

Healthy Minds, Healthy Teens

A teen mental health guide for Black families & communities of color

Young people need mental health care. Communities of color need mental health care. And this has become an even more urgent need as the crises of 2020 have disproportionately impacted youth of color. Racial and economic inequality and injustice have always formed barriers for communities of color to access mental health services, and those barriers have grown even taller this year. This guide seeks to offer tools and resources for families of Black and Brown teens to identify the need for mental health care and to get access to that care.

Three key mental health challenges in 2020



Digital addiction

We have a basic human need to feel belonging and connection, but our digital devices can sometimes provide a false sense of connection while keeping us staring at screens — especially during the isolation of 2020.



Isolation and Covid-19 anxiety

Fear and anxiety about the pandemic can be overwhelming, while social distancing measures can lead to loneliness and isolation. The pandemic disproportionately affects Black communities, and teens especially struggle with isolation from friends.



Racial injustice and inequality

Racism is already linked to anxiety, depression, and trauma for kids and teens of color. Since the police killing of George Floyd, these issues have increased significantly for Black Americans.

How to have a conversation with your teens

When it comes to talking about mental health, starting the conversation might be the hardest part. Just knowing you are interested in listening can help a young person feel more connected. Here are some tips to get started:

- Create a plan for the conversation.** Write down behaviors you have observed that concern you. There may be specific events, classes, or friendships that you think may be causing stress that you want to ask about.
- Pick a time to start the conversation** when you're both relaxed and won't get interrupted or distracted
- Avoid overly declarative language.** Focus on your observations and ask open ended questions
- Don't minimize.** Validate your teen's feelings
- Once your teen starts talking,** ask them if they'd like you to offer solutions, or just to listen

[More tips from the JED Foundation »](#)

Is there a problem?

Some signs that your teen might need professional mental health support:

- Frequent headaches or stomach aches
- Difficulty concentrating
- Changes in academic performance
- Changes in eating habits
- Unusual weight change
- Difficulty sleeping
- Avoiding or missing school
- Persistent sadness
- Avoiding social interactions
- Outbursts or extreme irritability
- Out-of-control behavior
- Drastic changes in mood or behavior
- Hurting oneself or talking about it
- Talking about death or suicide

Black teens are more likely to face depression than white teens — and less likely to be treated.



Creating healthy digital habits

Digital devices are essential tools for connection, but they have a dark side. Social media platforms are designed to keep us scrolling to sell ad space, and have been shown to cause higher rates of depression and anxiety among users, while decreasing self-esteem. Check your digital wellness with [this tool from Google](#) and use the tools below with your teens:



Reset boundaries: Have a conversation with your child about what is reasonable. Experts recommend one hour per day max, use settings to track usage if needed.



Avoid devices in the bedroom: A half-hour before bedtime, all devices should be removed from the area where your child sleeps.



Remove social media apps from phones: These apps are designed to be addictive. Having them at our fingertips makes it easy to mindlessly scroll for longer than we intended.



Turn off notifications: Any apps that buzz or beep with notifications that are not vital to you should be turned off. They pull us away from human interaction and draw us back into looking at the screen. [Here's how »](#)



Plan screen-free activities: Pick a block of time to put away the devices and focus on other activities like a family game night, cooking together, taking a walk, or doing an art activity.

Helping your teen manage anxiety

Teen stress and anxiety are at an all-time high due to racial injustice and the stress and isolation of the pandemic. While it's important to normalize these feelings, they shouldn't be ignored.

- Talk with your teen about the stress they may be experiencing.
- Allow a safe and non-judgmental space for them to verbalize their feelings.
- Share stress management skills you have found useful.
- Encourage mindfulness and meditation. Try the [Liberate app](#) for the BIPOC community.
- Speak openly about the history of bigotry and racism in our country.
- Create space to talk about incidents of racism that have occurred and how to handle them.

Finding the right therapist for your teen

During these unprecedented times, therapy allows individuals to explore and recognize their safe space, to confirm their existence in society, and to provide affirmation to their identity. Just like we can take steps in strengthening our physical capabilities, we can do the same with our mental health by giving thought and attention to our minds.

If you have private health insurance, call your provider to ask about mental health care. If you have Medicaid, you should have access to free care. If your employer has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), check if it includes mental health care. **If you're uninsured, ask a community health center or call the SAMHSA helpline at 1-800-662-HELP.**

Finding culturally competent care

People of color may want to get a sense of a therapist's cultural sensitivity by asking:

- Do you work with many people of color?
- How do you see our cultural backgrounds influencing our communication and my treatment?

Determine if your therapist is a good fit

Remember that you don't need to work with the first person you meet — it's ok if a therapist isn't a fit for you. Consider asking:

- Did my provider communicate effectively with me?
- Is my provider willing to integrate my beliefs, practices, identity, and cultural background into my treatment plan?
- Did I feel like I was treated with respect and dignity?

Where to find a professional

Black therapists in MA and RI:
<https://bist.ly/2H2FAFE>

Innopsych – Find your therapist of color:
<http://bit.ly/innocolor>
<http://bit.ly/massgeneral>

Hotlines & Resources

SAMHSA hotline for substance abuse and mental health services (24/7):
1-800-662-HELP (4357)

Samaritans support line – call/text 24/7:
1-877-870-HOPE (4673)

Boston neighborhood trauma team – if you're impacted by community violence, hotline 24/7: 1-617-431-0125

Boston Emergency Services Team (BEST) – 24/7 support for mental health and other crises: 1-800-981-HELP

Crisis Text Line – 24/7 text line for anyone experiencing any painful emotion:
Text HOME to 741741