

Understanding our Students, Part I: Trends in Youth Mental Health in the 21st Century

Emma Adam

Edwina S. Tarry Professor of Human Development and Social Policy
School of Education and Social Policy

Professor of Psychology and of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences
Associate Vice President for Research, Office for Research
Northwestern University

COAST

CONTEXTS OF ADOLESCENT STRESS AND THRIVING

<https://adamlab.sesp.northwestern.edu>



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Major Points

1. College-age youth are still developing
2. Adolescence and early adulthood are stressful periods of life
3. Youth stress, depression and anxiety have increased:
 - Prior to the pandemic 1990-2020 (especially 2013 on)
 - During the pandemic 2020-2022
4. Much debate exists about causes of trends; there are likely multiple causes.
5. Multiple possible points of intervention exist.

Definitions

- Adolescence = “the period between the onset of puberty and the taking on of adult roles” ([Blakemore & Mills, 2014](#))
- Many argue that college-age youth should be considered/defined as adolescents (Sawyer et al., 2018, Dahl et al., 2018).
- For today, I will use the word “youth” which is a term that encompasses mid-to-late adolescents and young adults aged 15 through 25.

Defining Adolescence/Youth (Sawyer et al., Lancet, 2018)

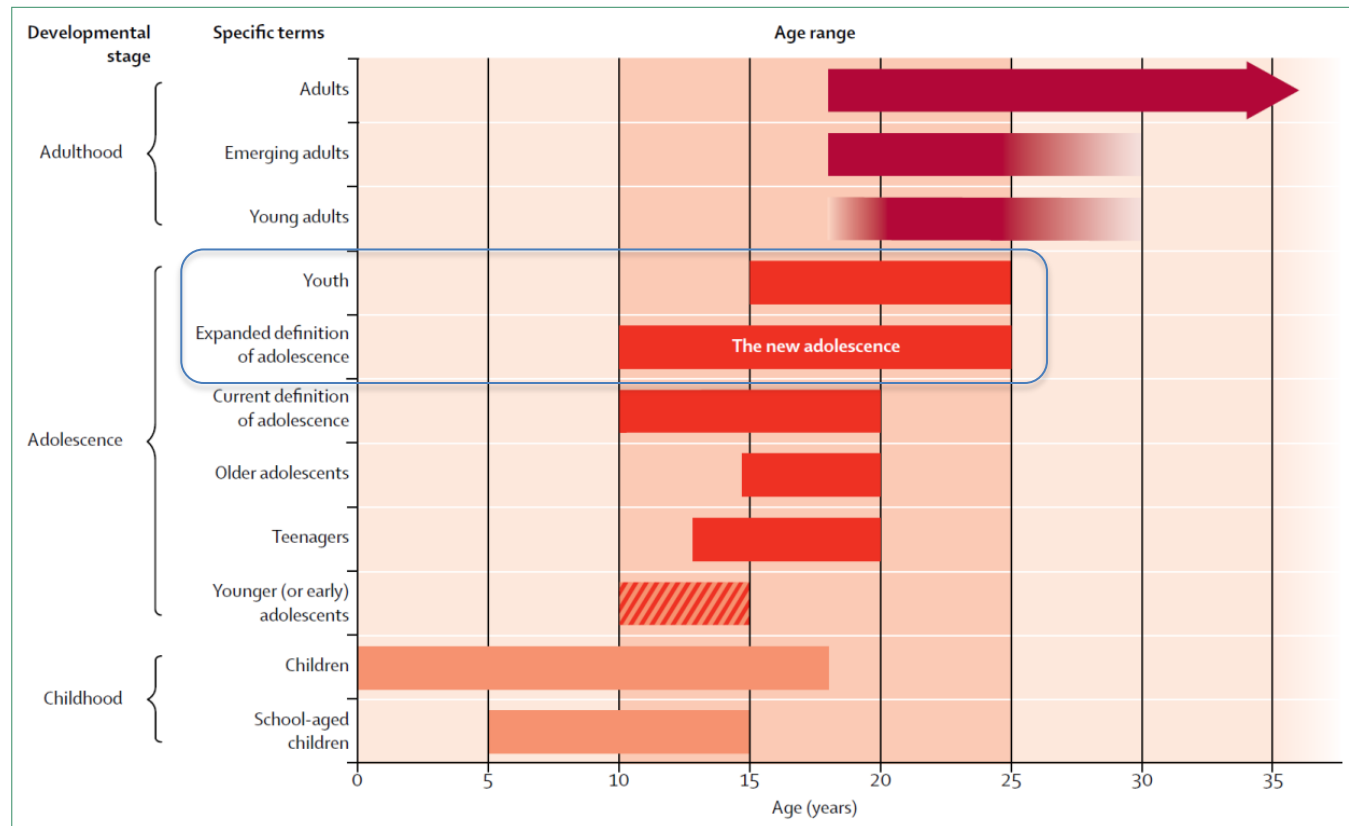


Figure 1: Commonly used age definitions of specific terms of relevance for adolescence that span or overlap with the developmental periods of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood

Colour shading highlights variation in the lower and upper age limits of the term. Stripes denote a term that sits within more than one developmental stage.

College Age Youth Are Still Developing

- Many dramatic social and biological changes occur during early-to-mid adolescence.
- However, late adolescence and early adulthood still involve profound changes in:
 - Social networks and relationships (family, peer, romantic, neighborhood, work)
 - Understanding of self and identity (gender, sexual, racial-ethnic)
 - Academic, work and extracurricular demands and settings

College Age Youth Are Still Developing

- In addition, changes in some hormones continue into early 20's (e.g. DHEA).
- Young adults are still strongly owl-like in their circadian rhythms and sleep Carskadon, 2004
- Changes in brain development are still underway (frontal cortex and its connections are still maturing through mid-20s) Dahl, 2004, NYAS, Volume 1021

Implications

1. Cumulative biological and social changes are **stressful**
2. High youth stress levels:
 - Can dysregulate youth stress biology
 - Impact youth sleep hours and quality
 - Can negative impact youth cognition and memory
 - Contribute to youth anxiety and depression



Definitions

- **Anxiety →**

A feeling of apprehension and fear, characterized by physical symptoms such as palpitations, sweating, and feelings of stress

<https://www.medicinenet.com/anxiety/definition.htm>

- **Anxiety Disorder →**

Any of various mental disorders characterized by extreme anxiety and including panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and generalized anxiety disorder

<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/anxiety-disorder>

- **Depression →**

A mood disorder characterized by an inability to experience pleasure, difficulty in concentrating, disturbance of sleep and appetite, and feelings of sadness, guilt, and helplessness.

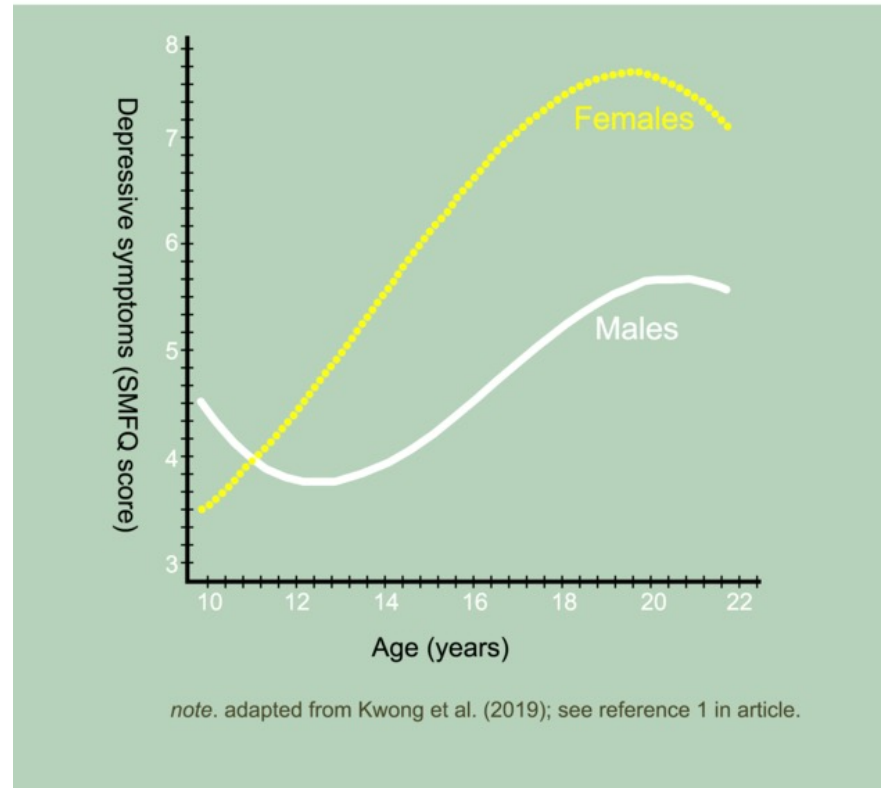
<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/depression>

Youth Anxiety and Depression Trends

- Developmental
 - Anxiety and depression typically increase from childhood through early 20s.
 - Gender disparities emerges over this time.
- Recent Historical
 - Strong evidence of recent historical or secular increases in youth anxiety and depression since approximately 2013.
 - Particularly in girls/women
 - Stronger in youth than older age groups
 - Further increase during the pandemic

Depression by Age and Gender from Adolescence Into Young Adulthood

Figure 1. Male/Female Trajectories of Adolescent Depression



Kwong, A. S. F., Manley, D., Timpson, N. J., Pearson, R. M., Heron, J., Sallis, H.,...Leckie, G. (2019). Identifying critical points of trajectories of depressive symptoms from childhood to young adulthood. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 48, 815-827.

Poor Mental Health, 1995-2020 by Age Group

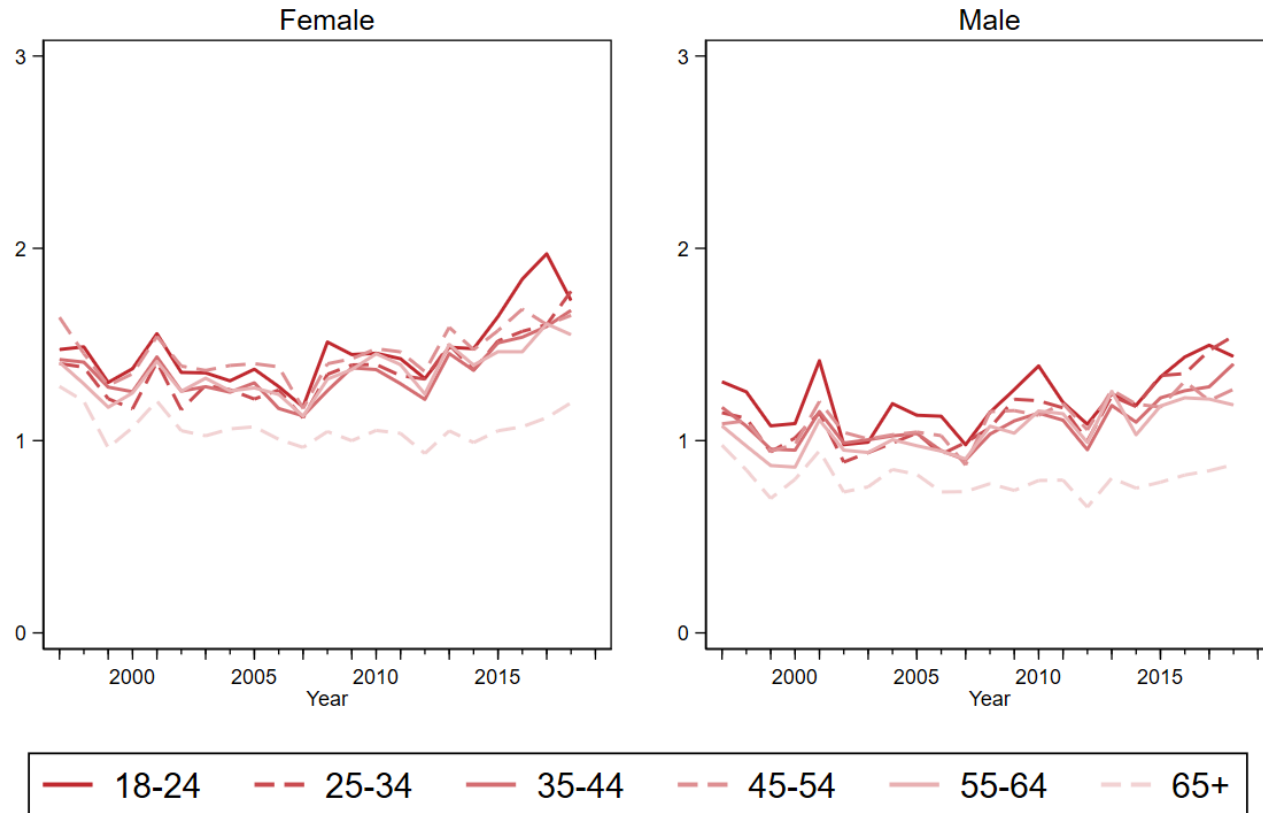
Number of days mental health not good of 30



Source: BRFSS
n=9119431

Anxiety Symptoms, 1995-2020

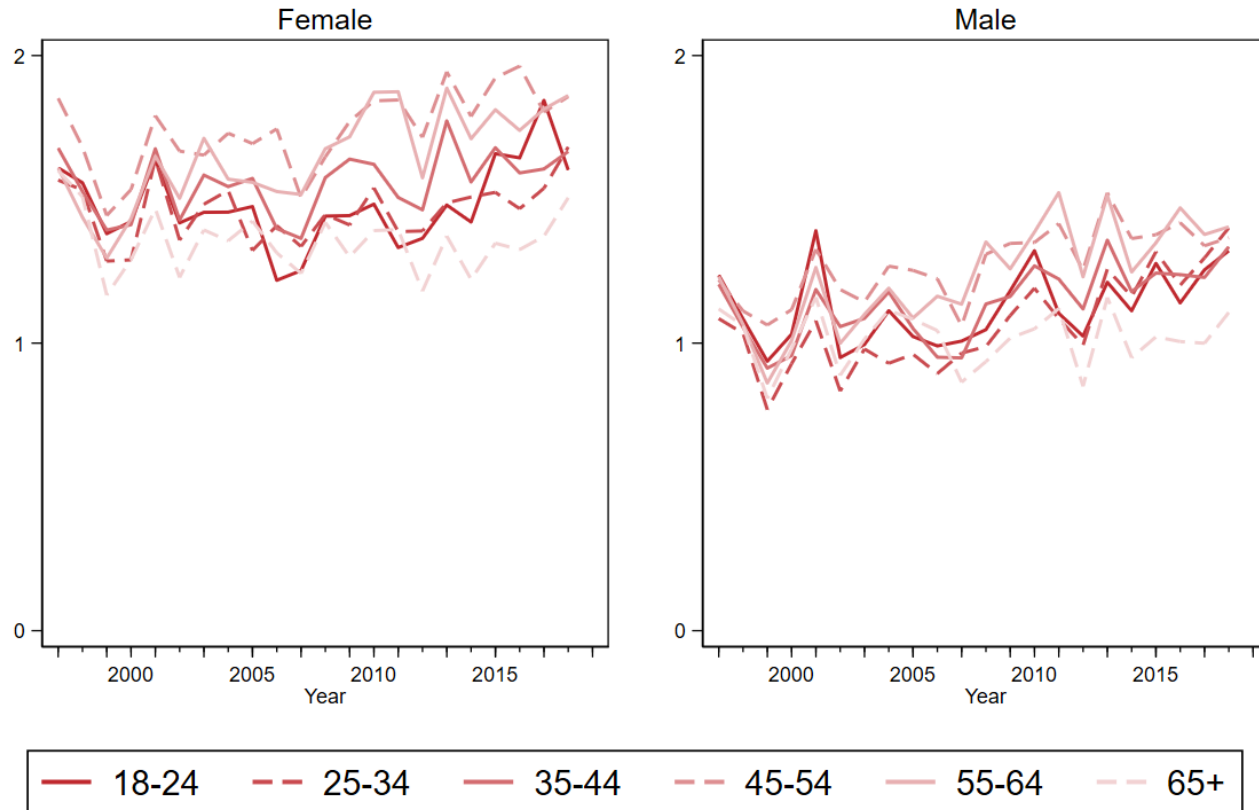
Anxiety items



Source: NHIS

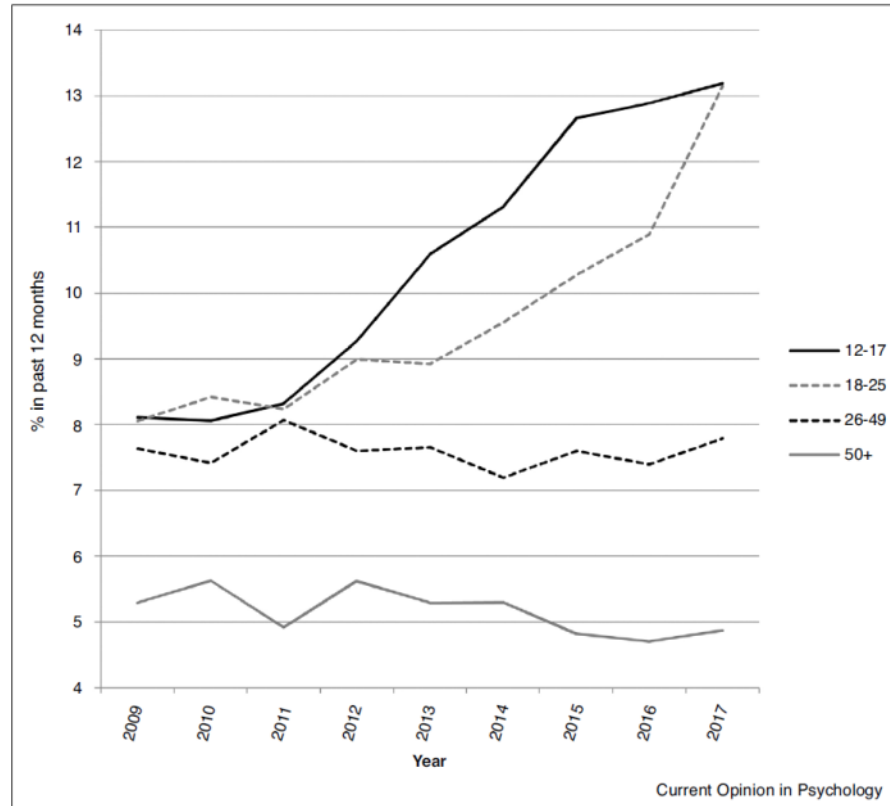
Depression Symptoms, 1995-2020

Depression items



Source: NHIS

Major Depression by Age, 2000-2017 (Twenge, 2020)



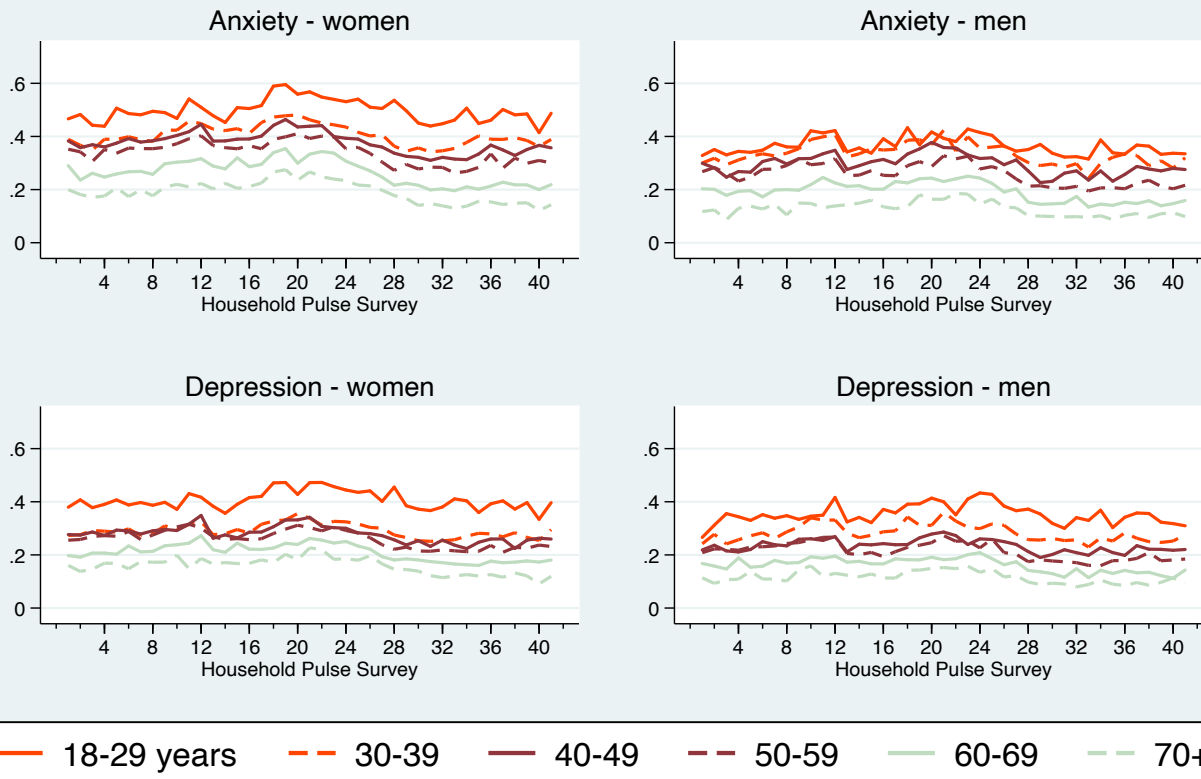
Major depressive episode in the last 12 months, by age group and sex, National Survey of Drug Use and Health, 2009–2017.

Proposed Reasons for Pre-Pandemic Increases

1. Increased acceptability of reporting
2. More screen time and social media use
3. Increased academic and extracurricular stress
4. Increased economic stress, economic disparities, economic shocks, and debt
5. Increased parental depression → prenatal and postnatal transmission
6. Worse health behaviors – reduced sleep and exercise, poor nutrition, increased substance use
7. Historical stressors – 911, Great Recession, political and racial polarization, climate change.

Anxiety and Depression across the COVID_19 Pandemic Years

Anxiety and Depression above clinical levels



Source: HH Pulse Surveys, April 2020 - January 2022

Youth Stress, Depression & Anxiety 2020-2022

Pandemic Sources

- Social isolation, separation from peers and/or family
- Sickness/death of loved ones, fear of sickness/death
- Economic stress (family, personal, national and global)
- Frequent and unexpected changes in housing, school and work lives.
- Friction regarding pandemic rules and regulations.

Non-Pandemic Sources

- Multiple race-related events and protests
- Political tension, polarization and protest
- Climate-related events and worries
- War and threat of global (possibly nuclear) war

Key Stressors

- Academic & Career Stress
 - Homework
 - Testing
 - Extracurricular
 - Education and Job Prospects
- Interpersonal Stress
 - Peer
 - Family
 - School
 - Neighborhood
- Societal/Historical Stress
 - Global warming
 - Political Polarization
 - Pandemic
 - Economic Stress
 - War/threat of War

Youth Stress and Coping: Resetting the Balance



Key Coping Resources

- Positive social relationships
- Predictability, acceptance and belonging
- Strong identity and self-esteem
- Exercise, nutrition, sleep, mindfulness
- Professional interventions and treatments
- Political, institutional and policy action

Stress Reduction Steps – for Youth

Steps to **encourage youth** to take:

1. Get regular (but not excessive) exercise
2. Limit caffeine and eliminate nicotine, alcohol, and illegal drugs
3. Get 8 to 10 hours of sleep with sleep schedules as regular as possible
4. Limit screen time, particularly late at night
5. Take time out for safe, fun, social activities, and for engagement with your culture – as safely as possible, in the time of COVID-19
6. Practice meditation, yoga, mindfulness
7. Seek professional help (therapy, medication) when these measures are not sufficient.

Stress Reduction Steps – for Parents

Steps for **parents** to help reduce youth stress:

1. Express warmth, love and support; listen and validate; limit conflict in your home
2. Involve your teen in community and cultural activities – in the time of COVID-19, these activities should be VIRTUAL
3. Talk with child about the sources of stress in their lives and strategize together on how to reduce them
4. Keep **your own** and you child's expectations in check and teach your child when and how to say “no” to too much
5. Provide a model of self-care and positive responses to stress
6. Seek professional help (therapy, medication) for your child (and yourself) when needed.
7. De-stigmatize mental health help-seeking for your child.

Stress Reduction Steps – for Professors, Administrators & Presidents

Professors, Administrators & Presidents can help reduce student stress:

1. Strive to make all students feel included in class and campus; feelings of belonging are keys to calm, learning, and mental health.
2. Strive to practice culturally relevant and inclusive pedagogy; this will increase feelings of belonging for marginalized students.
3. Encourage your students to practice self-care, getting sufficient sleep, nutrition and exercise; where barriers to such self-care exist, seek to put in place resources to remove such barriers.
4. Provide a model of self-care; sufficient sleep and exercise will reduce your own emotional reactivity and improve class, workplace and campus climate.
5. Learn to recognize signs of stress, anxiety and depression in your students.
6. Help refer your students (and yourself) for professional help when needed.
7. Be flexible and compassionate with all students; be aware of and openly acknowledge the modern-day stressors they are facing.
8. Keep student debt in check through generous aid packages, particularly for students from less privileged backgrounds.
9. Help guide your students towards positive career and further educational opportunities (help them see a vision for the future).

Questions and Comments?



Extra Slides

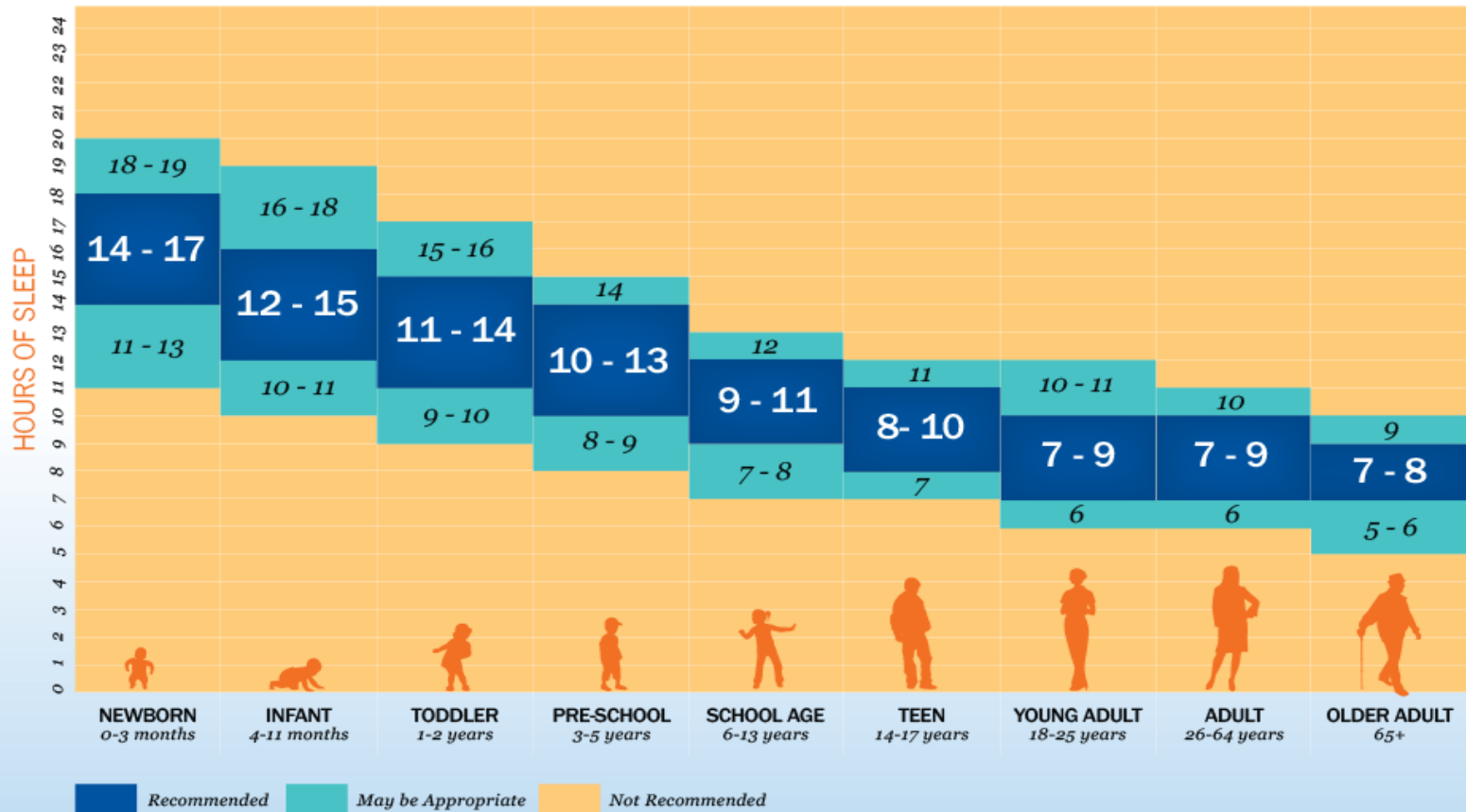
Symptoms of Depression

If you have been experiencing some of the following signs and symptoms most of the day, nearly every day, for at least two weeks, you may be suffering from depression:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or “empty” mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, or pessimism
- Irritability
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities
- Decreased energy or fatigue
- Moving or talking more slowly
- Feeling restless or having trouble sitting still
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Difficulty sleeping, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping
- Appetite and/or weight changes
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts
- Aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems without a clear physical cause and/or that do not ease even with treatment

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression>

SLEEP DURATION RECOMMENDATIONS



SLEEPFOUNDATION.ORG | SLEEP.ORG

Hirshkowitz M, The National Sleep Foundation's sleep time duration recommendations: methodology and results summary, Sleep Health (2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sleh.2014.12.010>

Sleep Improvement Tips



Go to bed and get up around the same time every day, even on weekends!



Avoid eating large meals within 3 hours of sleeping - but eating a small snack is better than going to bed hungry



Avoid coffee and sugary drinks after school and in the evening



Listen to calming music or white noise on Youtube or Spotify to help you relax



Avoid looking at electronic screens, including cell phones, in the hour before sleeping



Develop a relaxing routine before bedtime - ideas include taking a bath, meditating, listening to music, and reading



Exercise daily - but not within 3 hours before bedtime



Try to only lay in your bed when you want to go to sleep so your body knows it's time to rest