

The Guide to teen mental health

Parents of teens, this one is for you. The mental health of our teens is a widespread concern for good reason: 40% of high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for at least two weeks in a row that they stopped doing their usual activities.¹

If we think our teens are feeling down or defeated, our inclination may be to step in and help, but often our approach causes them to shut down and disengage. A recent survey found that most parents (77%) believe their teenager always receives the social and emotional support they need, but only 27.5% of teens said they receive the right support.²

That gap is probably partially explained by the difference in the type of support parents want to give vs the type that teens want to receive: 62% of the young Gen Z respondents say they want their parents to listen to them when they are upset, and only 28% want their parents to give advice.³ And if you feel like you're walking on eggshells, you're not alone: **1 in 6 parents have a hard time comforting and communicating** with their teen.⁴

Hard as it may feel for parents, therapists say it's natural for teens to create distance from the people who love them most: "Teens are looking for their own independence and autonomy, and in their search for that, can push boundaries and buttons," said Erin Mack, LCSW, Talkspace's Risk Management and Clinical Quality Manager. "While it can feel like a constant battle, this is part of teenage development, and parents can find ways to foster independence while still respecting boundaries and expectations."

Therapists at Talkspace help teens with a variety of concerns ranging from feeling sad or depressed to stress-coping skills and so much more. They see teen clients through live video appointments and very commonly through asynchronous messaging. Through messaging sessions, teens often use visual cues and emojis, and therapists often use them in reply.

To help you keep the lines of communication open, reduce conflict, and strengthen your connection with your teen, Talkspace created this **"Emoji Guide to Teen Mental Health"**. Because while long conversations have their place, when communicating with teens sometimes less is more. These emoji reactions and short, empathetic phrases are suggested by our therapists as tools to de-escalate and support your teen in the moment, without trying to micromanage or problem-solve. The emojis we included are commonly used by the therapists themselves and/or their clients.

This guide is not meant for emergency or crisis situations.

So, if you or your teen is ever experiencing an emergency, is in a crisis, or is in danger, please get help right away.

- Call 911 or head to the nearest emergency room.
- Text or Call the Suicide & Crisis Hotline at 988 (check out 988lifeline.org for more info).
- Find more crisis support resources at: <https://helpnow.talkspace.com>.

¹CDC, The Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report, August 2024

²CDC, [Perceived Social and Emotional Support Among Teenagers: United States, July 2021–December 2022](#), 2024

³Walton Family/Gallup, 2024

⁴CDC, [Perceived Social and Emotional Support Among Teenagers: United States, July 2021–December 2022](#), 2024

Symbols of support and validation

Use these emojis and to convey love, support, and validation.

Emoji	What it is	What you'd be saying with it
	Thank you or prayer hands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I'm grateful for you Thank you I am praying for you and your success You got this! (Some teens also see this as a high five.)
	Expressive smile, smiling with your eyes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This/you make me proud Feeling good about it
	Jazz hands or hug	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You got this That's my girl/boy/kid
	Blowing a kiss, heart, heart hands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I love you Sending you lots of love
	100% or points, bullseye, clap	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I agree You nailed it
	Raised hands, starry-eyed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YES! Amazing



Engaging with curiosity and without judgment

Use these emojis to engage with your teen to express curiosity and invite them to share more. While you may be concerned, it can help you assess a situation before rushing to judgment or imposing consequences.

Emoji	What it is	What you'd be saying with it
	Sad and pensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am sad to hear this I am here with you
	Wide eyes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I'm listening I'm interested You have my attention
	Peeking eyes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am slightly concerned I am not sure I approve
	Heart hands, care, bandaged heart	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I support you You got this Wishing you healing
	Facepalm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> That's embarrassing Oh no!
	Shock, disbelief, double-exclamation point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I'm shocked Wow! Really?
	Raising hand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can I ask a question? I have a question... Me! (In response to something, this has happened to me)

Emotions in emoji form

These are commonly used by clients to express a range of emotions and can also be used to reflect back to your teen or show how you feel.

Anger	  
Sadness	      
Laughter	    
Excited	  
Happy	   
Embarrassment	 
Confusion, Uncertainty	   

Teen-friendly responses to common concerns

Here are some common concerns and how you might try responding to them in a text.

Common Concern #1: Your teen is withdrawn or had a bad day and retreats to their room.

- I am here if you need me 🤝
- Hope today wasn't too bad 😊

Common Concern #2: They have homework or a chore to do, and it's getting late. In this instance, sending a text might be a good first step.

- Homework done?
- Send me a ✓ to let me know your homework is done.
- Anything I can do to support you getting everything done?

Common Concern #3: Rude or disrespectful talk. Your impulse might be to serve it right back, but don't take the bait, instead take a beat.

- Employ humor and sarcasm: "Almost, but not quite. Try it again."
- Employ empathy: "I know you are having a tough time/ I know you're angry. Come find me when you're calm and you can speak respectfully."

Common Concern #4: Negative self-talk. Teens can be extremely critical of their own appearance or abilities. When you observe negative self-talk, your response may be best received in shorter and more supportive form.

- Don't talk about my kid like that
- How that makes me feel 😞
- Are we thinking of the same person? 🤔
- What others see: 🤩

Guidance for bigger challenges

Of course some challenges and conflicts need to be addressed with more than a quick 🤔. When your teen is really struggling, Liz Colizza, LPC, Director of Research and Programs at Talkspace, suggests following this simple sequence:

Silence: First, teens need space and time to process. Make sure you are giving them the safe space to share things, and do not feel the need to step in immediately. Whether over text or in-person, your supportive emojis or eye contact is golden.

Short phrases: You can use eye contact, nodding and short phrases, like "Got it," "I can see that," or "makes sense" to show you are listening and present, without wanting to fix something right away.

Validate: "I'm sorry that happened to you," "That must have been hard," can be extremely validating. You can also try repeating back what they expressed in their own words, and adding an open-ended question to hear more about what they're going through.

Show curiosity in their perspective: Let them know that you want to understand their world. When it comes to teens, respect is a two way street. They will respect you when they feel that you respect them. "I care about you and I want to understand what's going on." "What has that been like for you?" "What are your thoughts on this?" "Help me understand what's making this difficult."

Ask for permission to step in: "Do you want me to just listen or do you want me to offer some ideas?" Your opinion and your experience is valuable, but only as good as someone willing to hear it. You can ask your teen if they'd like to hear your suggestions and if they say no, you can leave the door open to part two. The main thing is that you've provided them with love, support, and empathy at that particular moment.

If you find they are not opening up, try to remain neutral while staying attuned and available to them even despite what seems like uncomfortable distance. Remember that teenagers are very sensitive to how their parents react to their growing autonomy. If they experience their parents as overprotective, over-controlling, or enabling (doing too much for them) it can trigger what's called 'autonomy threat.' This leads the teenager to shut down and resist cooperating or engaging with their parents, and that's why sometimes your best strategy is to stay present and attentive but consider a lighter approach to your communications.

Parenting teens isn't easy, but you are not alone in the struggle to communicate with them in a way they will receive it. Rest assured your non-verbal support, validation and love speak volumes and have lasting impact.

New: Teenspace Community

Talkspace's new peer support space is designed with teens and for teens and lightly moderated by Talkspace mental health experts. **Teenspace Community** provides a safe, anonymous place where teens who are engaged in Talkspace therapy can gather online to give and receive support. These emojis were curated as the official replies available to teens in-app.



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Teen reviewers: Fiona Feyen, Leo Glunt, Nina Oberfest