

MINI-GUIDES

**RESPONDING TO
A STUDENT IN
PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS**

FOR SCHOOLS



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INTRODUCTION

ADOLESCENCE is a key time, full of opportunities and discoveries, but it can also be a time when teens are more susceptible to anxiety and depression.

AS A TEACHER,

you may have already noticed a child in distress in your class.

Their distress may have affected their language, behaviour and work. In this kind of situation, it is normal to feel helpless.

How can you help a student
in distress while respecting your role
as a teacher?



IN THIS GUIDE,

we equip you step by step so you can:

- better understand and recognize psychological distress
- develop good reflexes when dealing with it
- guide your student toward good resources





PART 1:
UNDERSTAND THEIR DISTRESS
AND RECOGNIZE IT



STEP 1:

DISTINGUISH BETWEEN TEENAGE ANGST, TEMPORARY BLUES AND DEPRESSION

During adolescence, young people may eat or sleep more or less, experience changing moods, be more emotional or stay the same and push boundaries.

When these changes arise, we often attribute them to teenage angst or hormones. **However, the majority of young people go through adolescence without angst.**

It would therefore be more appropriate to speak about a period of adolescence.

In addition, certain researchers suspect that young people going through teenage angst may, in fact, **be suffering from mental health problems such as depression.**

WHAT IS DEPRESSION AND HOW IS IT DIFFERENT FROM HAVING THE BLUES?

When young people go through difficult experiences (parents separating, the end of a friendship, a breakup, etc.) it is normal to observe a change in their behaviour for a short period of time, following which their behaviour goes back to normal. They would therefore be considered to be experiencing temporary blues and not depression.

A young person with depression will experience intense symptoms that last several weeks with no sign of improvement.



A YOUNG PERSON WITH DEPRESSION WILL EXHIBIT ONE OR SEVERAL OF THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS LISTED BELOW:

VISIBLE SIGNS



EXCESSIVE
IRRITABILITY



SADNESS/DEPRESSION
THAT DOESN'T GO AWAY



LOSS OF INTEREST
IN ACTIVITIES

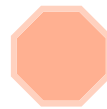
PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS



GAIN/LOSS OF WEIGHT
AND/OR APPETITE



SLEEP DISORDERS,
INCLUDING INSOMNIA
OR HYPERSOMNIA



LOW ENERGY OR
FATIGUE



AGITATION OR
REDUCTION IN
PSYCHOMOTOR ACTIVITY

SUBJECTIVE SYMPTOMS



EXCESSIVE FEELINGS OF
GUILT OR LOW SELF-ESTEEM



TROUBLE CONCENTRATING
AND/OR MAKING DECISIONS



PERSISTENT THOUGHTS ABOUT
DEATH OR SUICIDE

CHANGES IN BEHAVIOUR



SOCIAL DEPENDENCY
OR WITHDRAWAL



MASKS

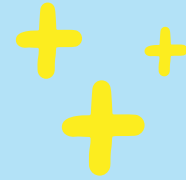


RESISTANCE OR REFUSAL

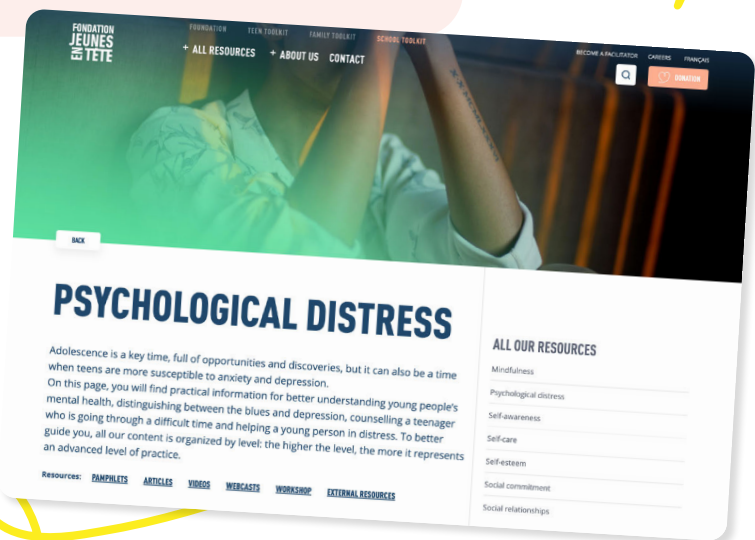


If depression is not diagnosed or treated, it can lead to long-term consequences such as:

- difficulties maintaining good relationships with other people
- risk of dropping out of school
- being drawn to consuming drugs or alcohol
- in certain cases, suicidal ideation



FIND MORE INFORMATION ABOUT DEPRESSION IN TEENS IN OUR SCHOOL TOOLKIT HERE



STEP 2:

IDENTIFY THE STUDENT'S EMOTIONS, THOUGHTS AND BEHAVIOURS

To help you “**situate**” a teen whose behaviour or language worries you, here is a **summary table** you can refer to.

However, don't forget to trust your judgment, which will help you adapt your reaction according to the context.




Observing your students' emotions, thoughts and behaviours is **essential** for knowing how to react appropriately.

YOU CAN PRINT THE FOLLOWING PAGE AND SHARE IT WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS BAROMETER			
EMOTION/STATE	FEAR 🤖	ANGER 😡	SADNESS 😞
Intense	Scared, panicked	Furious, enraged	Hopeless, depressive state
Observable behaviours	Panic attack Avoidance and evasion (Screens, sleep, alcohol, drugs) that lasts several weeks	Aggressive actions (hitting) Aggressive speech directed toward others or themselves Behaviour that is repeated regularly	Withdrawal Loss of energy or interest, even in things that they like Neglecting their body (food, sleep, activities) Continues for more than two weeks
Here, the young person needs help and should be directed toward appropriate resources (psychologist, Special Education Technician, doctor, etc.).			
Moderate	Worried, anxious	Disgruntled, irritated	Displeased, depressed
Observable behaviours	The young person expresses things to go wrong Withdrawal	Attacks others with words Sensitive Raises their voice	Occasionally falls asleep during class Withdraws at times Neglects their body for less than a week
Go to the young person if they don't come to you. Tell them the behaviour you've observed and the boundaries to be established (for aggression, screens). Let them know that you're there to help them or help them find other help (school or outside resources, seeing a family doctor, speaking about it with their parents, etc.).			
Weak	Preoccupied, worried	Upset, annoyed	Sad, disappointed
Observable behaviours	The young person is caught up in their thoughts Expresses their fear State of openness	Impatience Lashing out Angry words or speech that isn't directed at others	Restrainted or temporary crying Expresses what they're struggling with
Be present and listen. Name the emotion and communicate your willingness to help or see with the young person what could help them.			



PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS BAROMETER

EMOTION/STATE	FEAR 	ANGER 	SADNESS 
Intense	Scared, panicked	Furious, enraged	Hopeless, depressive state
Observable behaviours	Panic attack Avoidance and evasion (screens, sleep, alcohol, drugs) that lasts several weeks	Aggressive actions (hitting) Aggressive speech directed toward others or themselves Behaviour that is repeated regularly	Withdrawal Loss of energy or interest, even in things that they like Neglecting their body (food, sleep, activities) Continues for more than two weeks

RECOMMENDED BEHAVIOUR:

Here, the young person needs help and should be directed toward appropriate resources (psychologist, Special Education Technician, doctor, etc.).

Moderate	Worried, anxious	Disgruntled, irritated	Dejected, depressed
Observable behaviours	The young person expects things to go wrong Withdrawal Procrastinating	Attacks others with words Sensitive Raises their voice	Occasionally falls asleep during class Withdraws at times Neglects their body for less than a week

RECOMMENDED BEHAVIOUR:

Go to the young person if they don't come to you. Tell them the behaviour you've observed and the boundaries to be established (for aggressive speech). Let them know that you're there to help them or help them find other help (school or outside resources, seeing a family doctor, speaking about it with their parents, etc.).

Weak	Preoccupied, worried	Upset, annoyed	Sad, disappointed
Observable behaviours	The young person is caught up in their thoughts Expresses their fear State of openness	Impatience Sighing Angry words or speech that isn't directed at others	Restrained or temporary crying Expresses what they're struggling with

RECOMMENDED BEHAVIOUR:

Be present and listen. Name the emotion and communicate your willingness to help or see with the young person what could help them.



HOW TO SPEAK TO YOUR STUDENT ABOUT BEHAVIOUR THAT WORRIES YOU:

Have you noticed a student exhibiting uncharacteristic emotions or behaviours that worry you?

- Don't hesitate to speak with your student one on one and let them know why you're worried. Mention their behaviour, based on concrete facts, all while staying calm and expressing your concerns.

It is important to address the student's behaviour because it can be an indication of the hardship they're experiencing.

On the other hand, impulsive behaviour that damages their physical or psychological health, or even aggressive behaviour toward others, should be avoided. It is essential that the teen retakes control of their actions.

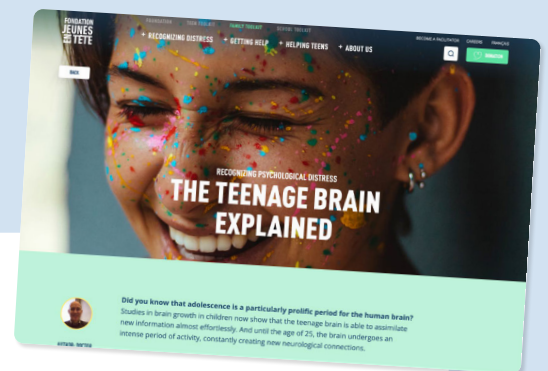
HELP YOUR STUDENT EXPRESS THEIR EMOTIONS:

Suggest to your student that you share their feelings: this will help them to lessen the intensity of their feelings. When a teen identifies their emotions, you can ask them to indicate the intensity of these emotions on a scale from 1 to 10. Try to check the intensity of these emotions after a few minutes of talking together or at another pre-arranged time.

Note that **emotions** during adolescence can be very intense and can be felt or perceived intensely by others. We know today that the specific development of the brain and, to a lesser extent, hormonal fluctuations, can explain the behavioural changes of teens, such as impulsiveness or difficulty controlling their emotions.



TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW THE BRAIN FUNCTIONS DURING ADOLESCENCE, READ THIS ARTICLE.





FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

As an adult, ask yourself what intensity of emotions you can contain and your tolerance level before reacting.

It is vital to **keep your calm** and not act out of panic so that the student can feel reassurance by expressing their feelings.

If you feel overwhelmed by the situation or the student won't open up to you, get help from school resources (see resources at the end of this guide).



INVITE YOUR STUDENT TO SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS:

After speaking about your student's actions, you can invite them to share their thoughts.

When they express their feelings with an adult they trust, this also reduces the intensity of these feelings.

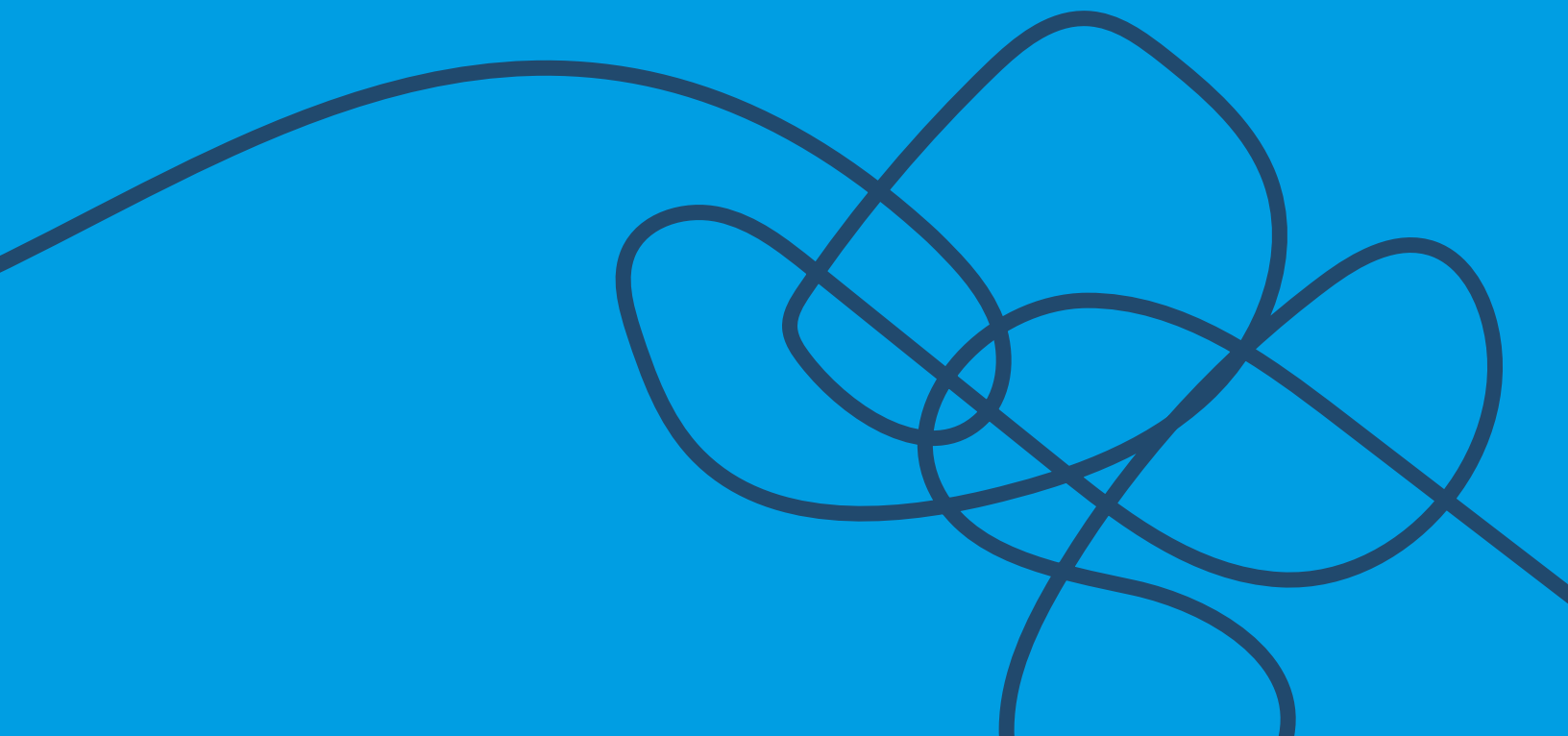
Make sure to have an open, attentive and welcoming attitude, even if certain ideas can seem very far-fetched.

If the student's thoughts worry you or seem "strange," don't hesitate to check with suggested resources (at the end of this guide).



PART 2:

KNOW HOW TO RESPOND WHEN FACED WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS



ATTITUDES TO FAVOUR VS ATTITUDES TO AVOID WHEN A STUDENT CONFIDES IN YOU

ATTITUDES TO FAVOUR

In order to establish an atmosphere of trust with your student, and so that they feel understood and heard, have an open and welcoming attitude.

Encourage them to express their emotions and listen to them carefully to better understand what they're going through. Don't rush them and try to be patient. For example, start with: *"What's going on inside you right now?"*

ATTITUDES TO AVOID

To comfort your student, you may tend to say things such as:

"It's not a big deal, it's nothing," "You're making a mountain out of a mole hill," "You'll see, you won't remember this in 40 years!"

Or even say ready-made phrases like: *"It'll be alright," "Don't worry," "Don't cry over that"* and so on.

Although they may be well-intentioned, these comments can tend to **invalidate or minimize** your student's feelings.

ATTITUDES TO FAVOUR

What's important here is to be attentive and responsive to signs and symptoms that may be related to depression.

Ask your student what steps they've taken. Understanding as much as possible about their situation will help you know whom to refer them to (see table). This is also a way to collect factual information that will help professionals act appropriately.

Examples of questions to ask your student:

"When did these symptoms start?"

"Have you already spoken to someone?"

"Do you have access to resources?"

"If this is about a friend, are other people in your social circle worried as well?"

ATTITUDES TO AVOID

You may also try to laugh to deflect an emotion or simply adopt an attitude to distance yourself from their suffering, without necessarily realizing you're doing so.

👍 ATTITUDES TO FAVOUR

Encourage them to seek help and counselling.

Be careful to **recognize and validate what they're going through**. Reassure them that you're there and you support them. You can give the student's name to a school counsellor or guide them directly toward this resource. Your support is likely to motivate them and help them take steps to consult a health professional.

🚫 ATTITUDES TO AVOID

Avoid comparing the student with other young people and setting them up as a failure.

👍 ATTITUDES TO FAVOUR

Act with respect and steadfastness.

That's not to say that you have to keep everything to yourself, but it is important to inform the young person from the beginning that if you are worried about their situation, **you have a duty and responsibility to speak about it**. It is important that other people are made aware of the situation (parent, professional).

You can, firstly, encourage the student to talk to them about it. Then, secondly, you can explain to them that you have a duty to speak about it for their own well-being. Don't forget to tell them that you are available for them: they need to know that they can count on you.

🚫 ATTITUDES TO AVOID

Don't let yourself be tried by the "duty of secrecy": if the student is at risk of doing something that could put their life or someone else's life in danger, confidentiality no longer applies, and you must call the appropriate authorities.





...to the failed drug policies of recent
—PAUL NEWMAN
...she brings to our drug policy
...a difference in the strug-
...to anyone who thinks
...who wish to help
...her life."
—J.K.
...strates
...one of our gravest social
...importance."
"A comprehensive and riveting account of
...in America's struggle against drugs. All of
...the future of our children and our country dep-
—MAREN
...President, Child
"Matha Falco's book makes clear that to win the war ag-
...must come to our senses and fully employ the 'weapons' of
...treatment, education, community action. To ignore her compelling
...ment is to put another generation of children, as well as our his-
...values, at risk."
—JOAN GANZ COONEY,
...Chairman, Children's Television Workshop
"In this informed, persuasive, and often surprising investigation, Matha
...Falco cuts through the rhetoric to identify surprising programs that actually work
...against drugs. The great majority of Americans want to solve our
...problem in our cities, in our workplaces, and among our children.
...shows us exactly how to do it."
—DR. MICHAEL
...author of *Rising Sea*

**ATTITUDES TO FAVOUR**

Act in a way that respects your boundaries.

Immediately get help from school counsellors if a student confides in you about their suffering or if you observe troubling behaviour.

Each person has their place regarding the student: the facilitator, a teacher, a member of the school system, their parents, their family, their friends. All of these people can help the teen find more specialized resources. It's not about becoming an impromptu therapist, but about warming them up to the idea of getting therapy. It is also **important to recognize** that you are privileged to have been chosen by the young person to create meaningful contact and then guide them toward other professionals.

Together, we're stronger! Don't be the only one to intervene with the student. Try to mobilize the teen's network so as to create a strong safety net that gives them as much support as possible.

**ATTITUDES TO AVOID**

Don't try to solve the problem yourself: psychology is a complex and delicate field. It can be emotionally heavy to support a young person in distress; it requires certain skills.





WHAT ARE THE WARNING SIGNS THAT REQUIRE AN INTERVENTION?

If the student is going through a particularly difficult situation, for example heartbreak, their parents separating, failure, bullying, etc., it is important that their circle, of which you are a part, remains attentive to signs of distress and that they let the teen know that they are not alone, that there are adults around them that are there for them as needed. You can also choose to adjust or reduce the demands on the young person by suggesting lighter workloads, for example.

In order to act as soon as possible and stop the situation from deteriorating, it is essential that you be able to recognize **signs of distress**. These signs may include, but are not limited to:

➔ WORRYING SPEECH AND STATEMENTS LIKE:

"Everyone would be better off without me," "It wouldn't change anything if I wasn't there." "I'm going to finish it," "They'll see. They'll regret it," etc.

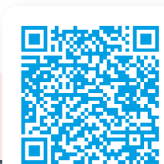
Ask them questions about what they mean, if they're thinking about suicide and, if yes, if they've thought about a method. The teacher's role here is to **alert a school counsellor** to evaluate the necessity and urgency of intervening.

➔ A SUDDEN AND DRASTIC BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE:

- 👉 **A negative behavioural change:** the student, normally cheerful, begins to isolate themselves, to be depressed, aggressive or angry, to have hunched shoulders, etc.
- 👉 **A falsely positive behavioural change:** the student, who has been sad for a while, starts to be cheerful, make plans with their friends and seemingly return back to life as usual, despite the fact that nothing has changed in their difficult life situation. In reality, it's possible that they've found a sense of peace by making a plan to end their suffering. **Stay alert!**

TO LEARN MORE

about the signs of distress to watch out for in order to prevent suicide, [consult this article](#).








PART 3:
**GUIDE YOUR STUDENT
TOWARD GOOD RESOURCES**

HOW DO YOU DIRECT A STUDENT TOWARD PROFESSIONALS SUCH AS SPECIAL EDUCATION TECHNICIANS, PSYCHOEDUCATORS AND PSYCHOLOGISTS?

Here is some advice to encourage a young person to consult a professional:



Offer to physically accompany your student to the school counsellor or encourage them to ask a friend to accompany them.


Counsellors will know more about how to target the difficulty and the right professional to refer them to (doctor, psychologist...).

Explain to your student that their symptoms could be related to a physical illness and that it is therefore important that they consult a health professional. Also, remind them that **understanding their psychological state is very important for getting better.**


To build your student's confidence, it can be reassuring to explain how things will go in the counsellor's office.

They are going to ask if it's for them, for a friend or for someone in the family. They're going to explore their symptoms, experiences and lifestyle habits with them. Encourage them to say what they're feeling in total confidence and to give them accurate information.

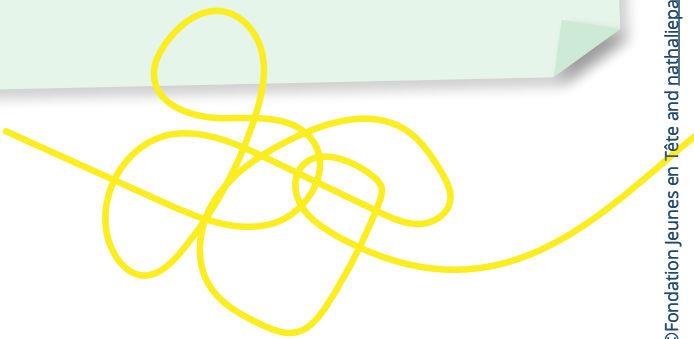
The counsellor is there to help them with what they're going through, to help them understand themselves and to **find ways they can get better.**



If they're afraid that the whole school will find out, explain to them the different methods in place so that they can discretely go to the counsellor's office (check with a contact person to find out these methods). You can also recommend that they seek private counselling if they have the means to do so.



If they're afraid of their parents' reaction, you can try to reassure them and encourage them to talk about their fear with the counsellor so that they can explore how to tackle the subject with their parents together.





Speaking about confidentiality can be reassuring as well.

Mention that in Quebec, from 14 years of age, young people have the right to confidentiality with certain professionals.

However, in certain exceptional situations, confidentiality can be broken if the professional judges that the young person or another person is in serious danger.

Encourage your student to ask the counsellor questions if they have any doubts. They can answer them and clarify the subject more on with them.



Bet on hope!

It's normal to have fears, but you can overcome them. Speaking about it is the **FIRST** step to getting better.

The right treatment can help you get better and provide you with tools for the future: the majority of people who look for mental health help get better.





RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT YOU

There are several services and helplines where people are available to give you advice and lead you through different steps to follow to help your struggling young person.



SCHOOL TEAM:

A team of professionals is available at your school (psychologist, psychoeducator, social worker, nurse, special educator, addiction counsellor, guidance counsellor, AVSEC, etc.). Don't hesitate to discuss things with them and to get advice from them on the best way to help the struggling young person given their situation.



YOUR REGION'S CLSC

The CLSC's psychosocial reception can also be a resource of choice for a young person who needs help. To find the CLSC closest to you, dial 811.



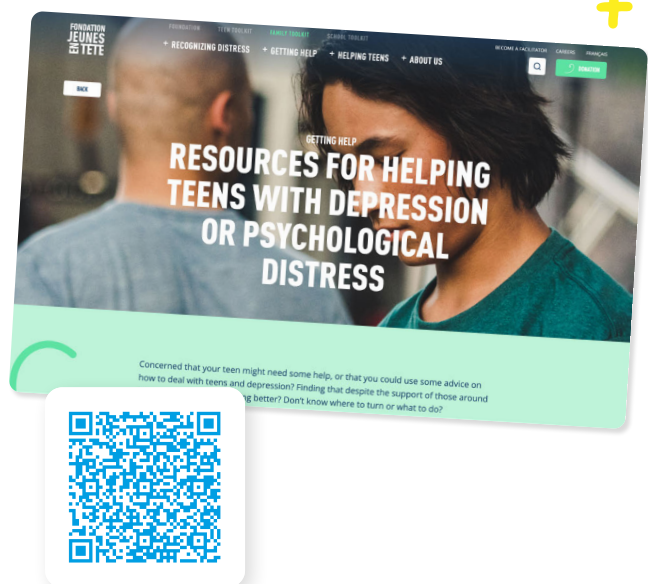
THE RÉSEAU AVANT DE CRAQUER

<https://www.avantdecraquer.com/en/>

A Quebecois network of 38 associations dedicated to the well-being of friends and family members of someone with a mental illness. (Formerly La Fédération des familles et amis de la personne atteinte de maladie mentale--FFAPAMM)

DISCOVER

more resources to help you deal with psychological distress on the Fondation Jeunes en Tête website:







ARE YOU IN A SITUATION WHERE THE RISK OF SUICIDE IS HIGH?

If your student mentions a concrete plan* to commit suicide during your conversation, **it is an emergency.**

Don't wait and:

- Call 911
- Go directly to the nearest emergency room
- If the young person's suicidal thoughts seem less concrete, call Suicide Action at 1-866 277-3553 ; your call will be automatically directed to a local resource (this free, confidential service is available 24/7)

*A concrete plan can be identified by 3 elements:
place, means and time.





RESOURCES TO SUGGEST TO A YOUNG PERSON



TEL-JEUNES

Phone: **1 800-263-2266** Text: **514 600-1002**
<https://teljeunes.com/Home>

Telephone and internet intervention centre for young people in Quebec. Free, confidential, professional and available 24 hours/7 days. Telephone and email support and referrals, information banks and online, support forums.

KIDS HELP PHONE

1-800-668-6868
<https://kidshelpphone.ca/>

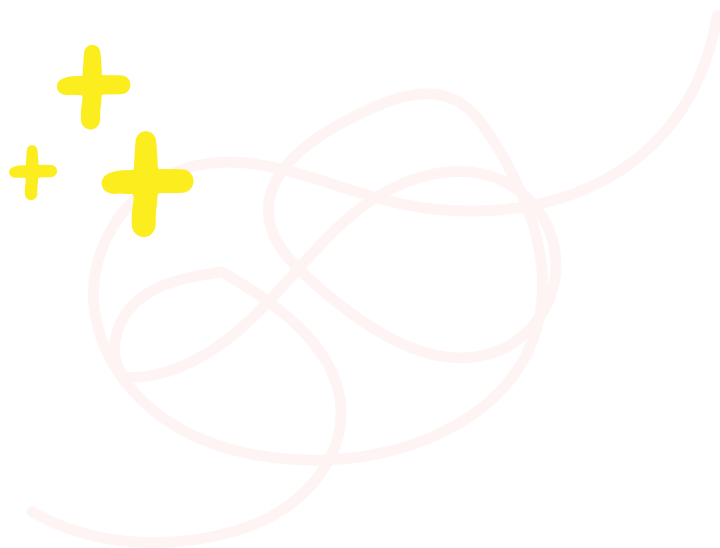
Bilingual telephone help line, available 24 hours a day, free and confidential, intended for young people ages 4 to 19 who are going through a hard time or who need information. Professional counsellors offer support, a listener and referrals and are also open to parents who need support for their child.

OTHER HELP LINES

<https://www.211qc.ca/en/psychosocial-support/helplines-talklines>

FAMILY DOCTOR

CLSC
Ordre des psychologues du Québec

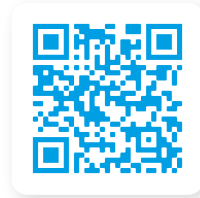
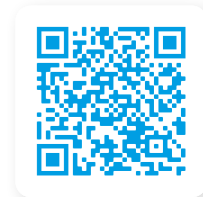


TO FURTHER EXPLORE THE AUTHOR'S IDEAS:

📌 [Psychologist Nathalie Parent's website](#)

📌 [Conferences and training offered on the subject](#)

📌 [Facebook page](#)



BOOKS (in French only):



10 Questions sur l'anxiété de performance

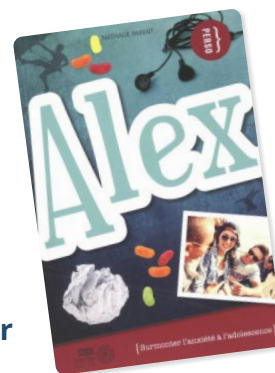


Enfants stressés

Vic, l'anxiété de performance à l'adolescence

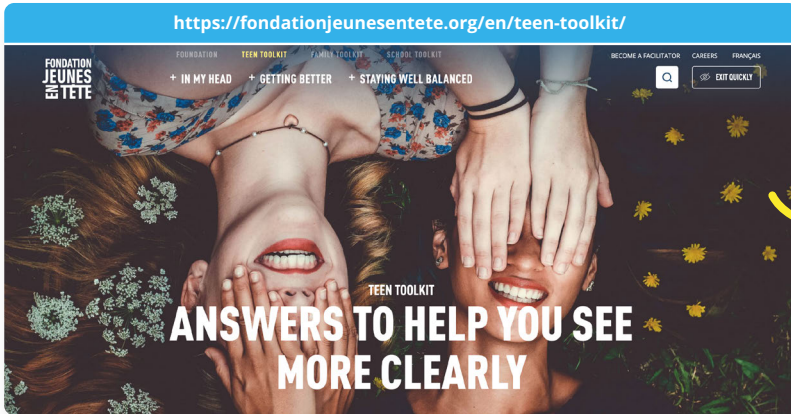


Alex, surmonter l'anxiété à l'adolescence



DISCOVER ALL OUR TOOLS FOR DEVELOPING YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH

TEEN TOOLKIT



FAMILY TOOLKIT



SCHOOL TOOLKIT



WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK NATHALIE PARENT,

psychologist, author, speaker and trainer,
for writing this mini-guide.

SINCERE THANKS TO OUR PARTNER:






Les Éditions Midi-Trente : practical books and friendly intervention tools for overcoming difficulties and stimulating the potential of children and adults.

DON'T HESITATE TO CHECK OUT THEIR BOOKS AND TOOLS!

fondationjeunesentete.org/en/
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 [Fondation Jeunes en Tête](https://twitter.com/fondationjeunesentete)