



Anxiety and stress in our youth

Dale Wisely, Ph.D.

Guiding principles

- Teenagers are diverse. There is almost nothing we can say that begins with “Teenagers are...” that will be true of all teenagers.
- Related: The “problems with teenagers” are likely to differ by zip code. Example: Causes of death are very different for kids who live in the suburbs than people who live in urban areas. Different for white kids vs. black kids.
- Our culture tends to be fearful and suspicious of teenagers. We tend to scapegoat them.
- Most of the “problems with today’s teenagers” are also problems among adults. Or their problems are largely OUR fault. Things we have done and things we have failed to do.
- There is nothing wrong with the teenage brain. We have misused valid information about brain development.
- Teenagers deserve respect, empathy, support, mentoring.



Pew Research Center *Social & Demographic Trends*

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FEBRUARY 20, 2019



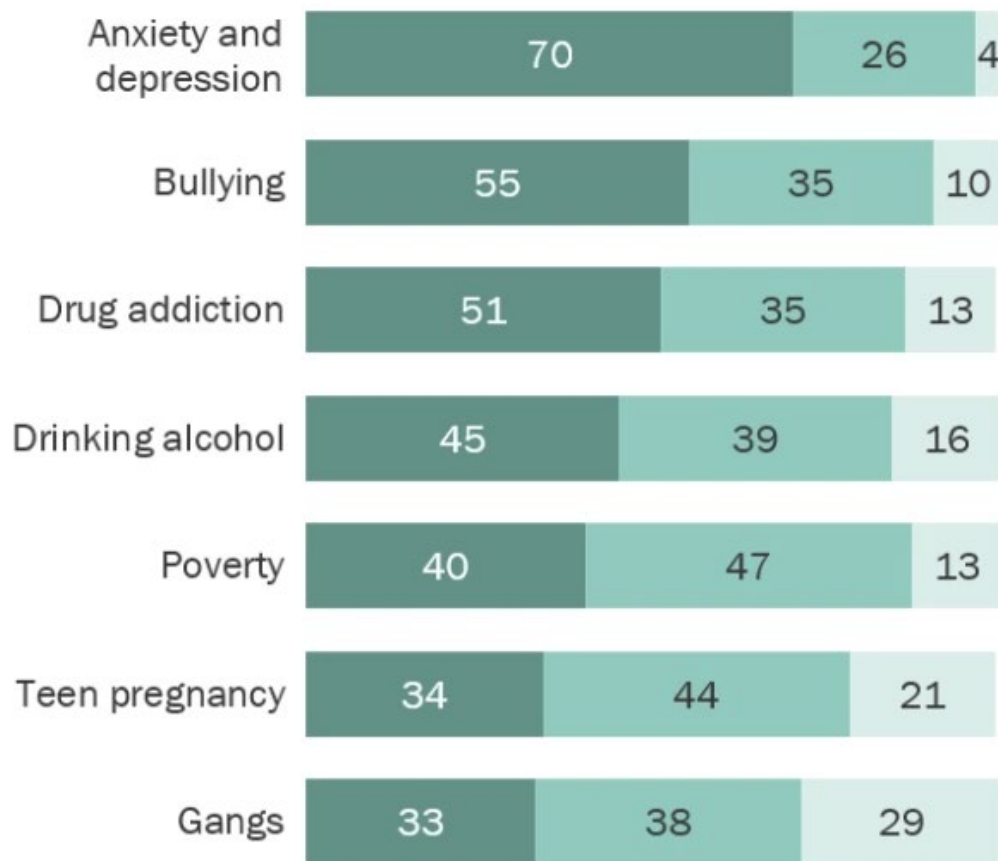
Most U.S. Teens See Anxiety and Depression as a Major Problem Among Their Peers

For boys and girls, day-to-day experiences and future aspirations vary in key ways

Anxiety and depression top list of problems teens see among their peers

% of teens saying each of the following is a ____ among people their age in the community where they live

■ Major problem ■ Minor problem ■ Not a problem



Anxiety is normal.

But can become
excessive.

When excessive
often and over time:
Anxiety disorder.



Anxiety / Stress is part of human condition

It's total absence across time may be a DEFICIT. For many of us, when we're not anxious or depressed we are in denial.

In context of stress & living in the USA, we should be slow to say.."what's wrong with this kid" and more willing to say, "what's wrong with us?"

- High expectations, pressure to succeed, too much to do.
- The world is scary & threatening
- Social media

Anxiety & depression

When does anxiety become a problem?

interferes with function or enjoyment.

Persistent

Irrational

**Anxiety causes suffering, so should be
taken seriously**

But...

- Even when a teenager can be properly and fairly diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, that doesn't mean that the problem is endogenous (as opposed to exogenous).
- Many, many of our youth live in situations that one would expect to cause symptoms of anxiety & depression.

COVID19

- Disruption of routines
- Break in continuity of learning
- Break of continuity in health care
- Missed significant life events
- Lost security & safety
- Lost social interaction

Anxiety and development

- Infancy (7-9 months): Stranger, Separation.
- Before about age 8: specific real or imaginary things.
- After about age 8: more abstract, generally more social
Grades, peer relations, coping with change.
- Adolescents: Peer relations, achievement, generalized anxiety, moral, sexual, religious concerns.

Common anxiety-related disorders: Teens

- Social anxiety
- Generalized anxiety disorder
- Obsessive-Compulsive disorder
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

- ▶ Feeling nervous or "on edge."
- ▶ Perfectionism with distress
- ▶ Unfounded or unrealistic fears.
- ▶ Sleep disturbance.
- ▶ Obsessive thoughts and/or compulsive behaviors.
- ▶ Trembling, sweating, shortness of breath, **stomachaches**, **headaches**, and/or muscle tension or other physical symptoms.

SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY IN YOUTH

Social anxiety



- Fears of meeting new people.
- Avoidance of social situations.
- Few friends outside family.

Generalized anxiety

- Many worries about things before they happen.
- Resistance to reassurance.
- Fears of embarrassment or making mistakes. Extreme perfectionism.

OCD

- Repetitive, intrusive, unpleasant thoughts (obsessions)
- Uncontrollable need to repeat specific acts (compulsions)



Related problems

- Depression
- ADHD
- School performance
- Substance abuse in adolescents

Professional Help?

- Is the anxiety **unusual**?
- Is it **persistent** over time?
- How **frequent** is it?
- How much is teen's **function altered**?
- How much **suffering**?

- ▶ Sadness or hopelessness
- ▶ Irritability, anger, or hostility
- ▶ Tearfulness / frequent crying
- ▶ Withdrawal from friends & family
- ▶ Loss of interest in activities
- ▶ Poor school performance
- ▶ Changes in eating & sleeping habits
- ▶ Restlessness & agitation
- ▶ Feelings of worthlessness & guilt
- ▶ Lack of enthusiasm & motivation
- ▶ Fatigue or lack of energy
- ▶ Difficulty concentrating
- ▶ Unexplained aches & pains (headaches/stomach aches)
- ▶ Thoughts of death or suicide

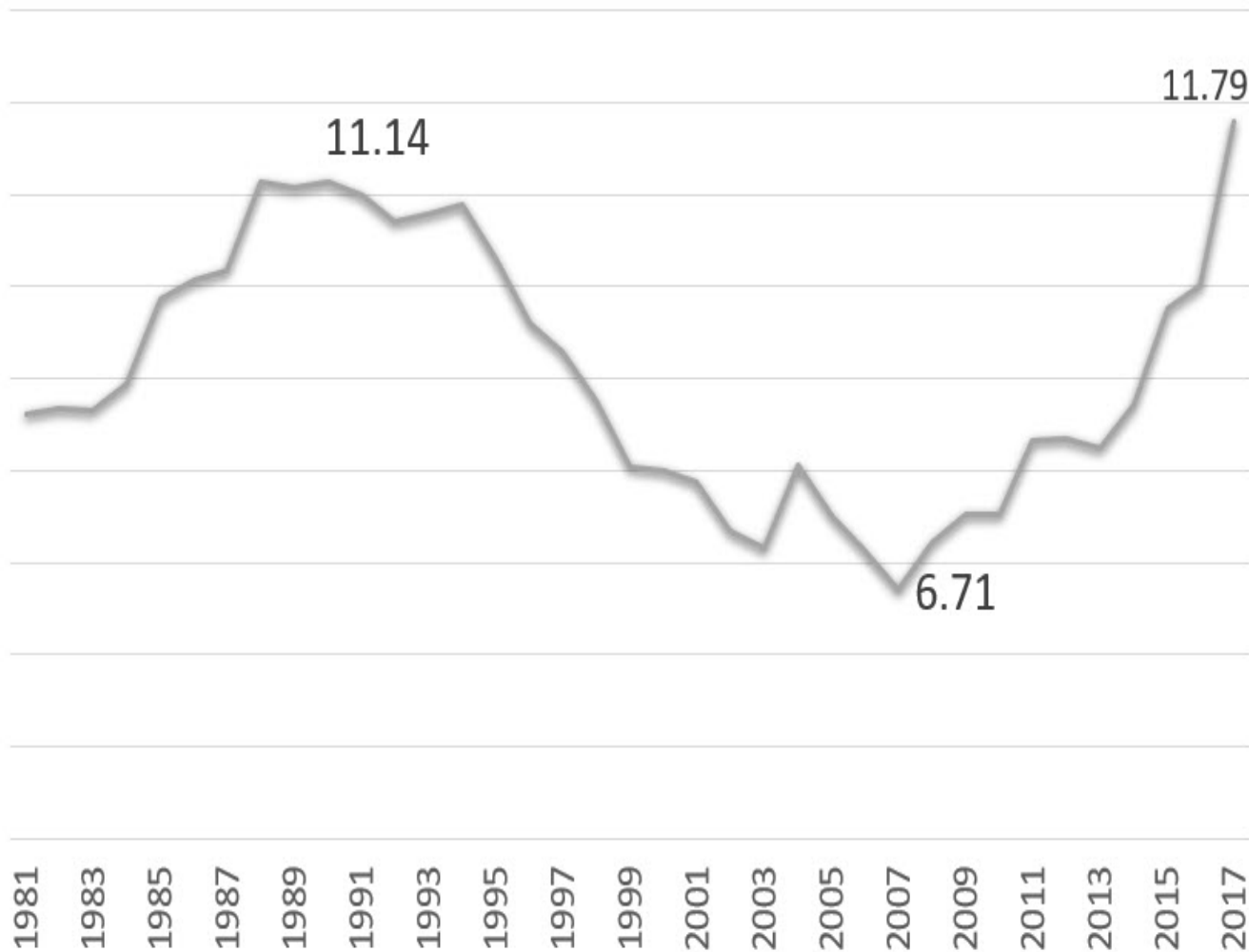
SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION IN YOUTH

suicide

a national crisis



Suicide rates have increased **significantly** in all ages in last 15 years.



Suicide Rates, 15 to 19-year-olds, 1981-2017.

Peaked in early 1990s; Dropped to low point in 2008.

In 10 years, 2007-2017, suicide rates in teenagers

increased **76%**

Percent change in suicide rates, 2007 vs. 2017 15 to 19-year-olds

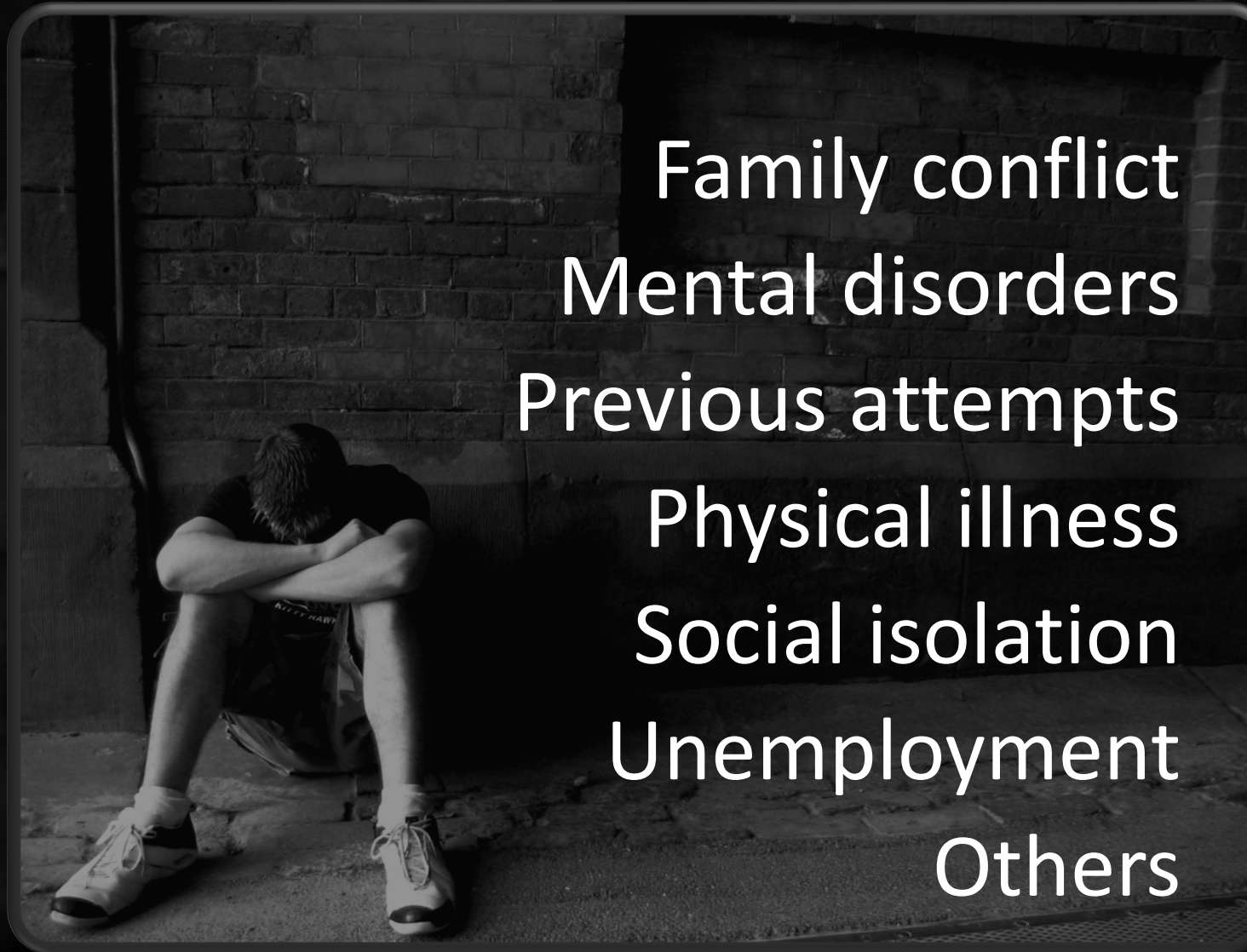
White males	Up 68%*
White females	Up 110%
Black males	Up 72%
Black females	Up 235%**

* Up 22% just from 2016 to 2017!

**But still the lowest rate of these 4 groups



Major risk factors for suicide



Family conflict
Mental disorders
Previous attempts
Physical illness
Social isolation
Unemployment
Others



Helping at home.

Review goals & expectations for teenager, with eye toward realism.

Depression? Ask about self-harm.

Goal not to eliminate all anxiety.

Listen & withhold criticism.

Discuss with child's physician.

But we need more...

- As many as 1 in 3 teenagers will experience a clinical anxiety disorder, even if not diagnosed.
- Maybe 1 in 7 get any evaluation / treatment
- Have to increase access to high quality mental health care
- May need to reconsider the model for delivering it



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