

ARE YOU ALRIGHT?

"This can't possibly be happening to my child!" This is what most parents think when their children are diagnosed with any mental health disorder.



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"I'm an MBBS student and am extremely passionate about surgery. I love reading, writing, dancing and going on treks. I also enjoy volunteering in my free time, especially with organizations dedicated to children. Want to gush about a novel you just read with someone? I'm your person!"

Mental health is a hot topic. There are some campaigns, blogs and websites all solely dedicated to creating mental health awareness. They provide resources about how to access help and information about what we can do to stay mentally fit. This became even more useful in the times of COVID-19 lockdowns. But what about teens? If you sit and deeply introspect, you will realize that in some way or the other we have all been minimizing their problems and frequently labelling their issues as just teenage drama or attention seeking behavior.

We're almost all guilty of noticing unusual behavior in a youngster we know and just waving it off as stereotypical teenage demeanor because we all end up thinking *'They have pretty much everything they need, why would they be having such problems? Nah, they're just at an age where they think this is cool.'* Have you ever done this too? Think about it. In most cases, even the parents don't bring their child in until after issues have been going on for months because they are in denial. Even after they come to accept that there is a problem, they're reluctant to seek help.

Such mentation of ours is what has led to highly complex mental health problems among young people being underreported, understudied and underfunded. Did you know that worldwide, at least 13% of people between the ages of 10 and 19 live with a diagnosed mental-health disorder? and what about the undiagnosed cases? Can you imagine how common this is? Try and remember any ten adolescents you know. They could be your family, nieces, nephews, your neighbors' children, anyone. Did you notice that according to these statistics, at least one of them may have a diagnosed mental health disorder?

Anxiety and depression constitute more than 40% of mental-health disorders among young people (those aged 10–19). UNICEF also reports that, worldwide, suicide is the fourth most-common cause of death among adolescents (aged 15–19). In Eastern Europe and central Asia, suicide is the leading cause of death for young people, and it's the second-highest cause in western Europe and North America. Do these numbers shock you? They definitely frightened me the first time I read them.

Some symptoms of **generalized anxiety disorder** include:

- Feeling restless, wound up, or on edge
- Becoming fatigued easily, having muscle tension
- Struggling with concentration and experiencing irritability
- Having difficulty keeping worry levels under control
- Struggling with sleep, such as difficulties falling asleep or staying asleep, or not feeling well-rested

Similarly, signs of **depression** include:

- Feeling persistently sad, anxious, or empty
- Experiencing hopelessness or pessimism
- Struggling with restlessness, irritability, fatigue and lack of energy
- Feeling guilty, worthless, or helpless
- Losing interest in hobbies or activities that used to be enjoyable
- Struggling with concentration, memory, and/or decision-making
- Experiencing unexplained changes in appetite or weight
- Having thoughts of death or suicide
- Unexplained aches or pains that don't go away when treated

If a youngster seems to be having any of these issues, rather than turning a

blind eye, we should talk to them and try to figure out if there is a stressor in their life that's causing them to behave this way. Many times, simple conversations, being able to vent out and discuss their problems, or just having their feelings validated, can have a huge positive impact on their lives. We can make them feel less alone and assure them that we're always there to support them. If these conversations don't reduce their

anxiety or depression, we can try to understand their perspective and assist them in getting the therapy or treatment they may need.

In most situations, talking to the youngster may not always be the ultimate solution, but it is definitely the first and easiest step. **Mental illness is preventable.** Let's take that first step toward making a young person's life easier. Next time, let's ask them, **"Are you alright?"**