

IN THE NEWS

PULSE EDITION

Protecting Mental Health & Substance Awareness Teens: Use

Understanding the Crisis, Promoting Prevention, and Supporting Youth Well-Being

In August 2025, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) launched a major new public health initiative called the Free Mind campaign which focused at addressing a growing crisis among America's youth: the intersection of mental-health challenges and substance use. The campaign targets adolescents ages 12–17 as well as their parents and caregivers, offering resources, guidance, and support for navigating stress, anxiety, depression, and the pressures that can lead to drug or alcohol use.

This effort comes at a critical time. According to the most recent Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) survey, in 2024 about 15.4% of adolescents experienced a major depressive episode in the past year and many more reported moderate or severe anxiety. These numbers reflect widespread mental-health stress among young people.



Source: Drug Free America

What's happening?

Right now, the United States is facing a crisis among teenagers which is rising mental health struggles and increasing risks related to substance abuse. CDC has recently shown data that more than 80,000 people died from drug overdoses in 2024 which the drug fentanyl involved 75% of overdose deaths among youth ages 10-19. A SAMHSA survey reveals many adolescents are experiencing high levels of anxiety and depression, but a large portion of those who have

both substance use disorder and a major depressive episode aren't receiving the care that they need. Overall, these trends show that teens who are facing serious mental health pressures while also being exposed to dangerous substances proves that we need precaution and prevention to help prevent this.



Source: SAMHSA

The Human Side of the Crisis

Behind these statistics are real people, teens, families and even healthcare professionals who are struggling silently. Studies have shown that mental health challenges do not stop at children but they often follow individuals into adulthood and even into careers. An article from *Harvard Medicine Magazine* describes how many doctors and medical professionals experience burnout, depression and emotional exhaustion but feel pressure to

These show a troubling cycle of those who are trained to care for others and lack the space or support to care for themselves. This reality matters for teens who aspire to go into the medical field. When young people see medical professionals overwhelmed or even emotionally drained it reinforces the importance of addressing mental health early before stress turns into substance use or long term harm.



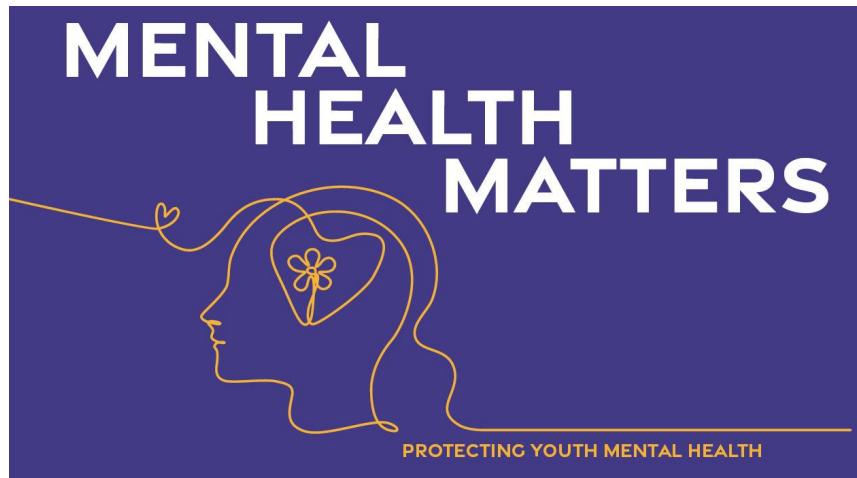
Source: NGA

An article from *JAMA* describes untreated mental health conditions that significantly increase vulnerability to substance misuse, specifically during adolescence when coping skills are still developing. Preventing education and access to care can make a meaningful difference in breaking this cycle.

Why Awareness and Prevention Matter

The Power of Early Intervention, Education, and Open Conversations

The *CDC's Free Mind campaign* recognizes that prevention must begin with honest conversations, accessible resources and trusted support systems. Many adolescents experiencing anxiety or depression never seek help either due to fear, stigma, or lack of awareness. When mental health struggles are left unaddressed, some teens turn to substances as a way to cope which increases the risk of addiction, overdose, and long term health consequences. By prioritizing mental health education and early intervention, communities can help teens develop healthier coping strategies and reduce exposure to dangerous substances.



Source: CDC

Resources and Support

If you or someone you know is struggling with mental health or substance use, support is available:

- 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: call or text 988 (24/7, free and confidential)
- SAMHSA National Helpline: 1-800-662- HELP (4357) for treatment referrals and information
- CDC Youth Mental Health Resources: guidance for teens, parents and caregivers
- Trusted adults: teachers, school counselors, healthcare providers, or mentors can be an important first step toward getting help

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