



# PDA Teen Mental Health

A guide for parents and carers

PDA teenagers are at significantly elevated risk of anxiety, depression, and burnout. This guide helps you recognise the signs, understand the causes, and know when and how to seek professional support in Australia.

**If you are concerned about your child's immediate safety**

Call 000 if there is immediate risk. Lifeline: 13 11 14 (24 hours). Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800. headspace: 1800 650 890. Your nearest emergency department.

## Signs of Anxiety in PDA Teenagers

- Increased demand avoidance and school refusal
- Physical symptoms with no medical explanation (stomach pain, headaches)
- Extreme irritability or emotional volatility
- Sleep disturbances — difficulty falling asleep, waking, nightmares
- Withdrawal from previously enjoyed activities
- Increased rigidity and need for control

## Signs of Depression in PDA Teenagers

- Persistent low mood, flatness, or numbness
- Loss of interest in interests they previously loved
- Significant changes in sleep or appetite
- Hopelessness, worthlessness, or statements about not wanting to be here
- Withdrawal and social isolation
- Neglect of personal care

### **If your teenager makes statements about not wanting to be here**

Take all such statements seriously — even if they seem casual. Ask directly: "Are you thinking about hurting yourself?" Asking does not increase risk — it opens the conversation. Contact Lifeline (13 11 14), headspace, or your GP urgently.

## Autistic Burnout vs Depression

Autistic burnout can closely resemble depression. The key difference is that burnout is specifically caused by the sustained effort of functioning in a neurotypical world — and responds to genuine rest and demand reduction. If your teenager has been under sustained high-demand pressure, consider burnout as a contributing factor.



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## Seeking Professional Support in Australia

- GP Mental Health Treatment Plan — enables Medicare rebates for psychology
- headspace (for 12–25 year olds)
- Private clinical psychologist with PDA/autism experience
- State mental health services if acute

### Finding a PDA-informed psychologist

- Ask specifically: "Do you have experience with PDA profiles?"
- Ask about their approach to demand avoidance — look for non-compliance-based models
- The Psychology Board of Australia ([psychologyboard.gov.au](http://psychologyboard.gov.au)) can help you find registered practitioners