



Research summary

Connect. Help. Prevent.

Tackling the youth
mental health crisis



Today's youth are more connected to information than any other generation before them and are struggling more than ever to make sense of the world, their place in it and how to navigate through it. The health care industry as a whole needs to work together to break down barriers to mental health support for youth and their parents or caregivers. To achieve this, we need to find ways to help young people access resources that are credible, feel authentic and are proven to be effective.

Driven to improve care options, we recently completed extensive research with adolescents and young adults and their caregivers and clinicians to better understand the lives, needs, desires and values of individuals ages 13-26 who are experiencing behavioral health symptoms, conditions and treatment. Our research revealed three common points of intersection in the mental health journeys of today's youth that provide critical opportunities to help enhance preventive measures, provide treatment, and improve the mental health and well-being of individuals.

At Optum, we are proactively designing new behavioral health solutions to help solve the adolescent mental health crisis – and we are starting with three connection opportunities.

Connection opportunity 1

“
Am I OK?”

Often in the early stages of a mental health concern, individuals become aware that something is wrong, but they don't know what it is. They don't know why they feel the way they do and often don't have a frame of reference for what “mental well-being” is or what the signs and symptoms of a mental health condition may be. When youth get this feeling, they report being reluctant to ask parents and caregivers for help. Reasons given include:

- They worry they will burden their already stressed-out parents
- They worry their parents/caregivers will “freak out” or overreact
- They do not trust their parents/caregivers to be able to help them

So instead, youth tend to seek validation and care from others they trust. These could be friends in real life or people they meet online. They also conduct their own research online.



Pathway

Make it easier for youth – and the people who care for them – to find and share credible information, including through digital spaces, apps, toolkits and other health literacy resources. For example, apps and digital spaces could be used to help youth increase their awareness of mental health, identify warning signs and triggers, and build life skills to promote their well-being. Tools could be used to help caregivers monitor their perception of a child's mood and behavior over time to more objectively understand when an intervention may or may not be appropriate. Digital tools also could be developed to help youth start difficult conversations with their caregivers, and vice versa.



Connection opportunity 2

“
Can I
trust you?
Do you
care?”

Teens and young adults are united in their desire for mental health professionals to see them in their entirety. Any mistrust in the authenticity or credibility of the help available is difficult to overcome, and there is a low tolerance for trying again after experiencing something that feels disingenuous.

However, if they feel a counselor or resource is genuine and authentic, they appreciate knowing resources are available. In building connections, teens value personality fit and seek a therapist who brings their full self to conversations. They also seek credentialed, peer-recommended, knowledgeable clinicians who provide coping mechanisms and empower effective self-management of symptoms. When teens and young adults have positive experiences, they are likely to continue to engage with therapy and may even become mental health advocates for others.



Pathway

Build trust with youth and create more opportunities for touch points and soft landings, where they can find genuine connections and evidence-based information while maintaining a sense of autonomy. For example, peer support networks have proved successful in helping guide and sustain individuals with mental health conditions and substance use disorders through diagnosis, treatment and recovery. Youth could more readily find credible sources of effective support if investments were made to broaden the reach of peer support networks into schools, community organizations and other places youth spend their time, as well as mobilizing virtual touch points for these networks through social media platforms and other online spaces.



Connection opportunity 3

“
Where
can I find
help?”



Pathway

In order to help caregivers and teens and young adults more easily navigate the health care system to find support, we need to help systems and clinics overcome barriers to providing care. For example, a secure communication platform could be developed on which medical and behavioral health professionals could collaborate and coordinate diagnosis and treatment plans for youth, including for long-term continuity. Also, the burden on medical providers, especially in regions with limited behavioral health professionals, could be alleviated by expanding the virtual visits network of mental health professionals or improving literacy and awareness of other types of evidence-based support, such as behavioral coaching, when appropriate.

Teens and young adults and their caregivers report getting lost in the health care system. They don't know where to go, who can help or how to proceed. For guidance, they sometimes turn to their primary care providers – 20% of visits to primary care providers are related to mental health conditions.*

Meanwhile, there is a persisting shortage of mental health providers in the United States. In hopes of bridging this gap, many inside and outside the health care industry expect medical professionals to screen for mental health warning signs and make assessments and referrals accordingly. Despite the positive intentions of all involved, including clinicians, this is proving difficult in practice. For instance, when they occur, the interactions between medical clinicians (physicians, nurse practitioners, etc.) and youth are typically limited to short annual visits, such as for a wellness checkup or sports participation screening. This leaves little opportunity for a mental health concern to be revealed or identified. In addition, most medical professionals already cope with heavy patient loads, staffing shortages and administrative burdens, among other challenges. Perhaps most importantly, medical professionals are experts in their chosen branch of medicine and do not specialize in behavioral health conditions.

New approaches and solutions are needed to help bridge care and access gaps for all involved.

Reimagining the journey toward mental well-being

These are just a few potential starting points for answering the call to help address the youth mental health crisis in America.

At Optum, we are using our in-depth research to explore and test a myriad of new evidence-based solutions to help caregivers and youth better understand, address and prevent mental health concerns. These programs will make it easier for youth to understand what they're feeling and find credible sources they can trust. They also will make it easier for parents and caregivers to support youth. All of these steps are essential to helping young people – and the people who care for them – live healthy and fulfilling lives.

To learn more

about how we can partner to address youth and family mental health,
contact your Optum representative or visit [optum.com/behavioralhealth](https://www.optum.com/behavioralhealth).



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