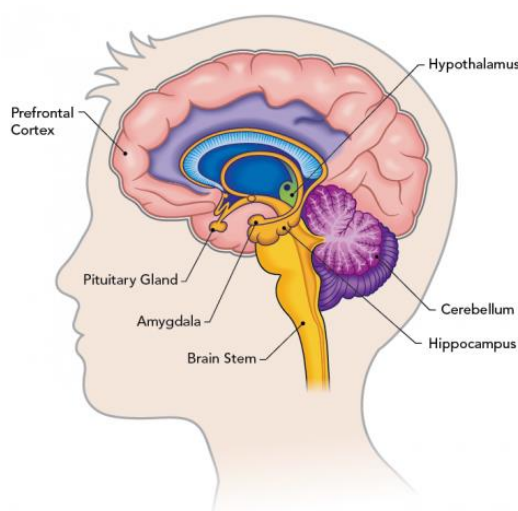


The Teenage Brain

Information for parents and guardians



How the brain develops during the teenage years

The picture above shows the teenage brain. The brain is a very complex and interesting part of the body and oversees control and regulation of everything the body does.

It's made up of three parts: the brainstem, the cerebellum and the top brain.

The brainstem connects the brain to the body and controls things like breathing, digestion, and heart rate. It's sometimes called the 'primitive part' of our brain.

The cerebellum controls balance and all our emotions.

The top brain is the 'boss' of our bodies, receiving signals and returning responses for everything that happens. For example, if something hot touches our hands, it's our brain that tells us to pull away so we don't get burnt.

During the teenage years some changes happen to the brain that continue into the mid-20s. During these changes, some connections that young people don't use will be removed while other connections are strengthened. This is the brain's way of becoming more efficient, based on the 'use it or lose it' principal.

This process begins at the back of the brain, meaning that the front part of the brain - the prefrontal cortex - is 'renovated' last. This is the decision-making part of the brain and is responsible for the ability to plan and think about what we are going to do, and the consequences of our actions.

It also helps us to solve problems and control reactions to what's going on around us. The prefrontal cortex is very important but is not always fully developed until we're at least 25.

While the prefrontal cortex is still developing, another part of the brain called the amygdala will step in to help us make decisions and solve problems. The amygdala usually deals with emotions, impulsive reactions, and aggression, so this can help explain why young people sometimes make 'rash' decisions that they later can't explain. They 'felt' the response more than they 'thought' it.

"Is my teenager's behaviour normal?"

If you often ask yourself this question, you're not alone. Parents often have difficulty understanding how their child has become so different.

It's normal for teenagers to be moody, because of the hormonal changes they go through, the changes happening to the neural pathways in their brain, and the ongoing growth of their body. Lung capacity also changes during this time, which can make teenagers feel tired more easily than adults.

Teenagers may sometimes find it difficult to remember things they've been told, or that they have been asked to do. They may seem defiant or distant at times.

Normal teenage behaviour may seem strange or hard to understand for adults, even though we were all teenagers once. It can be difficult to differentiate between this normal behaviour and signs of mental health challenges,

Signs that your teen might be dealing with mental health difficulties:

'I think my son or daughter might be depressed, but I'm not sure.' As a starting point, we usually ask the parent why they think this. Parents will often say they simply have a 'gut feeling' that something isn't right. 'Gut feelings' like this can be useful, as parents or guardians typically know what's 'usual' behaviour for their child.

Listen to the tone of your child's voice. Do they sound low or down? Is there a 'nothingness' to it? You can often spot a low mood, or the early signs of depression through a 'flatness' in your child's voice. Although teenagers can be known for short answers and moodiness, there are other underlying or subtle indications that things aren't quite right.

You might have noticed that they:

- have become very withdrawn
- are persistently sad or more tearful
- get more irritated or angry than usual
- can't sleep, or sleep a lot more than usual
- are exhausted all the time
- have no appetite
- have a permanent sense of hopelessness

Consider what's going on at school or college. Changes in their attendance, interest, concentration or performance can sometimes indicate that they are experiencing difficulties, or they might have become disruptive and uncooperative. Some children may start refusing to go to school altogether. Outside of school, are they losing interest in hobbies, clubs or seeing friends? Have they withdrawn from others completely?

If you suspect that your child might be feeling depressed – whether that's by 'gut feeling' or tangible changes in behaviour, personality, mood or attitude – talk to your child. Ask them what's troubling them and tell them that you're worried. Explain that you're there for them and practice listening without judgement. Go to your GP if you suspect something is wrong – with your child if they agree, but it's also fine to go alone to discuss your concerns and ask for advice.

Platform For Families – FAQ's

Can you prevent mental health challenges?

We can all face mental health challenges, but by developing our wellbeing and coping techniques, and by seeking help early, we can make sense of these challenges and find ways to work through them sooner.

What do I do if the support does not work?

Different things help different people, so it can take time to find the right support. It's important to be open to a range of support options, and to keep an open and hopeful viewpoint.

Most importantly, don't give up. At times, things may seem hopeless but with time and appropriate help, it is possible for the young people to feel better or overcome the challenges they are facing.

What should I do if I am worried about my child or a young person?

Depending on your relationship, gently encourage them to talk about how they are feeling. Be prepared that this may take some time. If they do share with you, make sure you seek appropriate support after the conversation, and keep the young person informed along the way.

How do I know if my teenager's difficulties are serious?

As a starting point, we usually ask the parent why they think their teenagers' difficulties are serious. Parents will often say they simply have a 'gut feeling' that something is not right. 'Gut feelings' like this can be useful, as parents or guardians typically know what's 'usual' behaviour for their child.

- We recommend reaching out for help if your teenager:
- Is often sad, worried, or fearful
- Has major changes in appetite or sleep needs

- Has a permanent sense of hopelessness
- Is being a danger to themselves or others.

Where should I go for help?

If you are concerned about your teenager, seek professional help. Talk to your GP with them and explore the services that they can be referred into.

You can also find more information and advice on the following websites.

- Young Minds Parents Helpline
- CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably)
- NSPCC
- Mind
- NHS Wales

Is it important that I look after myself?

The answer is yes!

If your teenager is facing challenges with their mental health, it's very likely to affect you as their guardian. It's important not to blame yourself. Although it can be upsetting and worrying if your child is having a difficult time, and it makes your relationship with them feel more stressful, it doesn't mean you are a bad parent. Children often take it out on those closest to them, so you might be feeling the effect of their very powerful emotions.

If you are feeling that things are getting you down, it's important to recognise this. Talk to someone you trust and see what they think. Many people go on struggling with very difficult situations because they feel they should be able to cope, or because they feel they don't deserve any help.

It's difficult for many of us to feel we can take time for ourselves, but it can be extremely important for helping us feel calmer and have a better perspective on things. Rest helps us process our feelings and emotions. A walk in nature is often a good start, but anything that gives you space to relax for a bit can be a big help in tackling any challenges ahead.

Go to your GP if things are really getting on top of you. Feeling able to ask for some support from your doctor or a referral to a counselling service is a sign of strength, and a really important step to take. You can't help your child if you are not being supported yourself.