

What Might Be Causing Mental Health Issues in Teens?¹

1. Social-media use

Around 2012... teen sadness and anxiety began to steadily rise... [Psychologist Jean Twenge] looked for explanations and realized that 2012 was precisely when the share of Americans who owned a smartphone surpassed 50 percent and mobile social-media use spiked.

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Why would social media affect teenage mental health in this way? One explanation is that teenagers (and teenage girls in particular) are uniquely sensitive to the judgment of friends, teachers, and the digital crowd. As I've [written](#), social media seems to hijack this keen peer sensitivity and drive obsessive thinking about body image and popularity...

2. Sociality is down

[Psychologists] stress that the biggest problem with social media might be not social media itself, but rather the activities that it replaces.

"I tell parents all the time that if Instagram is merely displacing TV, I'm not concerned about it," [psychologist Laurence] Steinberg told me. But today's teens spend more than five hours daily on social media, and that habit seems to be displacing quite a lot of beneficial activity. The share of high-school students who got eight or more hours of sleep [declined](#) 30 percent from 2007 to 2019...

3. The world is stressful—and there is more news about the world's stressors

Lisa Damour, a clinical psychologist and author, told me that no single factor can account for the rise of teenage sadness. But she believes a part of the answer is that... teenagers' perception of the world seems to be causing them more stress.

¹ Excerpted from *The Atlantic* [Why American Teens Are So Sad](#), by Derek Thompson.

“In the last decade teenagers have become increasingly stressed by [concerns about gun violence, climate change, and the political environment](#),” she wrote in an email. “Increased stress among young people is [linked](#) to increasing levels of sadness...

...News sources have never been more abundant, or more accessible. But journalism also has a famous bad-news bias, which flows from [an unfortunate but accurate understanding that negativity generally gets more attention](#). When we plug our brain into a news feed, we are usually choosing to deluge ourselves with negative representations of reality...

4. Modern parenting strategies

...First, children are growing up slower than they used to. Today’s children are less likely to drive, get a summer job, or be asked to do chores. The problem isn’t that kids are lazy (homework time has risen)... Rather, [journalist Kate] Julian wrote, these activities “provide children with two very important things”: tolerating discomfort and having a sense of personal competence.

Second, researchers have noted a broad increase in an “accommodative” parenting style. If a girl is afraid of dogs, an “accommodation” would be keeping her away from every friend’s house with a dog... These behaviors come from love. But part of growing up is learning how to release negative emotions in the face of inevitable stress...