

Five Early Ways to Respond to Newcomer Youth Mental and Behavioral Health Concerns

This tip sheet provides practical guidance for service providers and caregivers, such as foster parents. It focuses on supporting the mental and behavioral health of newcomer teens and emerging adults, including youth in the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) program. **This guidance is not a clinical or diagnostic tool. Instead, it encourages noticing changes, listening with curiosity, and offering supportive first responses when a youth shares a concern.** For more in-depth guidance, see resources from the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants' (USCRI) [Refugee Youth Resource Center](#), including tools on recognizing distress, culturally responsive conversations with youth and caregivers, and connecting families to support.

1. Observe behaviors as signals rather than diagnoses.

Young people, especially those adapting to a new country, often express stress and concerns through behavior rather than words. Start by noticing what you **see** and **hear**, such as:

- Changes in sleep, appetite, energy, or ability to concentrate
- Increased isolation, withdrawal, or limited communication (e.g., "I'm fine"; "It's nothing")
- Irritability, frustration, anger, or conflict at school or work, or in relationships

2. Pause and remember: behavior doesn't equal meaning.

It can be tempting and natural to want to make sense of a young person's behavior, especially when you care about their safety. To help avoid jumping to conclusions, remember that behavior can mean different things depending on **context, culture, personality, and past experiences**. For example:

- Quietness may reflect respect, uncertainty, culture shock, or simply needing time
- Avoidance may reflect a fear of misunderstanding or consequences
- Anger may reflect stress, grief, or overwhelm rather than aggression
- Hesitation to accept support services may reflect stigma, unfamiliarity, or language barriers

3. Actively listen and gather information.

Your goal is not to obtain every detail from the youth or provide counseling. It is to learn enough to determine whether the youth might need more support. Keep conversations simple, **actively listen**, and engage with **curiosity and empathy**. If the young person withdraws, it's okay to pause and return to the conversation another time if there is no immediate concern for safety. Here are some example conversation guides that demonstrate **effective listening practices and potential responses**:

1. **Acknowledge what the young person shares:** *"I'm really glad you told me about this."*
2. **Validate their experience without judging:** *"That sounds so hard."*
3. **Ask open-ended questions:** *"When you say it's [so-so/fine], can you tell me what you mean or how you feel?"*
4. **Clarify how long the concern has been happening and how often it occurs:** *"How long have you been feeling this way? How often does it happen?"*
5. **Understand how it affects daily life:** *"Has this affected your day to day, like sleep or school?"*

4. Ask questions and decide next steps.

Open-ended follow-up questions help clarify whether a concern may be temporary or requires additional support. Focus on **impact, duration, and change over time**, and ask only what's needed to determine next steps. Here are some example conversation guides:

When you ask: *"You shared that you can't sleep. How long has this been going on?"*

If you hear: *"A couple weeks."*

You may reply: *"That sounds frustrating. Lack of sleep can make everything harder. Are you open to talking to your [case manager/therapist] to support you? You could talk with them on your own, I could reach out, or we can connect together."*

Next step: Involve more support.

When you ask: *"What do you mean when you say the kids at school are mean to you?"*

If you hear: *"It's just this one kid. He wouldn't let me join his game, but I told the teacher."*

You may reply: *"It feels terrible to be left out. I'm really glad you went to your teacher."*

Next step: Monitor the situation and youth's behavior, and continue to check in with them on the situation.

5. Follow up, revisit, and practice.

Mental and behavioral health needs can change over time. Establish regular check-ins with youth so that conversations about how they are doing become a consistent and expected part of your routine. Follow up with youth by revisiting conversations as needed. Recognizing concerns and responding with curiosity and care can make a meaningful difference when mental or behavioral health issues start to appear. Practicing these conversations with a colleague or supervisor will build your confidence and help young people learn what to expect from supportive adults.

For more mental and behavioral health resources, review Switchboard's [Collection of Resources for Supporting the Mental Health of Newcomers and Direct Service Providers](#).

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