

## **Teenagers – The Mind of a Whole Different Animal**

Being a teenager is not easy. The period of adolescence and puberty is a time of change driven by biological, hormonal, physical, cognitive and social-environmental factors. A teenager's brain is rapidly developing, especially in the area of the frontal cortex – the part that controls emotions, decision making, reason and self-control. These skills will not reach full maturity until somewhere in the mid-twenties. This helps to explain why teens often behave impulsively and make poor decisions. In other words, teenagers have a lot going on in their lives that they are dealing with. It's a tricky time of life to maneuver through.

It's not easy for parents of teenagers either. Parents often feel hurt, worried and unsure about what is going on with their child. While periods of being disrespectful, rude, sulky and angry are common occurrences in most teenagers, parents around the world worry about how to differentiate the normal "striving for independence" behavior with "pushing it too far" activities.

When "pushing it too far" begins to occur, it is up to the adult to look for signs and signals of a developing mental health concern. Issues such as depression, anxiety, eating disorder, impulse control disorder, ADHD, or anger management issues may be at play.

Parents of teens should watch for unexplained outward changes in their teen's appearance, school performance and unusual interests. These are often accompanied by other signs such as significantly avoiding parents, abandoning long-time friendships, or excessive hostility towards siblings. Other red flags include emotional highs and lows that change rapidly, becoming very withdrawn, sleeping more than usual, withdrawing from family functions, and bruises or injuries they won't tell you about or don't know how they got. While these behaviors are not always linked to a mental health issue, negative changes in behavior are often a clear indication that something is wrong.

Learn the warning signs of alcohol or drug abuse. Teens will often engage in reckless at-risk behaviors, and substance abuse is usually at the top of the list. Watch for physical signs as well as psychological. Adolescence is a time of increased vulnerability to fall victim to lifelong patterns. Don't be afraid to step in and confront the issue.

For parents concerned that their child or teen is experiencing significant symptoms of a potential mental health concern, meeting and working with a licensed mental health professional can be reassuring and helpful. Counseling can be very successful in helping teens to discover ways to overcome difficulties, develop skills and techniques to handle stressful situations and make changes in themselves or their situations. Therapy sessions are structured, time-limited, problem-focused, and goal-oriented. Often, teens appreciate having a neutral person with whom they can vent their feelings.

Seeking counseling is not a sign of weakness or desperation. It is an act of love. Teenagers may not understand or appreciate it now, but as they mature and grow into adulthood, having a stable foundation will be a gift they will never forget.

Lutheran Counseling and Family Services of Wisconsin is a community, family and faith based organization that provides outpatient mental health and adoption services to all people without discrimination. Contact us at 414-536-8333 or at [www.lcfswi.org](http://www.lcfswi.org).