

Your Child's Mental Health: Mental Wellness in Young Adults

Once your child has left home for college or work, you may feel confused about your role in guiding engagement with his or her primary care physician. As a parent, you might feel that they should be "on their own" and learn to manage any mental health concerns without your guidance.

While it is true that your young adult child is much more independent, and facing developmental tasks like mastering new educational, vocational and social skills, they are still very dependent on you, and though they may not say it directly, they really value your input.

Young adults, ages 18-26, are far more able to have open, direct conversations with you about all sorts of important issues, at least compared to their younger years. So, don't hesitate to include and initiate discussions about both their physical and emotional wellbeing.

While children this age are seen by society as "adults," their brains do not fully develop until around age 26. They are still impulsive and not fully mature. Perhaps more than any other time in their lives, young adults are subject to emotional stress and risk for psychiatric disorders. As a parent, it is really important for you to be aware of mental health concerns at this age.

Developmental Benchmarks and Problems of Young Adulthood

During this period of life your child will be working on developmental tasks in several areas:

- **Cognitive.** They will be thinking about themselves and the world with far greater complexity. They will be questioning their (and your) values and ideals.
- **Social.** They will develop more mature and intimate relationships. This may include more sexual exploration, including attention to their sexual orientation. They will now see relationships as possible paths to marriage and having their own families. While they see themselves as autonomous individuals, they also feel strongly about being part of a group.
- **Emotional.** Young adults move into more adult relationships with peers and with you. They are often still impulsive, and unpredictably emotional. But they are becoming more able to be empathic and to understand the feelings and motives of others.
- **Work.** Young adults are very concerned about their academic or vocational direction and how they will make a living in the future. They want to identify career goals.

Risk of Mental Health Concerns

The greatest source of disability in this group is mental illness – far greater than medical illness. During this age range is when many disorders first become apparent, including mood disorders, substance use disorders, anxiety disorders, suicidal behavior, sleep disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of bullying or sexual assault, and rarely, psychosis. Of great concern is that only about 25% of young adults who are struggling will actually seek mental health help.

Developmental Benchmarks and Problems of Young Adulthood

Remember that many young adults will not open the conversation. It is up to you to start one. Also remember that you are an expert on your child, and that they look up to you for advice.

Your child will be seeing their primary care doctor alone, so it's important to talk with them about any issues, so they can discuss them with their doctors. Some may still want you to come to their visit, but assume they will be on their own.

Here are some important questions to ask and topics to discuss with your child. Start with open ended-questions to see if they will bring up an issue or problem, and then get more specific.

Open-Ended Questions

- How have things been going in general?
- Tell me about school/work? Is it going ok? Any issues or problems?
- I know it's personal, but are you involved in any romantic relationships? How is it going?
- How are your relationships with friends? Do you feel well connected with others, or isolated?
- Any problems in your life right now? Are there any issues you want to talk about with me?

Specific Questions

- How has your mood been? Are you feeling down or low?
- Do you ever think about suicide? If so, please tell me about your thoughts, or any plans or intentions. Note: Remember, it is a myth that asking about suicide does not increase risk.
- Are you drinking or using any drugs? If so, do you think you are using them too much?
- Do you have any frequent worries? Do you feel anxious about anything?
- How is your sleep and energy? How is your appetite? Your concentration?
- Are you involved sexually? If so, are you using protection?
- Do you see bullying happening in your circles? How do you respond?
- Have you or has anyone you know been sexually assaulted? If so, have you already gotten help? How can I be helpful?
- Do you have any frequent concerns about your weight, body image, or appearance?
- How are you managing stress?
- Do you feel you could use a counselor? Have you ever thought about it? What would that be like for you?

This is a lot to discuss. You shouldn't attempt to take all of these topics on in one conversation. Young adulthood, though awesome at times, may be incredibly stressful. Your child needs to be able to talk with you about these issues. Your support can help them feel more comfortable bringing concerns to their primary care doctor or a mental health professional, as well.

SUMMARY

Remember, you know your child best. But if your answer to any of these questions makes you think, look at your thoughts as an opportunity to ask your doctor more questions. After all, that's what your doctor is there for!