

# Mental Health Issues for Adolescents and Young Adults

Mental health challenges occur for all teens and young adults, but there is increased risk for those with developmental disabilities or special health care needs. Mental health is defined by the World Health Organization as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.<sup>1</sup>

Adolescence is a time of change and transition. All teens face new situations as they enter and complete their high school experiences, consider moving away from their childhood homes, and grow more independent from their families. Dealing with new situations and responsibilities increase: learning to drive, traveling independently on public transportation, dating and romantic relationships.

Many begin their work careers and enter into adult relationships with others. Old friends are left behind; new friends are made. All these changes can increase the stress teens feel as well as reduce the support of family, teachers and friends. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that a study reported by the CDC<sup>2</sup> found that the number one health concern for more than 50% of U.S. 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> graders was “Handling stress” with 38% listing “Handling depression/anxiety” as a top health concern.

Research has found that for many individuals, mental illnesses first emerge in the teenage years: depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia. Other conditions may change in these years; ADHD often causes different problems in the teen years than in the younger school age child. Lack of focus and impulsivity escalate from academic problems to serious injury issues when teens are faced with the risks of driving, alcohol, drugs, sexual behavior, etc.

People who have developmental disabilities are at increased risk for mental health problems and mental illness. The National Association for Dual Diagnosis<sup>3</sup> (Dr. Robert Fletcher) gives the following ideas for this finding: “Stress is a risk factor for mental health problems. Persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities experience negative social conditions throughout the life span that contribute to excessive stress. These negative social conditions include social rejection, stigmatization, and the lack of acceptance in general. Social support and coping skills can buffer the effect of stress on mental health. In persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities, limited coping skills associated with language difficulty, inadequate social supports, and a high frequency of central nervous system impairment, all contribute to the vulnerability of developing mental health problems. Another explanation for the increased prevalence of mental health problems in this population relates to behavioral phenotypes. In addition to the characteristic physiological signs associated with genetic syndromes, many syndromes have characteristic behavior and emotional patterns. These behavioral phenotypes may contribute to the increased rate of behavioral and mental health problems among persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities.”

<sup>1</sup>World Health Organization. Retrieved 6/2010 from <http://www.who.int/features/qa/62/en/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> America’s Promise (2005). Voices Study: Research Findings. Reported in Audience Insights: Communicating to Teens, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, CS 201029/2009.

<sup>3</sup> (Dr. Robert Fletcher; Dr. Robert Fletcher)