



## 6 Strategies for Helping Today's Teens Cope With Modern Stressors and Pressures

## Today's students face a range of new and existing pressures that have contributed to mounting anxiety.

Studies show the extent of the issue: The Youth Risk Behavior Survey from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 42% of high school students said they “felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for at least two weeks in a row that they stopped doing their usual activities.”

This is no surprise to educators who see today's teens facing a myriad of complications that have only increased over time, indicates Natalie Barnard, an educational diagnostician and assessment consultant for Pearson.

“They have been raised in a world full of challenges: constant social media influence, anxiety and depression, bullying, increased drug and alcohol use and abuse, comparison to their peers, and uncertainty about their future, just to name a few.”

Those are just the concerns that are close to home, adds Theo Miron, a nationally certified school psychologist and assessment consultant for Pearson. “There’s so much going on in the world, and with everything accessible via the internet and the 24-hour news cycle, it becomes a load on their shoulders.”



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This is worrisome because an adolescent's experience can shape future outcomes; a study published by PLOS Medicine found that a positive outlook in the teen years (referred to as "positive affect") leads to improved health and well-being in adulthood. With this in mind, the anxiety-inducing realities today's teens are facing create new challenges for educators, who want to help students manage their mental health while ensuring they stay on track in their learning journey.

Read on to explore the role the school community can play in helping adolescent students cope with modern stressors and pressures.

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# New pressures create daunting circumstances

## Social media

The ubiquity of social media exposes teens to a constant stream of curated content that can trigger feelings of inadequacy and magnify unrealistic standards. Screen time has skyrocketed, with teens spending nearly five hours daily on social media apps, including TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat, finds Gallup. “It’s like an endless pursuit of perfection where they’re trying to outdo other kids, but it’s really a false reality they’re seeing,” says Elizabeth Shanley, a clinical assessment consultant for Pearson with nearly a decade of teaching experience in public elementary school classrooms.

## Academic achievement goals

Intense academic demands and overscheduled lifestyles can lead to burnout and stress. A study in The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health journal found an association between academic achievement goals and depressive symptoms in adolescence, with students who focused more

on how their performance compared to their peers (rather than whether they learned the skills and understood the subject) having an increased depression risk.

## Social/peer interactions

The CDC’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that 16% of teens said they’d been bullied electronically through text or social media during the past year, and 15% of teens indicated they were bullied on school property.

As all these factors accumulate, teens are experiencing increased diagnoses of anxiety and depression. Key stats underscoring this trend include the monthly antidepressant dispensing rate increasing 66.3% between January 2016 and December 2022 and, for the first time, the U.S. falling out of the top 20 in the World Happiness Report, with youth dissatisfaction heavily contributing to the steep drop.



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# Strategies for empowering teens to forge a healthy path

Finding healthy ways to deal with these stressors is imperative for student health and well-being. Fortunately, educators and caregivers are well-positioned to work together to help students navigate challenges.

Here are some practical strategies that can help spur teens to adopt a healthy outlook, develop strong coping skills and cultivate meaningful connections in pursuit of a bright future within the classroom and beyond.



## 1 Incorporate social-emotional learning (SEL) concepts.

It's important not to equate mental health and SEL. While mental health focuses on mental illnesses and disorders, such as depression, anxiety and schizophrenia, SEL emphasizes the development of social and emotional skills like self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship building and responsible decision-making, explains Barnard. Yet, SEL has been shown to help protect against mental health risks.

"If we don't address SEL, I believe there can be an increase or at least a risk of developing additional mental health issues," Barnard says, citing the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Roadmap report published by CASEL.

The report found that when students learn SEL competencies, their emotional intelligence grows and leads to better mental health, more classroom engagement, stronger decision-making and healthier relationships.

"District leaders should lean on solid, research-based SEL programs that are teacher-friendly and implemented across the organization," recommends Shanley. She suggests they first review the extensive list of programs on CASEL's website to choose the one that best fits the needs of their district and community and then invest in the training to get staff buy-in. "It shouldn't be a huge time investment because most program lessons only take about 10 minutes a day, but it will have huge payoffs in the long run."

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## 2 Initiate “phone-free” spaces (to the limits of your power).

A report from the Pew Research Center found that nearly three-quarters of U.S. teens say they feel happy and peaceful when they don’t have their phones with them, but they struggle to modify their habits. Schools can certainly initiate phone-free spaces, but ensuring students comply with the mandate during the school day is easier said than done. School districts are increasingly experimenting with novel ways to secure phones during school hours, but some are experiencing pushback from students and families.

Yet, the evidence for a phone hiatus is compelling on many student achievement measures, from self-esteem to material mastery. A study from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found that nearly 60% of students said they were distracted when peers used phones in class and that those who spent less in-school time on their phones got better test scores. Furthermore, research published by the American Psychological Association found that teens and young adults who decreased their time on social media by 50% significantly improved their esteem regarding their weight and appearance in just one month.

### 3 Create more opportunities for teens to interact.

It's hard to compete with the allure of a phone, Shanley acknowledges. That said, schools that make an effort to create more inclusive environments with exciting options for teens will see the positive payback. "If you provide opportunities for connection that are stronger than the devices, then kids are going to naturally gravitate toward real, in-person connection over the strong pull of the devices."

When students develop a sense of belonging, they're going to be more active in their education, Barnard explains. "Through this elevated involvement, you're going to see a domino effect of increased attendance that leads to better grades and eventually higher graduation rates. Recognition has to go beyond those who typically receive the spotlight, such as top athletes or honor students."

This means making sure there's a wealth of clubs or affinity groups, aside from more common pursuits like sports, band and drama that can only accommodate a finite amount of kids. "Not all kids have a mainstream interest. With more choices, you can foster participation in these other areas where kids show enthusiasm," indicates Miron.

Think about a reading club, a Lego club, a puzzle club, a yoga club, a trading card club. "Especially in larger schools there's bound to be someone else with the same interest, which helps create opportunities for genuine authentic connection", he says.

Of course, curating this robust menu of options likely rests on the shoulders of the educators who have direct contact with the children, Shanley points out. She recommends securing schoolwide and/or districtwide buy-in from your

administration to host these monthly clubs at the beginning of specific school days, for example. Eventually kids may run the clubs themselves, allowing them to practice essential soft skills, such as communication and organization.

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**Elizabeth Shanley, a former educator and clinical assessment consultant for Pearson**



## 4 Expand mental health services.

“The State of Kids and Families in America 2024” found that nearly 70% of voters believe schools should provide access to mental health care. That is hard to come by, says Miron, given that today’s school “counselor” wears many hats, with a role that typically revolves around helping with schedules, post-high school plans and credits. School psychologists may be overwhelmed by other essential functions that leave little time for them to provide mental health services.

While elementary schools often spend time in small groups where SEL-related topics can be a focus, high schools have more need for access to professionals with a mental health background to help individuals and groups discuss mental health, social media, safe internet use and other areas teens are increasingly forced to navigate.

To that end, Barnard believes it would be useful for schools to prioritize hiring or adding additional licensed school professionals and specialists trained specifically in SEL and mental health. “While it’s often a matter of funding, it would be beneficial for schools to prioritize a licensed professional counselor, school psychologist or social worker with this specific training who can help teens address questions in small groups or individually,” she says.

## 5 Infuse the power of resiliency.

Growing up isn't easy, especially in these days fraught with so many internal and external pressures, and the reality is that everyone faces disappointment and stress from time to time. The key is being resilient — feeling empowered to overcome obstacles and knowing how to learn from failures to emerge stronger and more confident.

"We need to help normalize failure because it's unavoidable," Miron says, adding that it's not the failure itself but what youth do after it which will help them be successful later in life.

"We do them a disservice if we don't let them know that while they might feel isolated, others are in the same boat, and they need to learn how to push past these obstacles that everyone faces with a positive 'can-do' spirit."

While not everyone has supportive role models or learns these strategies at home, educators can help equip students with the tools and mindset necessary to thrive in the face of adversity.



## 6 Build productive bridges with caregivers and families.

Students are only your captive audience for a finite portion of the day, which underscores the importance of effective communication with caregivers to ensure a cohesive support system. Open dialogue allows schools to better understand the unique challenges and circumstances of each family to tailor their support.

The onus is on schools to proactively bridge the gap. “A lot of parents didn’t necessarily have good experiences in schools themselves, which means they might be less apt to reach out to the teacher or principal,” observes Shanley.

One of the best ways to initiate a relationship is by starting with positive outreach, so when and if you need to broach a more challenging topic, there’s already been initial communication.

“It doesn’t have to be anything major, but touching base with parents to help build that connection will pay dividends in the future,” says Barnard. As an example, she suggests a quick email that their child was kind on the playground or helpful to a new student in the biology lab.

Schools could also focus on building the school community by inviting families in for inclusive events, especially those that embrace the diversity among student populations to ensure all families feel recognized and welcome.

“When families feel more committed and connected to the school, they will respond better to information you share about tough topics around the internet, social media or gaming,” Shanley says.

Students also perceive this unified approach, Barnard notes. “They recognize and appreciate that the school is communicating with their parents and vice versa.”

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# The importance of fostering student well-being beyond academics

While the primary goal of schools is academic achievement, forward-thinking educators and administrators recognize their role can extend far beyond the classroom to cultivate a supportive community that addresses students' overall well-being in today's stressful and tumultuous world.

By prioritizing social-emotional learning, mental health support and inclusive community-building, schools can help students develop the skills and resilience they need to navigate challenges and succeed in all areas of life. Looking beyond academics allows schools to create a holistic and supportive environment that encourages students to flourish and reach their full potential.

We realize an educator's job today is more challenging than ever, with its own pressures that can rival that of students.

**For more helpful resources on supporting yourself and your students, visit the [Pearson Mental Health Resource Center](#).**





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