

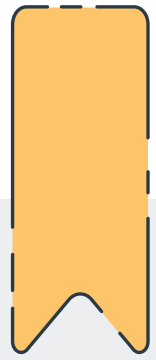
Mental Health in America's Schools

A Guide to Supporting Students

Written by Impero Software and Mental Health America



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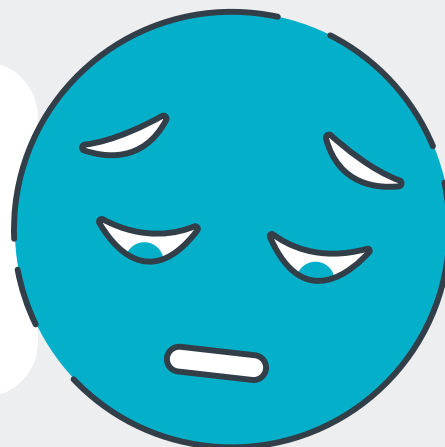


Mental Health in America's Schools – A Guide to Supporting Students

Executive Summary

For many of us mired in everyday tasks, the life of a child can seem carefree, if not downright idyllic. Trading the concerns of bills, difficult bosses, and aging parents for homework and best friend worries seems like a good deal. But don't be so quick to think the grass is greener for today's middle school and high school students. Today's youth are feeling more stressed and lonely. Nearly half of 11 to 17-year-olds say they are stressed out and more than two million have major depression issues, a rise of more than 4% in the last six years, according to the nonprofit [Mental Health America](#) (MHA).

What's worse, the organization notes, that 83% of teens say they don't have an adult in their life who understands what they are going through. As school officials, and a key link to helping parents respond to the stress their child is under, it's important to understand the signs and causes of stress and loneliness in students' lives. The good news? Mental health issues are common and treatable. Just like physical health, taking care of mental health struggles early can usually prevent small problems from becoming bigger issues. This paper will review the latest information on stress and loneliness among youths, identify typical warning signs to watch for, and explain how school officials and parents can provide early intervention and support.



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Stress and Loneliness in Schools

Most people experience stress every week and students are no exception. Taking tests, trying out for sports or other activities, navigating the social mores that rule middle school, all come with a degree of difficulty that can heap pressure upon a student. But sometimes these forces are helpful. For example, studying for a test or practicing an instrument can ensure that knowledge is gained, skills are improved, and the next hurdle is met.

Problems occur when the stress isn't temporary. That's when it begins to affect other parts of students' lives. And research shows that children are feeling much more stress than teachers or even parents can guess.

[Research from the American Psychological Association](#) (APA) shows that about one in five children aged 8 to 17 report worrying a lot or a great deal, but only 3% of parents rated their children's stress as extreme. For older children, that percentage rises: 48% of 11 to 17-year-olds surveyed by MHA felt they were "very stressed out."

The same disconnect happens with children reporting headaches and sleeping difficulties: about one in every three children report getting headaches in the past month, but only 13% of parents thought their children had headaches, according to the APA. And 44% of children reported sleeping difficulties, but only 13% of parents felt that was the case.

So what's causing all this stress in children today? The causes aren't a surprise or anything new. The top reason for stress, cited by 76% of 11 to 17-year-olds in the same survey, was getting good grades. Other factors ranking high include:

- Preparing for the future (76%)
- Loneliness (68%)
- Appearance/body image (62%)
- Juggling priorities (61%)

To a lesser degree, but still prevalent, factors include having to help take care of family members, worries about their physical safety, or family finances.

Loneliness is different from stress and how it affects students can be harder to specify. But a [report from London](#) last year, the first of its kind, showed that 11.3% of children reported they were often lonely. The feeling was most prevalent among children aged 10 to 12, and the study showed a direct link between students' reports of loneliness and whether they qualified for free school meals. About 28% of students who qualified for school meals said they "often" felt lonely, compared to just 6% of other students. There was also a big split between children who lived in the city versus children who lived in rural areas. Just 5% of rural children reported feeling alone, while 20% of city children said they felt lonely. There isn't a comparable study in the United States, but nearly half of all Americans report "sometimes or always" feeling lonely according to MHA. Children, adolescents, and teenagers are no exception.

The reasons students feel alone, according to MHA, can include these eight situations:

- Moving to a new neighborhood
- Changing schools
- Parents getting a divorce
- An older brother or sister moving out of the house
- All their friends are in a relationship
- Fights with friends
- Being bullied
- Seeing social media posts for activities they weren't invited to attend

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Understanding the Warning Signs

So now we understand that students are much more prone to both loneliness and stress than we may have originally thought. But exactly how do we determine which students are in need of help versus those who are simply having a bad day? There are a number of behaviors in students that could indicate stress, especially if these behaviors repeat or become long-term problems. According to MHA and the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly half of all mental health disorders begin by the age of 14, so it's important to pay attention if students are:

- Feeling angry or easily frustrated
- Experiencing tiredness, likely caused by poor sleep
- Losing their temper with peers
- Having frequent headaches or other unexplained ailments
- Experiencing changes in appetite
- Having trouble concentrating or thinking clearly
- Feeling sad/moody/nervous/anxious
- Feeling they can't handle life's challenges
- Shunning friends and activities

There can be differences in the ways that younger children and teens show loneliness. Younger children are more likely to create imaginary friends, become clingy, seek attention through bad behavior they understand is wrong, be timid or unsure of themselves, or cry more often. For teens, the signs may include seeming sad, appearing not to have friends, no longer hanging out with former friends, or talking negatively about themselves.

Stress can affect students emotionally and physically. Excessive stress can make students feel nervous, anxious or overwhelmed. Stress can cause students to procrastinate or neglect responsibilities as they try to avoid stressful situations. Stress can change eating habits and sleep patterns, and can wreak havoc on students' concentration.

The effects of chronic loneliness can be severe, as bad for overall health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day or being obese, notes MHA. Chronic loneliness can [increase](#) children's cortisol levels, which also amps up the stress they feel. It can also lead to:

- Less restful sleep
- Poor self-care
- Higher possibility of alcohol or drug use
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Pessimism
- Poor self-esteem
- Higher risk of suicide



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The Role of Social Media

Students interact with social media, gaming, and the internet in different ways than adults. Their behavior online can either exacerbate or lessen stress and loneliness. Understanding how students behave online can help adults steer them toward positive behaviors. MHA lists these examples:

- 57% of teens say they have met new friends online and 68% report receiving support from peers online.
- But about a quarter of students say social media has a negative effect on them and the same percentage report being bullied or having rumors spread about them either online or through social media.
- Many students socialize with friends online through gaming or other activities. This interaction might not replace face-to-face meetings, but it can fill a meaningful gap in students' lives. More than three quarters of teens say gaming online helps them feel closer to existing friends.

Early Intervention and Support

When stress and loneliness become pervasive and affect students over a period of time, they need help. If these conditions impair students' everyday functions, they could be the first signs of a mental health condition such as depression or anxiety. Young people tend to be incredibly active on social media so these signs will often manifest themselves first online. [Research](#) from the University of Vermont noted computers can diagnose depression based on clues in someone's Instagram photos more reliably than a doctor can in a face-to-face appointment. For example, photos posted by those suffering from depression were on average bluer, darker and grayer than those posted by healthy individuals. Other clues came in the form of the type of filters the individuals selected and how many people's faces appeared in their posts, according to the study.

[Other online indicators of mental health issues](#) include changes in typing speed, voice tone and word choices. Today there are online monitoring tools available to help educators and administrators determine when students may be having an issue. Impero's student online safety features comprise a number of keyword detection libraries, this includes a mental health keyword library developed in partnership with MHA. When a student who is using the school network types a word found in the keyword library, whether it is in an application, on social media, or the internet, the system will send an alert to the designated school administrator.

Here are some examples of key words or phrases that could indicate a student is having thoughts of suicide:

"ehtilb" - a term or hashtag people use mainly when discussing or searching depression, cutting, or eating disorders.

"Feel so alone" – a phrase that may indicate a cause for concern as people suffering with mental health problems may state that they feel lonely.

"Pain-free way to die"—a phrase that could indicate a cause for concern as people having suicidal thoughts may discuss and/or search on pain free ways to attempt suicide.

"Want the pain to stop" – a phrase that could indicate a cause for concern as people suffering with mental health problems may disclose that they want the pain to stop.

"kms" – text speak for "kill myself." This may indicate a cause for concern as people having suicidal thoughts may talk about or search on how to kill themselves.

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When a keyword is flagged, the school administrator can see the context in which the student used the word to help them determine if the word was being used for educational purposes or for something that could indicate an issue. This can be a first step to intervening when students are struggling and getting them the help they may need.

An early warning system also provides schools with the data to make informed decisions around student mental health and wellness. **Impero EdAware's** browser-based software can help schools and teachers do a better job of monitoring the mental health of students by showing a holistic view of every student's wellbeing. The software is a repository of student records of incidents and concerns allowing school officials to store and access student related documents, and their own documents and policies, related to each student. **Impero EdAware** is an early warning system that can help inform effective interventions for students. This digital record keeping can both save staff time and simplify referrals, when needed, to relevant external services.

In a [case study](#) with the Pottsboro Independent School District in Texas, the district described the benefits of Impero's safety features in this way:

"Impero Education Pro has helped open our eyes to a lot of things students spend their time searching for. It's given visibility of online dangers we couldn't easily identify before, such as bullying, self-harm and suicide patterns. We do a lot of the monitoring in our technical department and we've set certain keywords as severe (which trigger a notification), and we look at these on a daily basis. If we come across something like self-harm or suicide, it's not what we want to see, but it makes all our work and time implementing the software well worth it. When an issue is detected, we pass this capture to the counselor to see if it's legitimate e.g. a student searching a suicide hotline. The counselor can get an understanding of why the student has searched that, where they can notify a parent and talk to the student before a situation escalates."

In another example, a school reported Impero's keyword detection features helped it detect two students at risk of suicide within a matter of weeks of each other. One student was a 'happy-go-lucky' grade-A student who was showing no outward signs of needing help. However, keyword detection through Impero's mental health keyword library indicated the young person was planning to commit suicide. Fortunately, school staff were alerted, and the appropriate support was given to that student.

The second student was showing noticeable signs of struggle, however when approached the student would shut down and not open up to anyone in the school. Through keyword detection, Impero's mental health keyword library identified that the young person was researching suicide methods. This evidence empowered school staff members to approach the young person and provide the help the student so desperately needed.

'Want the pain to stop'

'Feel so alone' 'kms' 'ehtilb'

'Pain-free way to die'

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How to Help Students Suffering from Stress or Loneliness

Teachers and parents may not be able to stop stress, but they can use these eight strategies to help students better deal with the pressure they are feeling.

- **Remind them to be kind to themselves.** It sounds simple, but just letting students know that no one is perfect can help. Reinforce that they should try their best and eventually they will see the reward.
- **Help them manage their time.** Stressed students frequently feel overwhelmed and that can lead to them deciding it is not worth trying. Help them set a schedule by breaking down tasks into small goals and reinforcing that they should celebrate progress. Also, it may help to caution them to give up some activities, or at least delay worrying about them until vital tasks are completed.
- **Don't forget the basics.** Encourage students to eat healthy while avoiding excessive caffeine and sugar. Sleep is also crucial, so counsel them to stick to set bedtimes whenever possible.
- **Look for signs of substance abuse.** Teens under stress are more susceptible to turning to drugs, alcohol, or vaping. Remind them that using these substances won't solve problems.
- **Let them know it's OK to "let it out."** Laughing or crying can help a student release emotions. Give them permission to do either if they need it.
- **Help them relax.** Students need a break from stress, so encouraging them to listen to music, take a break to play a game, or provide opportunities for them to stretch or meditate, could be helpful. Help them set limits for how long they do these activities, especially at home, so they don't avoid essential work or later feel guilty for time spent off task.
- **Tell them you care about them.** Students, like everyone else, need to feel appreciated. Knowing that someone cares about their wellbeing can be a comfort.
- **Remind them that it's OK to ask for help.** No one should suffer by themselves, especially when help is available. Knowing when to ask for help is a strength, not a weakness. Let students know you are available to talk with them or that a school counselor or mental health professional can help if needed. If young people are unsure about what help they need, encourage them to take a confidential screening test with [MHA's Screening Program](#) to determine the severity of their problems.

Part of the problem students who are experiencing loneliness face is an inability to think they can change their experiences. Here's where some good suggestions can nudge students into activities that naturally include others, sparking the possibility for new friendships. These four suggestions can help:

- **Talk to them about their interests.** Simply finding out what a student enjoys can spark ideas about how they can pursue these interests with others.
- **Encourage recreational sports.** Sports give students a chance to meet peers, make new friends, and pursue activities that aren't tethered to past worries. Schools, through organizations like their athletic boosters, can offer to help fund team costs for students in need.
- **Remind them of family connections.** Lonely students can forget their built-in support system, from parents and siblings to extended family. Suggesting they pursue fun activities with family members can be a good start.
- **Change their classroom experience.** Simply setting up new small group interactions during class time can help a student not only avoid peers they have a problem with, but it can introduce them to students they may not have naturally connected with.



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A Focus on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Many districts have, or are, implementing SEL for students and staff. SEL can help students persevere in times of difficulty, especially when dealing with stress and loneliness.

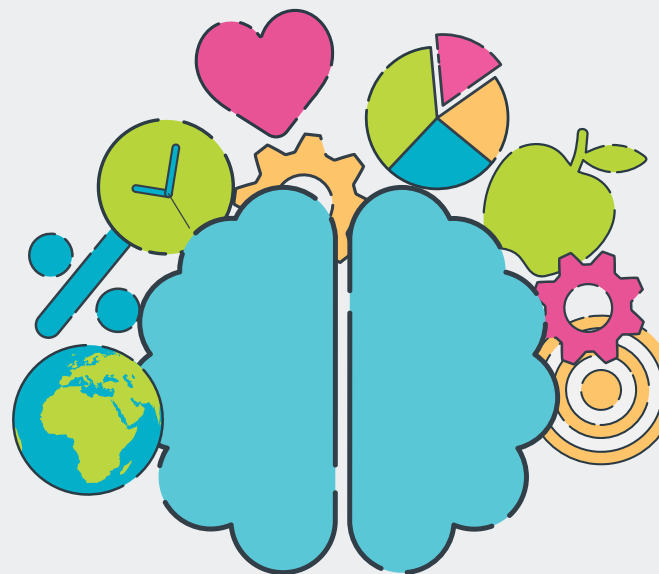
According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), research has shown that SEL programming can have a positive impact up to 18 years later on academics, conduct problems, emotional distress, and drug use. And, in schools that teach SEL skills, 27% more students improved their academic performance and 24% more students improved their emotional wellbeing and social behavior.

SEL skills focus on the core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making. By helping students to be more self-aware of their own emotions, they will hopefully be better able to handle all of the stressors associated with adolescent life.

Teachers who want to incorporate social and emotional learning into their practice can:

- Offer lessons focused on SEL competence.
- Use cooperative and project-based learning to help students form relationships with others.
- Use SEL practices and modeling across all classes.
- Make SEL an organizational strategy and provide SEL professional development to educators to help them be better prepared to practice SEL skills in their teaching.
- Use conflict-resolution strategies to help students apply skills to new situations.
- Allow students to practice group decision-making.
- Have students mentor younger students as a way to build self-confidence and purpose.

Too often today, stress and loneliness is a large part of students' lives and schools can and should be vigilant about taking away the stigma around mental health, focusing on early intervention and giving students the skills to cope when stressors arise. By doing this they are helping students deal with the internal pressures that get in the way of being successful students.



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About the Authors

Impero Software is a specialist provider of remote monitoring and management software for education. We are dedicated to solving complex problems with simple solutions for schools across the globe. Because we're 100% focused on education, we develop our solutions in direct response to the latest education trends and requirements – whether that's student safety and wellbeing, new technology, or the rise of cloud services.

In order to ensure we deliver the very best products for our customers, we work closely with schools, charities, and specialist organizations around the world, including those that specialize in mental health. Our range of student safety and remote monitoring and management solutions have been specially designed to support technical teams, empower teachers and keep students safe.

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Mental Health America is the leading community-based non-profit in the United States dedicated to addressing the needs of those living with mental illness and promoting the overall mental health of all people. Our work is driven by our commitment to promote mental health as a critical part of overall wellness, including prevention services for all; early identification and intervention for those at risk; integrated care, services, and supports for those who need it; with recovery as the goal.

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