Poll: Parents reporting teens’ MH worsening during pandemic

The pandemic has taken a large toll on teens’ mental health, according to a national poll on children’s health released March 15. Restrictions put in place to contain COVID-19 may be particularly difficult for teens, who rely heavily on their peer and social connections for emotional support, according to the new report.

The C. S. Mott Children’s Hospital National Poll on Children’s Health asked a national sample of parents about the emotional impact pandemic restrictions have had on their teens age 13–18.

The Mott Poll Report: How the Pandemic Has Impacted Teen Mental Health was administered in January to a randomly selected group of adults.

Although serious illness from COVID-19 is uncommon among teens, the changes brought on by the pandemic have wreaked havoc on their lives, according to the poll. Many have experienced disruptions to their normal routines, including closed schools, canceled activities and an inability to hang out with friends to extended family. Parents in this Mott Poll have shared that there has been a significant mental health impact of the pandemic for many of their teens.

Most parents (73%) report that COVID-19 has had a very or somewhat negative impact on their teen’s ability to interact with their friends. Around half of parents (46%) say they have noticed a new or worsening mental health condition for their teen since the start of the pandemic.

Parent report of pandemic-related mental health change reflects some differences for teen girls and boys. More parents of teen girls than parents of teen boys note an increase in anxiety/worry (36% vs. 19%) or depression/sadness (31% vs. 18%). In contrast, similar proportions of parents report negative changes in their teen’s sleep (24% vs. 21%), withdrawing from family (14% vs. 13%) and aggressive behavior (8% vs. 9%).

Various strategies

Parents who note negative changes in their teen’s mental health have tried various strategies to help their teen. Half (52%) have tried relaxing family COVID-19 rules to allow their teen to have more contact with friends; most of these (81%) say it has helped. Similarly, half of parents (47%) have tried relaxing family rules about social media; most (70%) report it helped.

Roughly one-third of parents (34%) report talking with teachers or school counselors, with over half (57%) saying it helped. About one in four parents (29%) report seeking help for their teen from a mental health provider, with most (74%) feeling it helped. Roughly one-third of parents (32%) report looking for information on the internet, with 58% saying it has helped; and 25% of parents report encouraging their teen to try a web-based program or an app to improve their mental health, with 60% saying it has helped.

Implications

At just the age when they are biologically primed to seek independence from their families, restrictions to control the COVID-19 pandemic have kept teens at home, according to the report. It is no surprise that many teens are feeling frustrated, anxious and disconnected due to social distancing and disruption of their usual schedules for school and outside activities, the authors stated.

These problems may be new for some teens, but for others they may have been exacerbated by the pandemic. It can be challenging for parents to assess the seriousness of the situation, and when it may be necessary to seek outside help. Although teens can experience a wide range of severity of mental health problems, if parents hear their teen express any thoughts of suicide or self-harm, it is important to seek mental health assistance immediately, the authors stated.

Recent research has shown teen depression during the pandemic to be associated with teens’ own fears and uncertainties, as well as high levels of parental stress. Parents also may want to consider whether they are transferring some of their own pandemic-related stress onto their teens. Parents have a critical role to play in helping their teens cope with the stress of the pandemic, the report noted.

Mental health experts advise that one of the most important things for parents to do is keep lines of communication open; ask their teen how they are doing and create the space for them to speak honestly so they can provide help when needed. Parents also need to remember it is normal for teens to crave privacy from their family. Giving them space for some quiet time, creative time or music time can be helpful to their mental health.

Massachusetts from page 1
was the same day the commonwealth shut down due to COVID-19.

A virtual kickoff commenced instead, said Danna Mauch, president and CEO of the Massachusetts Association for Mental Health (MAMH). The site contains a searchable database of more than 5,500 community behavioral health and related social services that people might depend on, such as clinics, residential hospitals, behavioral health services, food pantries and affordable housing entities, said Mauch. The services on the site are searchable by ZIP code and service type.

The Network of Care Massachusetts site, since its 2020 launch, has helped residents of the commonwealth, with nearly 38,000 individuals accessing the site, officials stated. The site is funded by the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation,