

# **Teen Minds: Living through a pandemic and beyond**

Report 2020



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# 1 Foreword

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## Pablo Vandenabeele

### Clinical Director of Mental Health

Adolescence has always been an emotionally turbulent time, but the pandemic has created mental health challenges that no previous generation has had to face.

We are very good at dealing with good news, and OK at dealing with bad news, but most of us struggle to deal with uncertainty — and Covid-19 has made uncertainty part of our everyday.

Teenagers have had to cope with uncertainty around their education and exams; many live in households facing financial issues and despite the recent vaccine breakthroughs, they continue to live with the uncertainty of whether they, or a family member or friend, will catch Covid-19.

These are difficult times for everyone, but teens are particularly vulnerable because they are still acquiring the coping skills and life experience that build resilience.

Bupa UK has a long history of working with families to protect and promote mental health, so we commissioned research<sup>1</sup> with teens and parents to learn more about the impact the pandemic is having on a generation of teens – and what we can do to support families grappling with these issues.

Some of the findings from our Teen Minds study are worrying. 4 in 5 teenagers reported symptoms of poor mental health such as anxiety and depression, while 3 in 4 experienced physical manifestations such as tiredness, hair loss and digestive issues. And some have turned to harmful coping mechanisms – including under or over-eating, alcohol or self-harm – to deal with these issues.

More than half said that although they had experienced these negative signs and symptoms before, the pandemic had brought them back, or made them worse.

As a mental health professional, I would be worried if someone was not sometimes anxious, or sad, about what is happening around us. It's important that we do not 'medicalise' very human responses to challenging or difficult events. But it's also important that we're all vigilant to the warning signs too.

Our research also shows there is cause for optimism too. 2/3 of the teens surveyed have used exercise or sport to manage their mental health during lockdowns, and 3 in 5 have talked to their parents about their concerns.

At Bupa, we want to help parents have productive and fruitful conversations with their children. These conversations are not always easy, but they are important. They build trust, and understanding, and can lead to solutions which build resilience and strengthen mental health. Sometimes they bring the realisation that a teen needs support from someone outside the family.

In addition to providing insight on what's happening to teenage mental health, and how Bupa can help those who are struggling, we hope this report helps families navigate issues of mental health in adolescence and acts as a useful tool for those wondering when and how to access help.



**80%**  
of teens have had  
mental health  
symptoms since  
March 2020

<sup>1</sup>Bupa commissioned PCP Research to survey 1,000 UK teenagers aged between 13-19, and 1,000 of parents between 22 October - 3 November 2020.





## 2

# An introduction to the teenage brain

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## Dr Lucy Foulkes Psychologist

With a special interest in social psychology and mental health, Lucy explains the social, biological and neurological shifts that shape teen behaviour.

Adolescence is all about becoming independent, teens start spending more time on their own, or with their peers, and relationships become a lot more complex. What peers are doing, and what they think about, become far more important.

There are also massive social changes around the move to a new secondary school, and we now know that a lot of the changes that are happening in adolescence — like moodiness and risk-taking — are underpinned by changes happening in the brain.

Our brains stop growing in size long before adolescence, so it was once assumed that our brain was also fully developed, and hormones alone were to blame for teenagers' unsettled moods and unsettling behaviour.<sup>2</sup>

But brain scans show a lot of changes take place in the brain's wiring at this time.<sup>3</sup> In some areas of the brain, the amount of insulating myelin doubles, which means messages can travel more quickly. At the same time, tiny receivers called dendrites branch out and boost the bandwidth that relays messages around the brain.

This eventually shifts decision making to parts of the brain governed by logic and reason, but in the meantime, while all of these neural messages are flying around, teenage decision-making is dominated by the amygdala. And this part of the brain is associated with emotional responses and quick decisions.<sup>4</sup>

All of these signals all pass through chemical junctions called synapses, and those which deal with a lot of traffic grow into super-highways, while those which get less use revert into country lanes, or disappear.

Extreme distress can speed up and lock in processing networks which are less than perfect.<sup>5</sup> Our experiences, and the way we deal with stressful events, also play a big part in determining which junctions are strengthened, and which are eliminated. And this creates a roadmap for how we deal with stressful events in the future.

All of this can make teens vulnerable to symptoms of mental health problems, and people who are diagnosed with disorders often experience symptoms for the first time in their teens.



**“It was once assumed hormones alone were to blame for teenagers' unsettled moods and behaviour”**

<sup>2</sup>[jneurosci.org](http://jneurosci.org)

<sup>3</sup>[ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)

<sup>4</sup>[aacap.org](http://aacap.org)

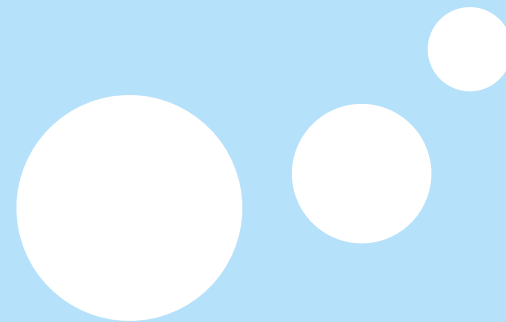
<sup>5</sup>[newscientist.com](http://newscientist.com)





# 3

## What is 'normal' now?



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## Emotions and behaviours

Before the pandemic, NHS data shows that 1 in 12 children between the ages of 5 and 19 (8.1%) had at least one mental disorder, and that number has been rising steadily.

Emotional disorders — such as anxiety and depression — were the most common in teens, with 9% aged 11 to 16 experiencing problems and 14.9% aged 17 to 19 affected.<sup>6</sup>

Bupa's latest Teen Minds research suggests the pandemic has added to what was already a growing problem.

During lockdowns, 4 in 5 teens reported negative emotions or behaviours associated with a mental health problem. Lucy says: "This does not mean they all have a problem which requires intervention, but within that group there will be some teens who are really, really, struggling."

**44%**

Anxiety

**35%**

Irritability

**29%**

Insomnia

The most commonly reported symptoms of mental ill-health were:

**32%**

Feeling sad or hopeless

**26%**

A sense of dread that something awful might happen

**26%**

Low self-esteem

**25%**

Feeling burnt out





Bupa's latest findings echoes the NHS data, in finding that problems are more common in older teens: 42% aged 13-15 had experienced anxiety during lockdowns, compared to 51% aged 18 to 19.

.....



70%

had experienced negative emotions before the pandemic



25%

said they had returned during lockdown



30%

said lockdown had made them worse



Stephen Buckley, Head of Information at leading mental health charity Mind, says: "Our research shows similar trends, with 2/3 (68%) of people aged 13 to 24 reporting deteriorating mental health during lockdown, and young people more likely than adults to report challenges."

Many teenagers have struggled with being 'stuck' in the family home for long periods of time (47%), socialising less with friends (55%) and feeling powerless about their situation (32%). Over half of teens (55%) feel their life is in a state of 'limbo', while three in 10 (30%) feel the pandemic means they're missing out on life.



47%

have struggled with being 'stuck' in the family home for long periods of time



30%

of teens feel the pandemic means they've been missing out on life



55%

have struggled with socialising less with friends

"When we ask teenagers to share their feelings of the pandemic, it's perhaps no surprise that some feel trapped, anxious and acutely aware of having sacrificed normal teen experiences. We are all different, and we all cope with stressful events in different ways. And it's important to remember that if someone is struggling, there is not an arbitrary cut-off point separating 'normal' anxiety or depression from a clinically diagnosable problem. When it comes to mental health there is no one type of 'normal' — it's a spectrum. The other thing for parents to consider is the resilience of their child, and how easily they are shaken up by events."

Pablo Vandenabeele,  
Clinical Director of Mental Health



# 4

## Self-diagnosis

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# Self-diagnosis

Increased awareness and openness around mental health could also be blurring these grey boundaries between negative feelings and a diagnosable problem; 38% of the teens surveyed said all, or most of their mental health problems were self-diagnosed and a further 19% reported a mix of self and professionally diagnosed conditions.

Lucy explains “Self-diagnosis is a tricky subject. While it’s great that teens are able to spot the warning signs for mental health issues, self-diagnosis must not replace professional assessment. It’s important that teens know when, and how, to seek help from their parents and outside.”



38%

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19%

reported a mix of self and professionally diagnosed conditions



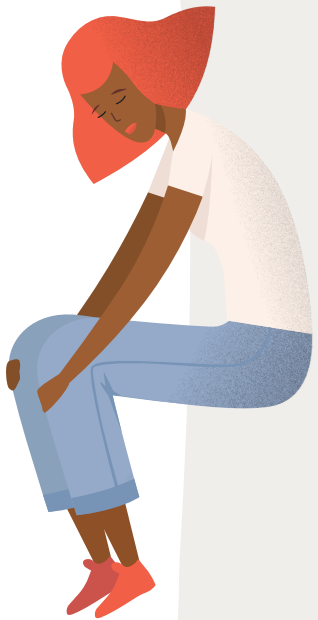
## Advice for parents

### Physical symptoms to look out for

Mental health challenges can prompt physical symptoms and changes in behaviour. Our research showed that this was the case for more than 3/4 of the teens (76%), and is something for parents and carers to look out for as potential early warning signs of stress or mental ill-health.

Parents talking to their children about physical symptoms should note that the most commonly reported physical side effect of mental health issues is **headaches** – with more than 3 in 10 (31%) of teenagers reporting this symptom. **Tiredness and lethargy**, which can be signs of depression, were reported by 30% and 13% had experienced **panic attacks**. Given the huge importance teenagers put on appearance and peer approval, the numbers who reported **skin breakouts** (29%) and **weight gain** (26%) is also a concern.

Other symptoms also included **hair loss** (6%), often associated with stress-induced alopecia, and **digestive issues**, where there is again a common link between stress and the gut.





# 5

## Coping mechanisms

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Worryingly, Bupa's research revealed over half of teenagers have turned to harmful coping mechanisms to manage their mental health during the pandemic (52%), such as controlling or restricting their food intake, picking their skin (excoriation), pulling out hairs from their body (trichotillomania) and self-harm. While others admitted to smoking, drinking and taking drugs as their form of escape.

**Almost half (46%) the teens surveyed had altered their eating habits and the majority (84%) of those who were restricting food said this gave them a sense of control.** By comparison, 41% reported the same sense of control from eating more.

Stephen, from Mind says: "Changing your eating habits every now and again is natural. But if food and eating feels like it's taking over your life, it may become a problem.<sup>7</sup> It's also worrying that so many of the teenagers who were eating more or less said that this gave them a sense of control as we know control is a big factor in eating disorders.<sup>8</sup>"

Lucy adds: "There is also anecdotal evidence that people with disordered eating have found lockdown problematic because they have constant access to food and don't have the same routines. This is particularly true for people who eat in response to stress or restrict food because of stress."



## Positive behaviours

The pandemic has also provided the incentive and space to explore positive coping strategies. Almost half the teens who were surveyed **(49%) have used exercise to manage their mental health, and 17% have turned to sport.** And both have been shown to relieve stress and increase emotional wellbeing.<sup>9</sup> **While 1 in 5 have focused more on reading (22%), 1 in 10 have started a new hobby (9%) or learnt a new skill (9%).**

Pablo welcomes this sign of young people embracing healthy ways of channeling anxieties brought about by Covid-19: "For parents spotting that their teenager has started a new hobby, or taken on an activity that is having a positive effect on their overall wellbeing, such as sport, this can be a good opportunity to start a dialogue with your child. Offering more praise to children who are lacking the affirmation that they'd usually expect from teachers and peers can help to encourage further healthy habits, and provides a chance to open up a conversation and get a sense of a teen's overall wellbeing."

In addition, research by Mind shows that almost 1 in 5 teens has practised mindfulness or meditation.<sup>10</sup> Stephen says: "Studies show that practicing mindfulness can help to manage depression, some anxiety problems and feelings of stress.<sup>11</sup> It is a skill for life."

More simply, young people are taking advantage of this break from social obligations to spend and enjoy being at home, and embracing quality time with their family. Over the period, a large number of teens **(37%) have taken to spending more time with their family to manage their wellbeing.** Lucy points out: "Some teenagers felt better in lockdown, it was a massive relief to step off the treadmill of social life. For the first time in years, they have had time to press pause and take up new hobbies. That's an important part of the conversation."

**"Some teenagers felt better in lockdown, it was a massive relief to step off the treadmill of social life"**



<sup>7</sup>mind.org.uk

<sup>8</sup>ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

<sup>9</sup>ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

<sup>10</sup>mind.org.uk

<sup>11</sup>mind.org.uk



# 6

## Starting a mental health conversation

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As a nation, we have all got much better about discussing our mental health. A lot of the stigma which once surrounded these issues has been broken down. Celebrities, members of the Royal family, and countless everyday people sharing their experiences and struggles has led to much more open and honest conversations about mental health.

Amid this improved awareness, it's important to remember that everyone has times when they feel anxious, or sad, or unsettled. There may be a tendency to see these emotions and feelings as negatives, when they are simply normal human behaviour.

Lucy says "There is not always a clear line between struggling with negative emotions during a difficult time and struggling with the symptoms of a mental health problem. What's really important is the impact that these feelings are having on people".

**"There is not always a clear line between struggling with negative emotions during a difficult time and struggling with the symptoms of a mental health problem."**



### Advice for parents

**If parents are worried, they should ask themselves the following:**

- How long has it been going on for?
- How severe is it?
- How controllable is the issue through positive change?
- How disruptive is it?
- Does it stop them living their life?
- Is it impacting their relationships?
- Are there any worrying physical symptoms?



**"Every day parents call in on Bupa's Family Mental Healthline and often they're concerned about something when perhaps their children aren't. Other times of course it can be more serious, and in these cases, receiving medical help as soon as possible is important as early diagnosis can have an impact on the long-term prognosis."**

Caroline, Bupa mental health nurse



## Supporting good coping strategies

Communication is the key to good mental health. That's whether teens have a specific problem, or parents simply want to support them by building resilience and helping them develop good coping strategies.

These conversations can be tricky, and not everyone is comfortable talking about their emotions. Our research found that a 1/3 of teens (34%) found it difficult to talk about their feelings with parents. Yet 3/4 of parents (74%) were sure their teen would come to them if they had a problem.

Caroline, Bupa mental health nurse says: "Don't worry about whether or not you will say the wrong thing, some conversations are better than no conversations.

"As we get older, and develop our emotional intelligence, we understand the importance of communication. But teens haven't got there yet, so it's important that parents

understand that and take the lead."

Parents instinctively want to 'solve' problems and sometimes miss the important first step — which is simply acknowledging their child's feelings.

"Validation is important. Don't minimise their feelings or try to brush them off. Accept them for what they are: it is what it is. Saying something as simple as, 'I'm really sorry you don't feel so good at the moment' won't change anything — but it lets teens know that they are cared for, and considered, and supported. That's very important."

**"Parents sometimes miss the important first step — which is simply acknowledging their child's feelings"**





# Gaining perspective

A series of comments, questions, or even texts, can also pave the way for a bigger conversation.

Caroline says: “Even if teens are not ready for a conversation, you can show love and comfort with texts and emojis.

”Teens treat text messages as chatting and see nothing unusual about having a text conversation with someone who’s in the same house. Texting also gives you both time to think about what you want to say, and it can be less confrontational than a face-to-face conversation.”

Looking at life from a different perspective can also make a huge difference; psychologists call it ‘cognitive framing’. As Lucy explains: “Even if we are all in the same position, some of us will frame the problem slightly differently.

“We might say OK, this is temporary, I am grateful for XYZ. These are the things I can control, and these are the positive aspects of what is happening. It can be far more helpful to frame a problem this way, rather than going around in circles and constantly thinking about the problem.”



## Advice for parents

### How can parents access further support?

If a teenager needs more support, a range of online and face-to-face therapies are available to Bupa insurance customers. If you are simply uncertain and think they might benefit from extra support, our mental health nurses can provide expert advice and reassurance via our Family Mental HealthLine.

Free tools for spotting various mental health conditions in teenagers and children and talking to them about them are also available to everyone from [Bupa’s Mental Health Hub](#).

Tips and useful content can also be found via the [NHS website](#), or mental health charities Mind, and Young Minds.



60%

would be comfortable approaching a parent if they were struggling



92%

felt they had someone they could speak to

Remember we're

HUMAN

It's likely that parents or carers might feel nervous about beginning to talk with their child about their mental health.

How are you?

Conversations about mental health can be more productive if you make it a two way conversation with your teenager. Don't use statements like "I'm worried about you". This can put them on edge and clam up or rebuff you. **Simply asking your child how they are will lead to a more positive conversation.**



Understand

As upsetting as it may be to hear that your child is struggling with their mental health, **try to remain calm**. If they sense that you're agitated it may cause them to become nervous and stop them feeling comfortable enough to open up. **Explain that you're there for them - and listen without judging.**



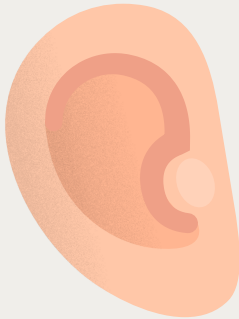
Myths

Try to dispel any myths they might have about mental illness. Explain that **it is just like other medical illnesses**, and that help is available.



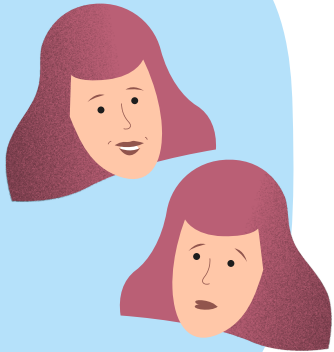
Acknowledge

Using phrases such as "there's no need to worry about that" can undermine their feelings and doesn't offer them a solution. **When they share how they feel, acknowledge it.**



Normalise

Explain that mental health is about our range of emotions and how we cope with our lives and that mental health can fluctuate daily - just like our physical health.







# 7

## Looking to the future

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## Looking to the future

None of us knows what long-term impact the pandemic will have, but there is no doubt it will have an impact. Our Teen Minds research found 70% are worried about the effect it will have on their future job prospects and 73% worry about the impact on their academic results - leading to a majority of 56% not feeling confident about their future.

Parents who were surveyed expressed similar concerns, with 77% admitting they are worried about their child's future prospects.

But there is also cause for optimism as half the teens said that Covid-19 has prompted them to prioritise their mental health over academic achievements, and 6 in 10 parents now put their children's health ahead of academic achievement, with 65% prioritising their happiness.

Furthermore, 68% of teens would be comfortable approaching a parent if they were struggling, and overall 92% felt they had someone they could speak to.

As Pablo says: "Wouldn't it be nice if everybody's new normal was ever so slightly better than their old normal. We should treat this as a reset button which allows us to reflect on how we used to live our lives, and see what worked — and what didn't."

**"Wouldn't it be better if everybody's new normal was slightly better than their old normal"**







# 8 Our mental health services

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# Our mental health services

Bupa UK has been investing in its mental health services, including cover for more conditions, ongoing support for longer term conditions and further support to families who are worried about their child’s mental wellbeing through the Family Mental HealthLine.

**Fast access to support is also available through Bupa’s Mental Health Direct Access service, which allows insurance customers to speak to a specialist without needing a GP referral.** And for those wanting to speak with a GP, Bupa offers access to video GP appointments usually within two hours through its new Digital GP app in partnership with Babylon. Further mental health enhancements and partnerships are planned for the year ahead.



The Bupa Family Mental HealthLine is available to Bupa UK private medical insurance customers between **8am – 6pm, Monday to Friday**, by calling: **0345 266 7938**

It provides:

- 1

An illustration of two people, a woman and a man, engaged in a conversation. The woman is on the left, gesturing with her hands, and the man is on the right, listening.

A team of trained advisors and mental health nurses to listen and provide advice, guidance and support
- 2

An illustration of a laptop and a smartphone, both with speech bubbles above them, representing digital resources.

Signposting to online resources for additional support and guidance
- 3

An illustration of a nurse in a white uniform, holding a smartphone and gesturing with her other hand.

Nurse-led case management to help parents with all aspects of their child’s mental health wellbeing, including planning and co-ordinating specialist care if needed



Designed for individuals and families, key features of the mental health cover include:



**Extended cover with all\* mental health conditions covered:**

Bupa covers all addictions, including drug, alcohol, and non-substance related addictions.



**No time limits:**

Mental health conditions are complex and can recur. Bupa customers will have access to medical treatment and support if their condition comes back



**Ongoing support:**

Those diagnosed with mental health conditions will be provided with help to manage their condition and prevent worsening symptoms. For example, if treatment involves ongoing, daily medication, they will have regular reviews to ensure they are on the most effective and appropriate treatment. If there is a clinical need, customers can have a follow-up appointment with a consultant psychiatrist

\*The only exceptions are dementia and learning, behavioural and developmental conditions. Support is for all new customers and renewing customers where they have mental health cover, provided within members' individual mental health benefit limits.

**About Bupa UK**

Bupa's purpose is helping people live longer, healthier, happier lives.

Health insurance accounts for the major part of our business with Bupa UK Insurance, the UK's leading health insurer, offering health insurance to 2.2 million people. Bupa Dental Care is the leading provider of private dentistry in the UK, with around 2.4 million patients and over 490 dental practices across the UK and Ireland. Bupa Care Services cares for around 6,800 residents in over 120 care homes, and nine Richmond villages. Bupa Health Services comprises 49 health clinics, and the Bupa Cromwell Hospital, a complex care hospital in London provides care for insured, self-pay, NHS and international patients. Bupa directly employs around 23,000 people in the UK.

For more information,  
**visit [www.bupa.co.uk](http://www.bupa.co.uk)**