A person smiling at another person

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**How parents and caregivers can support youth mental health**

**What to do when your child is feeling anxious or depressed**

When you’re raising a child, there is a lot to worry about – and there may be times when you are concerned about their mental health. Maybe they’re going through something stressful, like exams or a breakup. Or perhaps you’re noticing red flags, like they’re sleeping too much (or little), isolating themselves, or losing interest in activities they used to love. Or they might simply have confided in you that they’re feeling anxious or sad.

According to Children’s Mental Health Ontario (CMHO), [1 in 2 parents report having had concerns over their child’s anxiety.](https://cmho.org/facts-figures/) And 1 in 5 children and youth in Ontario will experience a mental health problem at some point. Yet more than a quarter say they don’t know where to turn for help.

We spoke with Laurie Marsan, Director, Clinical Services, of the [Child Development Institute](https://childdevelop.ca/) (CDI), and Paul Van de Laar, Vice-President, Service Excellence, of [Strides Toronto](https://stridestoronto.ca/) — who support youth mental health through their respective United Way-funded agencies. Their insights, below, can help you support your kids through tough times.

**Youth struggling with mental health issues like anxiety and depression often wonder: *Why me?***

Marsan explains, “It’s a combination of personality characteristics and life experiences. Children and youth with heightened sensitivities can be more impacted by adversity.”

Other factors include economic stability, social environment, lifestyle choices, coping skills, culture, and gender and sexual identities. And when a young person’s emotional needs are not consistently being met by primary caregivers, that can impact their mental health too.

**Social media is a *big* part of the problem too**

According to a [study](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7012622/) by researchers from [The Hospital for Sick Children](https://www.sickkids.ca/) (SickKids) in Toronto, “media and smartphone use may be contributing to the rising burden of mental distress among youth.”

“Social media creates a staged version of life, and young people looking at those images are just seeing the most beautiful parts of people’s lives, and it creates unrealistic expectations,” says Van de Laar. “What emerges from that is the anxiety and depression.”

**Feeling different from peers can weigh heavy**

The stakes can be high for young people just looking to exist in the world as their authentic selves, embracing their race, culture, gender, sexuality and other facets of their identity.

“Youth who are marginalized often experience a lot of microaggressions. It wears on people,” says Van de Laar.

**But positive peer interactions can help**

“When a youth feels more vulnerable to being misunderstood or receives invalidating messages, over time this can erode their self-esteem,” explains Marsan. “It’s important to encourage opportunities for positive social connections for them.”

Through support groups or simply connecting at social and recreational activities with peers who share aspects of their identity, young people can feel less alone, better understood and free to be their authentic selves.

**Family support and open dialogue also make a difference**

Marsan says, “check in with your youth on a regular basis, create ample opportunities for open informal chats, and normalize the fact everyone struggles with their mental health sometimes.”

“Just be curious,” recommends Van de Laar. “The tendency is so often to search for answers and rush in with solutions, but just being listened to is so valuable for young people.”

**When mental health interferes daily with healthy functioning, it’s good to seek professional help**

“Waitlists can be long, so reach out sooner rather than later,” says Van de Laar.

Many people hold back because they fear the stigma. “We must speak openly about mental health – it is as important as physical health,” says Marsan. “It’s important to normalize that having mental health challenges from time to time is part of life.”

**Accessing culturally sensitive mental health services matters**

In a therapeutic relationship, it’s important for young people to feel safe, heard and seen. “If there are aspects of their identity that are important to them, such as sexual orientation or race, it is helpful to share them from the outset to make sure a potential therapist has the right skill set or the right lens to help,” suggests Van de Laar.

**Parents and caregivers need to take care of their own mental health too**

“Self-care is so important, when you’re supporting a young person,” says Marsan. Parents and caregivers, or even the whole family, may seek talk therapy or mental health treatment for themselves or join support groups. “They also need trusted people in their life so they can have conversations where they don't feel judged,” says Van de Laar.

**Youth need a safety plan when there’s concern around self-harm or harm to others**

A safety plan is a personalized roadmap for the young person. It could include calming strategies, reminders of reasons for living, supports for high-stress scenarios, and crisis contacts.

“When there are risks to self or others, a safety plan is collaborative involving multiple people. It could be a combination of professionals, family members and the youth developing the plan together,” says Marsan, who also stresses it’s important to reach out to mental health services for triage and assessment in those cases. “If risks are imminent, call emergency crisis services for an immediate response.”

**Staying hopeful always helps**

“Helping young people to think in positive ways around their situation and the fact that change is always happening in life is critical,” says Van de Laar.

“Sometimes things start to feel dark, and people can get sucked into that, but we need to remember the importance of hope. People *can* and *do* recover from mental health challenges.”

**Mental health resources for youth and their families in the GTA**

[Children’s Mental Health Ontario](https://cmho.org/) (CMHO) has useful resources on their website for parents and caregivers, as well as for youth.

[Kids Help Phone](https://kidshelpphone.ca/) offers toll-free calls with counsellors or text services for kids seeking mental health crisis support, as well as a directory of resources and peer-support forums.

[Onestop Talk](https://onestoptalk.ca/) offers free single counselling sessions for youth under 17, across Canada, with the possibility of linking them to further support.

[Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario](https://youthhubs.ca/) are 27 centres providing integrated mental health and substance use supports to youth aged 12-25 across the province.

[Help Ahead](https://helpahead.ca/) is the centralized phone line to access child, youth and family mental health and well-being resources in Toronto.

[What’s Up Walk-in](https://www.whatsupwalkin.ca/) provides free single-session and solutions-focused virtual and in-person counselling, for children, youth, young adults and their families, on a walk-in basis.

[Child Development Institute](https://childdevelop.ca/) is a world-class leader trusted in helping children, youth and families, through evidence-informed services to build lasting change.

[Strides Toronto](https://stridestoronto.ca/) is a multi-service agency providing a wide range of exceptional services that improve the mental, social and physical health of infants, children and youth from the pre-natal stage to age 29, and their families.

In case of emergency (talk or immediate risk of harm to self or others), contact the emergency services in your area right away. Go to the nearest hospital or call 911.