

UNIT 1: TEEN BRAINS OF TODAY

GRADE LEVEL 6-8

Introduction Themes & Ideas

Mental Wellness
Depression
Anxiety
Stress
Brain Science

What Students Will Uncover

Through a range of discussions and activities, students will learn about brain health and the science behind stress, anxiety and depression. They will also delve into stigma and why it's so hard for so many teens to get the help they need.

Lesson Overview

This guide addresses the **upsurge of stress, anxiety, and depression** amongst teens today and what **research-based prosocial interventions** are proving to be effective. It works well for educators to run...

1. As a follow up to the Screening and Class Discussion Lesson Plan

OR

2. Independently, if you already know this is a subject you want to explore in particular.

We recommend that students watch the film prior to (or as part of) this lesson, but relevant clips are embedded throughout the guide if students do not have time to watch the whole film, or if they need a refresher on its content.

The lesson is organized around activities that can be completed during a class period. Educators are encouraged to review the lesson activities beforehand to assess suitability for class timing and teaching style. Educators can select and arrange the activities in a way that suits them, which can include choosing to run activities over multiple periods or setting activities as homework assignments.

Lesson Objectives

- Consider how screens might be impacting their mental health
- Understand the differences between stress, anxiety and depression and know the warning signs
- Be able to support friends who are going through difficult times
- Learn strategies for protecting mental health
- Become aware of the stigma surrounding mental health

Vocabulary

Amygdala — This is the part of the brain that processes emotions and controls our fear response.

Panic attack — This is when you have a sudden experience of disabling anxiety often characterized by hyperventilation, sobbing and chest pain.

Stigma — This is a negative societal attitude that is often wrongly attributed to a subject or state of being.

Lesson

Lesson Introduction

Opening Discussion

- Ask students to recall the film they recently watched (*Screenagers Next Chapter*).
 - Prompt student recall by asking some general questions to ensure they remember.
- ⇒ Do you remember any of the science experts shared behind different mental health issues?

⇒ Do you remember any of the treatment options mentioned in the film?

- Explain that in today's lesson, you will be taking a closer look at one of the main themes of the film: **the science behind stress, anxiety and depression** and completing a number of activities together.

Lesson Activities

ACTIVITY 1

Key Concepts Jigsaw (20-30 mins in class, completed as homework)

Students work collaboratively.

Split students into a jigsaw exercise, where three groups will research and answer the following questions about one of the key concepts: **stress, anxiety or depression**.

Students should also choose a target audience: **younger kids, peers or parents / guardians**.

Each group will then present, in whichever format feels most suitable to them (ie: poster, digital slides, making a video, etc.), what they've learned back to one another:

1. What is the definition of your key concept?
2. Why is your key concept important for your chosen audience to learn about?
3. How are screen time and social media related to your key concept?
4. What do others need to know about your key concept in order to promote mental well-being?

Key Learning: Students conduct research and learn how to present to a specific audience in the most effective manner.

More topics and discussion questions relating to "Key Concepts Jigsaw":

Stress

[Stress](#) is a complicated and dynamic physical and emotional response a person may have as they interact with their circumstances. It is a subjective experience — what feels stressful one day may feel easy the next, and what is stressful to one person might not be to another. Stress is natural and all humans experience it. Furthermore, some

amount of stress can be useful and increase productivity, where too much stress can be debilitating. Because of all of these factors, identifying, measuring and treating stress can be challenging, but it is important to know that it is possible and necessary to learn how to manage stress.

- ⇒ Do you ever feel stressed? What does stress feel like in your body?
- ⇒ What usually triggers stress for you? How do you deal with it?

ACTIVITY 2

Social Media Stress (15 mins)

Students work individually and then collaboratively.

Think about your relationship to social media. What percentage of social media (from 0% to 100%) is stressful? What percentage is enjoyable? Write your two percentages down and **reflect** with the rest of the class. Does your class have similar ratios?

Key Learning: Students share feelings with each other on a topic that is not widely talked about. They normalize their own feelings and stressors.

More topics, discussion questions and movie clips relating to "Social Media Stress":

Social media-related stress

Some teens attribute some of their stress to the culture of social media. These platforms often have unspoken "dos and don'ts" and can be very overwhelming to try to decode.

Questions like, "How much posting is too much?" or "How many followers should I have?" are questions that don't have concrete answers and can lead to some spiraling.

But it's complicated. [As we saw in the film](#), screens can evoke negative emotions like comparing oneself to others, fear of disapproval or missing out or interrupted sleep.

Screens can also provide support, like connection to friends, good advice, laughter and access to new information.

- ⇒ Do you relate to any of these students' quotes?

ACTIVITY 3

Anxiety vs Stress (20 mins)

Students work collaboratively.

Educator stands at the board and makes two columns, one for Anxiety and one for Stress. Students should call out symptoms or feelings that either fall under the category of stress or anxiety.

Make sure to emphasize that sometimes, a symptom won't clearly fall under just one of these categories. Make sure to point of places where a symptom could be indicative of both stress and anxiety (ie: sweaty palms, upset stomach).

Key Learning: Students get to investigate and reform their own assumptions. They get to form a clearer idea of a concept, which will help them better support themselves and others in the future.

More topics, discussion questions and movie clips relating to "Anxiety vs Stress":

Anxiety

[Anxiety](#) is an emotion characterized by tension and worried thoughts, and accompanied by physical responses like increased heart rate, sweating or upset stomach. Anxiety is different from stress because instead of the amygdala being triggered due to actual danger, anxiety triggers the amygdala somewhat randomly or in relation to things and moments that don't actually put a person in harm's way. Anxiety disorders happen when anxious thoughts and responses are recurrent and disrupt daily life.

[In this clip](#), Chief Research Psychiatrist of the National Institute of Mental Health, Daniel Pine, MD explains what to look out for when trying to decipher between normal levels of stress and clinical anxiety.

Exposure therapy

[In this clip](#), psychiatrist Harold Koplewicz, MD explains how one of the treatments for anxiety, [exposure therapy](#), works.

Exposure therapy is when a person is exposed to their anxiety triggers. When you repeatedly associate with something you're highly anxious about, you will become more familiar with the task or the object or the setting and your level of anxiety will decrease. There are a lot of different types of exposure therapy, some that expose the patient very slowly and little by little, and others that completely expose the patient right at the start.

Olivia, a teen who struggled with clinical anxiety, is [featured in this clip](#) explaining how she used exposure therapy to overcome her social anxiety. She explains having to put

herself into very uncomfortable social situations like ordering sushi at a pizza restaurant. Ultimately, the exposure allowed her to feel more comfortable interacting with peers at school and making friends.

ACTIVITY 4

Depression vs Sadness (20 mins)

Students work collaboratively.

Educator stands at the board and makes two columns, one for Depression and one for Sadness. Students should call out symptoms or feelings that either fall under the category of stress or anxiety.

Make sure to emphasize that sometimes, a symptom won't clearly fall under just one of these categories. Make sure to point of places where a symptom could be indicative of both depression and sadness (ie: crying, feeling anti-social).

Key Learning: Students get to investigate and reform their own assumptions. They get to form a clearer idea of a concept, which will help them better support themselves and others in the future.

More topics, discussion questions and movie clips relating to "Depression vs Sadness":

Depression

[In this clip](#), DBT therapist Lizz Dexter-Mazza, PhD explains the difference between sadness and depression.

[Depression](#) is defined by persistent and severe feelings of sadness, extreme fatigue, apathy, and sometimes emotional numbness that influence the way a person normally acts. Depression is a serious medical issue, but one that is treatable.

There has been a [52% increase in adolescent depression](#) between 2005 and 2017. Another study of 15 and 16-year-old students from across 37 countries found that since 2012, [twice as many teens felt lonely](#) in 2018, with girls reporting higher levels of loneliness than boys.

[In this clip](#), Daniel Pine, MD explains the science behind depression and what a depressed brain looks like.

- ⇒ What are your reactions to learning the frequency of anxiety and depression among teens?

What are your thoughts about the relationship between stress, anxiety and depression, and how much time teens spend on their screens and using social media?

Use of social media and depression are often present together but it's unclear whether one is causing the other. However, young people who are depressed are at greater risk for some of the known negative side effects of social media.

Coping with screens

[Delaney interviews a handful of students who say that they use their screens to cope with difficult emotions.](#)

Researcher Vicky Rideout also expresses her concerns about kids coping with social media [in this clip](#). She notes that even though social media makes many of them feel worse, they continue to turn to it.

It takes very little energy to scroll through social media or watch TikTok video after TikTok video. The content on these platforms is often entertaining enough to take viewers' minds off of whatever they're dealing with in their own lives for at least a little while. Sometimes, screens feel like the best way to escape from the hardships of our actual lives.

- ⇒ Do you ever use screens to cope with hard emotions? If so, what platforms do you turn to most?

Social media is notorious for only showcasing the positive parts of someone's life. Social media personas tend to be a big stressor for teens who want to be well-liked and perceived as happy by their peers.

[Delaney talks to a student](#) about their tendency to use social media to "look" happy. They explain that despite all of their happy posts, social media did not actually help them feel happy.

- ⇒ Do you relate to this student's quote at all?
- ⇒ Do you feel pressure to come off as happy on social media? Have you ever posted a picture of you appearing happy when you were not?

ACTIVITY 5

Ending the Stigma (30 mins)

Students work collaboratively.

If you were responsible for creating a digital campaign to end the stigma surrounding mental health, how would you go about it? Get into groups or work individually and create a mock-up of what your campaign would look like.

Key Learning: Students collaborate to create a resource for other students who might be struggling. They learn how to fashion their resource so that it appeals to their target audience.

More topics, discussion questions and movie clips relating to "Ending the Stigma":

Mental health stigma

Stigma around mental health issues is a major barrier to talking about them and getting much-needed support and treatment. Young people struggling with mental health need support and validation for what they are going through, and skills to cope in healthy ways. Severe cases of anxiety and depression can have serious and long-term side effects, and often require professional treatment.

Delaney shares her thoughts on mental health stigma [in this clip](#).

⇒ Have you noticed the stigma around mental health in your own life and social circles? Where and when do you see this stigma come out most often?

[Ishmael's story](#) is another one we follow in the film. He struggles with depression but eventually begins to see a counselor. In the clip to the right, he explains how validating his sessions are.

Stress, anxiety, and depression are real and potentially debilitating mental health issues — nobody can “just get over them.” As we saw in the film, suppressing emotions is harmful, and actually weakens a person’s ability to absorb information. And, anxiety and depression can lead to serious issues like self-harm, or suicidal thoughts and actions. It is important to access effective treatment to help young people navigate these challenges. There are resources on the [Screenagers webpage](#).

Mental health and gender

Gender may influence how young people perceive the expression of emotion. Boys are often expected to only show anger and are taught that expressing sadness is a form of weakness. Girls are often stereotyped as dramatic or over-emotional, making it difficult to share their mental health struggles with others. For transgender and gender non-conforming teens, [rates of depression are higher](#).

⇒ How do you support your friends when they seem to be struggling?

Dana, a male student, explains [in this clip](#) how difficult it is for him to express any emotion other than anger.

[In this clip](#), a father explains how he had to completely shift how he thought of his own and his son's emotions.

⇒ Do you think your gender impacts the way you deal with your emotions? Why or why not?

Stigma causing suppression

Young people might turn to suppression to deal, or to not have to deal with their difficult emotions, but an expert we meet in the film explains why suppressing emotions can be such a dangerous path to go down.

Psychology professor and researcher [Dr. James Gross, PhD explains](#) how trying to suppress our emotions can have a lot of negative impacts on our social and educational lives.

Suppressing emotions can ultimately make teens' information retention skills go down, going on to further impact not just their mental health, but also their academic performance.

⇒ Have you ever suppressed your emotions?

Lesson Conclusion

Ask your students if they have a better understanding behind the science of mental health and the stigmas surrounding it. Ask students to **list** their favorite things they learned about brain science, stigma or mental health treatments. Educator should transcribe students' answers on the board.

Frameworks

CASEL® SEL Competencies

Our Curriculum & Lesson Plans are independently aligned by the Screenagers Team to the [CASEL® SEL Competencies Framework](#).

- **Self-management:** Courage to take initiative.
- **Relationship Skills:** Seeking or offering support and help when needed. Communicating effectively.

- **Social Awareness:** Taking others' perspectives.
Demonstrating empathy and compassion.
Identifying diverse social norms, including unjust ones.
- **Self-awareness:** Identifying one's emotions.
Linking feelings, values, and thoughts.

AASL Standards Framework for Learners

Our Curriculum & Lesson Plans are also informed by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) *Standards Framework for Learners*. For additional information and resources, including a downloadable format for the *Learners Standards Framework*, for AASL's National Standards visit standards.aasl.org.

Inquire:

- **B. CREATE** — Generating products that illustrate learning.

Include:

- **B. CREATE** — Evaluating a variety of perspectives during learning activities.
Representing diverse perspectives during learning activities.

Collaborate:

- **D. GROW** — Recognizing learning as a social responsibility.

Engage:

- **C. SHARE** — Disseminating new knowledge through means appropriate for the intended audience.
Disseminating new knowledge through means appropriate for the intended audience

Explore:

- **A. THINK** — Reflecting and questioning assumptions and possible misconceptions.