

What Youth Want Physicians to Know when Treating Them



High school students were asked how they want physicians to talk to them when receiving treatment.

The HEADSS framework, a recognized psychosocial interview framework, was used.

HEADSS stands for Home, Education, Activities/Alcohol, Drugs/Diet, Sexual Behavior/Self-Esteem, and Suicidality/Safety. The framework provides physicians with a better understanding of a young person's situation and what their specific needs may be. Below is what the students said.

HOME



A person can have multiple homes and that "house" does not equal "home." Not everyone has support or someone to turn to.

DON'T:

- Assume that the youth has a place they call "home." Check your records on the patient's family situation first so you don't bring up things that may be triggering.
- Ask these questions when family is in the room.
- Mention something bad that may have happened in the past.

DO ASK QUESTIONS LIKE:

- Who do you live with?
- Who is in your life that supports you?
- What does "home" mean to you?
- Are you heard at home?
- Where do you feel safe? Do you feel safe at home?

EDUCATION



School causes a lot of stress, and 11th grade is particularly stressful. It can be hard to focus on school when there are other things going on outside of school.

DON'T:

- Ask about colleges or the pressure on grades.
- Lecture.
- Be judgmental or condescending.

DO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT:

- What things the student enjoys at school.
- What their favorite subject/class is.
- Where they go to school, what grade they are in.
- Sports or programs they are involved in.
- Plans post high school.



If someone doesn't want to talk about this, move on to a different topic. Youth want physicians to be polite, nice, respectful of different cultures, and open minded.

88% of students said it was very important for medical providers to provide support for their mental health.



What Youth Want Physicians to Know

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ACTIVITIES & ALCOHOL



Not all young people party and drink. If we say we don't, believe us. For some, alcoholism runs in their family, and it is easier for some teens to get addicted.

DON'T:

- Ask if we drink or party often and what type of alcohol we may consume.
- Ask about this in front of our parents.
- Tell me about your high school life.
- Lecture.
- Assume or judge.



Physicians can ask questions about student's extracurriculars and hobbies. Regarding alcohol, youth think it is good to talk about it if it is brought up in a good way. They want to hear about the specific dangers of alcohol, not just that it is bad.

DO ASK QUESTIONS LIKE:

- Is there peer pressure to drink?
- Do you drink? How often?
- Do you drink in safe environments?

DIET & DRUGS



Youth had a lot to say on this. Make sure youth feel comfortable with the topic. Many talked about diets – they want to break the stigma around diet culture. Drugs are a sensitive topic so ease into this conversation – it can go well.

DON'T:

- Lecture us or tell us your personal agenda.
- Pressure us to answer if we are uncomfortable.
- Tell someone they are overweight.
- Ask "why are you so skinny?"
- Give advice on how to lose or gain weight without being asked.



A number of students are adamant that they don't do drugs, and they aren't lying about it. Many students are experimenting with drugs, it is becoming "normal," and used in middle school. Diets can be harmful, and diets don't always correlate to one's body shape or size.

SUGGESTED WAYS TO ADDRESS THIS:

- Get at the young person's relationship with food and if they are hurting themselves over their weight.
- Disconnect diet from body weight conversations.
- Provide tips and facts on how to be healthy with diet.
- Be conversational about snacks, meals.
- Discuss how their medications may interact together.
- Ask about vitamins or supplements and if they have access to them.
- Explore caffeine intake.

What Youth Want Physicians to Know

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SELF-ESTEEM & SEXUALITY



This is a difficult topic for some to talk about. Approach them gently, build trust, and be confidential. Not all teens are having sex – “Just because I am on birth control doesn’t mean I am having sex.” Be positive, open, safe, and non-judgmental.

DON'T:

- Try and boost self-esteem if it is low. Make them feel heard and take it step-by-step.
- Assume my sexuality. It can get awkward to be asked “could you be pregnant” every visit because your doctor doesn’t know which gender you are.
- Bring this up in front of parents.
- Be blunt, rude, dismissive, or judgmental.

DO:

- Know the young person’s pronouns and use them. If you don’t know or remember, ask at the beginning of the appointment.
- Know our sexuality.
- Ask about our self-image.
- Make sure youth are comfortable with whoever may be in the room, they may want them to leave.
- Be patient.

SAFETY & SUICIDE



This is a sensitive topic that is difficult for many to talk about. Some don’t know how to bring it up. Students need to feel safe and that they trust that person to talk about it. It is an important topic.

DON'T:

- Talk about this with parents in the room.
- Belittle us.
- Lecture.
- Dismiss or judge us when we open up.
- Push us into answering what makes us feel worse. We will open up when we want to.

DO:

- Ease into the topic, using a good transition instead of just saying “are you suicidal?” Try asking “How are you feeling mentally?” or “How are things going at home?” and easier questions.
- Watch for the youth’s reactions to the topics and be mindful to not push them. Be sensitive.
- Choose words carefully.
- Make it a comfortable environment.
- Keep checking mental health one-on-one.

Wisconsin high school youth shared these thoughts at the Mental Wellness Student Leadership Summit 2025 hosted by the Wisconsin Office of Children’s Mental Health on April 11, 2025.

