

UTMC Kobacker Center offers help and hope to teens in crisis

The teenage years could be described as a “perfect storm” of biological, emotional, and social changes. Some teens are able to navigate this tumultuous period with minimal difficulty, while others may struggle to cope and are at increased risk of experiencing overwhelming feelings or mental health problems, which in turn can lead to substance abuse, high-risk behaviors, self-harm, or even thoughts of suicide.

According to UTMC child and



Dr. Rakesh Goyal

adolescent psychiatrist Dr. Rakesh Goyal, several factors contribute to the emotional upheaval so common in the teen years.

“Teens are biologically reaching a new phase as they enter puberty with all its hormonal changes. At the same time, their social circle is expanding beyond Mom and Dad and a small group of childhood friends. They’re trying to figure out their place in life, who they are, and what they want to be. The desire to fit in—to be accepted into a clique, to get invited to activities, and to be

like others—is very powerful at this stage,” he explains.

Dr. Goyal also points out that the teen brain is not yet fully developed, specifically in the prefrontal cortex, which is associated with exercising good judgment, delaying gratification, and controlling impulses. “So, teens are biologically, socially, and psychologically vulnerable to many different kinds of stress, and they can become overwhelmed trying to figure out how to deal with all these things,” he says.

Social media

Perhaps not surprisingly, the advent of social media has made teen crisis even more common than it once was. Along with all the benefits of the tech boom—exposure to different cultures and ideas, easy access to information, etc.—came several problems that put all the more pressure on teens, such as the ease with which people can bully others through social media. Also, there is an almost constant pressure to reply to and interact with peers via texting, email, and other forms of messaging.

When it comes to social media and smart phone use, Dr. Goyal’s advice to parents is to allow access to these technologies but with close oversight, especially for kids younger than high school age. “You don’t want to isolate teens by preventing all access to smart phones and social media, but there should be restrictions on their screen time and they need to let you know with whom they’re interacting—not to be punitive, but to make them feel secure,” he says.

Coping with stress

Dr. Goyal expresses concern that there’s a growing trend among teens to resort to self-harming behavior, such as cutting, or talk of suicide as a go-to mechanism for coping with stressors or feelings of anxiety or depression. “When teens start to talk about harming themselves or committing suicide as a way of coping, they actually tend to get sicker and sicker.

Getting trapped in that sort of thinking is like entering a black hole,” he cautions.

Warning signs

Teens in crisis seldom give a literal call for help, so it's incumbent upon their parents, teachers, or other adults in their lives to watch for certain warning signs, including:

- Changes in appetite or weight
- Changes in sleep habits
- A drop in grades
- Sudden lack of interest in activities
- Becoming socially isolated
- Suddenly replacing old friends with a new group
- Extreme moodiness
- Self-harming behavior such as cutting
- Looking for a way to kill oneself

Also, because teens are more likely to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors with peers rather than adults, Dr. Goyal advises parents to stay in contact with their child's close friends. "Oftentimes the first warning sign parents receive of a teen's emotional problems, self-harming behavior, or suicidal thoughts, is from a concerned, trusted friend," he says.

Upon learning that a teen is talking about suicide, engaging in self-harm, or exhibiting unusual behavior, it's critical for the parents to have him or her evaluated. Don't assume the problem will resolve with the passage of time. Crisis behaviors, such as threatening suicide or serious self-injury or experiencing hallucinations, warrant emergency room care. For mental health concerns that don't rise to the level of crisis, an appointment can be scheduled with the teen's primary care physician or a counselor, or call the Outpatient Department of Psychiatry at The University of Toledo Medical Center.

The Kobacker Center, one of only two pediatric inpatient units in Northwest Ohio, specializes in treating the emotional needs of children and adolescents ages 13-17 who struggle with intense anger, chronic depression, and thoughts of suicide. A team of professionals, led by a board-certified child and adolescent psychiatrist who directs treatment, provides comprehensive treatment and guidance.

The Center also provides outpatient services, psychological testing, individual therapy, and community psychiatric support, and collaborates with other providers and organizations in the area to ensure patients have access to all the resources they need.

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For more information on the Kobacker Center or to schedule an appointment, please call 419.383.3815.

**Kobacker Center
1400 East Medical Loop
Toledo, OH 43614
Phone: 419.383.3815**

