

# Brighter days are ahead



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Nearly half of high schoolers reported feeling sad or hopeless in the past year. Here's why so many are struggling—and how you can get help.



## GET HELP, FAST

**If you or someone you know is in crisis, talk to a trusted adult like a parent, doctor or school counselor—or seek out one of these resources for instant support.**

**988:** This new hotline number works exactly like 911 but is specifically for mental health emergencies. It's available 24/7 for call, text and chat access ASAP.

**notOK:** Download this app (available for iOS or Android) to reach out for help (without needing to explain why) at the press of a button. The app will alert a trusted contact with the person's GPS location.

**Crisis Text Line:** Text HOME to 741741 at any time to chat immediately with a crisis counselor on a secure online platform.

**The Trevor Project:** Call the Trevor Lifeline at 866-488-7386 to talk to a therapist who is trained to work with the LGBTQ+ community or visit [thetrevorproject.org](http://thetrevorproject.org) for more information.

**F**or Haley P., 16, the new school year should've been full of exciting experiences, from AP classes in her fave subjects to getting her driver's license to finally going to in-person football games.

"Everything was supposed to be amazing, but I was feeling anything but," says Haley. Wrestling with tough classes, fights at home with her mom and feelings that her friends were talking behind her back, she spiraled, experiencing less motivation to be social, less ambition toward her goals and a general meh mood. "I felt overwhelmed," she shares, "like I was in a battle with myself."

Haley's not alone. Nearly half of high school students in a recent CDC survey reported feeling sad or hopeless in the past year. And as many as one in three teens has an anxiety disorder, describing persistent feelings of dread, fear or uneasiness.

Saying it louder for the people in the back: Your mental health matters. It's time to be honest about not feeling OK—and start to make day-to-day changes to prioritize your growth, open up to others around you or seek out more support for your symptoms. Not sure where to start? We're here to help.

### TUNE INTO YOUR THOUGHTS

As a teenager (or a person in general), it's normal to go through momentary mood swings, experience surges of anxiety or simply have a bad day.

If you're having trouble separating what's a passing feeling ("ugh, that math quiz was so tough") vs. what's a larger problem ("I feel unsure about everything"), try keeping a journal for a week or two where you note your emotions and jot down some of your habits, like how much sleep you got and how much time you spent on social media. Be sure not to judge, just notice.

So what isn't normal? "Constantly feeling sad or losing interest in things that used to make you happy or excited are signs of depression," explains Dr. Regine Galanti, psychologist and author of *Anxiety Relief for Teens*, adding that consistent feelings of fearfulness and nervousness are signs of anxiety.

Other symptoms that signal something is off: fatigue, headaches, not being able to concentrate, excessive crying, digestive problems and dizziness.

Shelby D., 15, who has struggled with depression in the past, noticed that her feelings fluctuated from one day to the next, making it harder to define what she was going through. "When people think of depression, they might picture someone locked in their bedroom listening to sad music—but that's not always the case," she says.

"You can have a great day and have fun, and then the next day can be really hard."

And know this: It's not a "choice" to be anxious or depressed. It can come down to genetics or the wiring in your brain. If you feel like your mental health is interfering with your life, reach out and talk to a trusted adult like a parent or school counselor about your concerns—they can connect you with a doctor or therapist who can discuss treatment options. (Need immediate help? See the crisis resources above.)

### BREAK OUT OF YOUR BUBBLE

Why are so many teens struggling right now? Sometimes it's something specific—and other times feelings of depression or anxiety can seem to come out of thin air.

One clear culprit: Social anxiety and lack of in-person interaction. Although almost all of the nation's school districts lifted COVID restrictions in 2021, many of us are still adjusting to the after-effects of a chaotic couple of years. "Coming out of the pandemic, a lot of people feel some social anxiety and are not really sure how to be around groups of people," says Dr. Galanti.

The best way to ease back in? It may sound like stating the obvious, but making time to hang with friends should be at the top of your emotional health to-do list this year, experts advise.

*Continued on page 84*

Continued from page 71

“Even if you’re texting or liking each other’s posts, not seeing friends IRL is linked to a worse mental outlook,” says psychologist and anxiety specialist Dr. Carla Marin. She explains that it’s super valuable to have conversations where you can \*actually\* make eye contact to literally feel seen and heard—and where you don’t have to wonder if your bestie is watching Netflix or having another text convo as you’re connecting.

If you’re worried that hanging out with your friends is going to be awkward, or you feel out of practice when it comes to being social, Dr. Marin suggests giving it a shot anyway. “The more you do it, the more you’ll see that nothing ‘bad’ happens. And even if something does happen? You’ll see that you’re OK and it wasn’t the end of the world,” she advises.

Try acknowledging your feelings before the hangout (“I’m worried I’ll say something cringe”) and then, afterward, check back in with yourself and mentally replay all of the positive things that happened (“That story I told that made everyone laugh? Hilarious!”). Real time with real friends? Yeah, that feels good.

### SAY NO TO SCREEN TIME

One time when it’s OK to shut off your social life? When it’s pinging from your phone. As fun as it can be to spend hours scrolling TikTok or watching Insta stories, unlimited screen time can actually amplify feelings of loneliness or low self-esteem. In fact, a recent study found that, for teens, high levels of social media use over four years was associated with an increase in symptoms of depression.

“You see someone’s life look ‘perfect’ and you compare it to your own...but you don’t know what’s really going on behind the scenes,” says Shreya K., 17, co-host of the podcast *Voices of Gen-Z*.

It’s why Dr. Marin says that one of the simplest strategies you can use is setting boundaries. “If social media is starting to make you feel bad about yourself, that’s a sign that you should maybe limit how much you’re on it,” she suggests.

Download an app that regulates your screen time, take advantage of “Do Not Disturb” mode or designate a place in

your home to store your phone when you don’t want to pick it up as frequently (think of it as a “tech timeout” zone).

Even better? Use that time you’d be scrolling to do something that fills your cup instead, whether it’s reading a favorite book, going for a long walk, reorganizing your room or enjoying an old-fashioned game night with the family.

### SIMPLIFY YOUR SCHEDULE

If you’re staring at a packed planner and thinking “when exactly do I have time to prioritize my mental health?” then it’s time to make a change.

Because while reviewing flashcards or memorizing equations for an extra couple hours might seem important rn, the things that \*really\* matter for your growth are much more basic.

What should you prioritize? Eating healthy food like fruits, veggies, whole grains and protein. Moving your body often—anything from dance class to YouTube yoga tutorials to walking your dog is great. And, most importantly, get enough sleep (it may sound impossible, but strive for at least eight hours a night when you can). You might be surprised how much your perspective changes when you take time for rest and self-care.

### CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

In a recent *Girls’ Life* survey, nearly 80% of teens admitted they don’t think people their age feel comfortable opening up about their mental health struggles. “My friends and I can talk about it, but I don’t really feel like my parents or teachers would understand what I’m going through,” says Amira D., 14.

Feelings of anxiety and depression can be isolating and overwhelming, but here’s the thing: Mental health \*is\* health—and you deserve to get help when you need it. For Haley, she didn’t feel confident talking to her parents at first, so she decided to approach her school counselor with what she was feeling.

Now, she’s seeing a therapist and is even able to be honest with her friends and family about what she’s going through. “Asking for help isn’t always easy and sometimes you have to be your own advocate,” Haley explains. “But reach out—because it \*can\* get better.” 📞

## FASHION AND FEATURES SHOPPING GUIDE

Credits for pages 1, 2, 20-33, 51, 60-63.  
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