

## Mental Health and Substance Use

Our mental wellness depends on how we think about ourselves, our lives and the people we know and care about, and that, in turn, affects our ability to make healthy choices and decisions. Mental health is about enjoying life, having a sense of purpose, and being able to manage life's inevitable highs and lows.


The past year of lockdown has challenged the mental wellness of many young people, and particularly kids with existing mental health issues like anxiety or depression.

The post pandemic school transition to a classroom setting may be especially stressful for some kids. While many kids are looking forward to it and will be able to take the new school year in stride, some may be quite anxious and may turn to substance use to cope.

### Self-medication with substances – A red flag

Some kids might find that at first, the use of substances relieves some of their anxiety or stress, however, if they start to self medicate on a regular basis, they are at a greater risk of developing behavioural symptoms like moodiness, sleep disorders, erratic behaviours, avoidance of friends or situations, along with an increased possibility of developing a substance use disorder.

Studies show that ADHD, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, all increase the risk of drug use and dependence in adolescents. At the same time, using substances as a way to self medicate, poses some risk for developing mental health disorders, including psychosis, depression and manic or unusually irritable mood states.



**“There is no question that mental health problems and problematic substance use issues are linked.”<sup>1</sup>**

## How to recognize when your child is having a tough time

Understand that we all have a tendency to go towards certain behaviours when we're stressed. Listen to what your kids are saying and think about how they normally would act when they feel stressed. For example, if your child gets headaches or stomach aches when they're anxious, or they revert to behaviour changes like hiding away, being abnormally quiet or acting out when they're feeling overwhelmed, you'll know that something may be bothering them, like an uncertainty about going back to school.

Stress, anxiety and other mental health issues can also impact a child's academic progress, make it difficult for them to form friendships and cause disruptions at home. You may notice your older teen has started to use cannabis more frequently, many young people think that it helps to relieve anxiety and calm them. Young adult kids might turn to drinking alcohol more often in order to avoid dealing with uncomfortable feelings.







## TIPS

Here are some tips to help your kids deal with feelings of anxiety, apprehension, or overwhelming stress in their lives.



### 1. Help them express themselves:

The first step for any parent is to know and understand what their kids are feeling. Initiate frequent conversations with your kids that help them talk about their feelings – and actively listen to what they're saying. It's a good thing to remember to be compassionate and non-judgmental towards their experiences and feelings - each one of us has different ways of coping with our life experiences.

### 2. Validate their feelings:

It can be worrisome to hear a younger child say "I'm not going back to school," or your teen tell you, "Smoking weed everyday helps me feel better", but it's important to stay calm and positive. Your child may be telling you in their own way that they're worried or having negative anxious feelings. Give them the space to express themselves and be sure to validate their feelings. You can reassure them by telling them it's okay not to feel okay, and then try to bring the subject back to the positive - help them find fresh new perspectives and constructive things they can do to deal with negative feelings.

You can also invite your teen to research the health effects of using substances with you, and discuss healthier ways they can cope.

### 3. Set a positive tone:

Don't start a conversation with a leading question like "Are you nervous about going back to school?" "Are you anxious about seeing your friends again?" That could feed their anxiety.

Instead, help them focus on what they liked about school and being in the classroom, ask them to think of any good things that have happened during the pandemic, ask them what they're looking forward to now that things are open, or think about the things they've missed the most that they'll be able to do again. Remind them of the fun they used to have with their friends, and reassure them that even though they are facing a challenge now, no challenge lasts forever and things will improve.



### 4. Language matters:

Many teens won't talk about how they feel with their loved ones or seek medical help because they're embarrassed or they do not want others to think they are weak or unstable. Be compassionate and non-judgemental in any conversations about mental health or substance use, and show care with your words when talking about anxiety or depression to your kids.

### 5 . Family time is important:

Be sure to spend time together as a family regularly and be involved in your kid's lives. Remind your child that you will always be there for them, no matter what.

Create and enhance the bonds with your child. Keep the channels of communication open - this builds up connection and trust between you and your child so if the time comes when they have challenges to face, they will feel comfortable turning to you to help them find healthy ways to work through it.



Children who spend time with their parents participating in activities together build a positive sense of self-worth.



## When should you get help?

Some kids might resist going back to school because the pandemic lockdown was actually a lot easier for them. Kids who were bullied, or have social anxiety, or kids with learning disorders may have had an easier and less stressful time at home where they could do things at their own pace.

Feelings of sadness and despair after the pandemic affect children of all ages, not just teens and young adults. Younger children have been affected as well, and many struggle with their worries or fears in silence – not knowing how to talk about it.

It might be difficult to deal with some of these issues on your own. Reassure your child that you will do something to help them, and with the help of your family doctor, find a therapist who can help your child find healthy ways to cope with the aspects of their lives they find painful, challenging or overwhelming.

If your child at any age tells you that they are thinking of hurting themselves, or feels numb about life – things may have gone way beyond your control. For their safety, get someone to be with your child at all times, and get emergency medical help immediately.



### Additional Resources:

[Child Mind Institute](#)

[CAMH](#)

[Centre for Addiction and Mental Health](#)

