

## SUMMER CAMP MENTAL HEALTH CHECKLIST

*by Lauren Stern, Psy.D.*

Summer camp offers children a unique opportunity to build confidence, independence, resilience and maturity. Research shows that over 92 percent of children feel better about themselves because of camp, and these gains are maintained over time (Thompson, 2012). In a world where anxiety, social pressures and overall mental health concerns have drastically increased, this chance to disconnect from technology and build lasting relationships and test out new skills and experiences is invaluable. With Summer 2026 right around the corner, this essential guide is designed to empower your staff, reinforce the vital work they already do, and ensure they feel confident and supported in navigating the mental health needs that arise. The well-being of campers and staff is paramount, and by embracing these proactive strategies, every camper has the opportunity to grow from the magic of camp.

### KNOW THE WARNING SIGNS OF ANXIETY & DEPRESSION

The summer camp environment offers an ideal place to foster healthy relationships, increase self-esteem, and practice healthy coping skills. There's no better place than the great outdoors, filled with engaging activities, camp spirit, supportive counselors, and a structured routine to put our worries aside and be present in the moment. Campers have countless opportunities to try new things, take risks, and grow from their successes. That said, it is ever more important to be aware of campers' mental health needs and respond to warning signs of the need for additional support.

Anxiety is the most common mental health condition among teenagers. Anxiety disorders impact approximately 1 in 3 teenagers in the U.S. Rates of anxiety have been rising, and are more prevalent among females (Science Sites, 2026). Symptoms of anxiety vary greatly, and often evolve with age. Younger children are more likely to worry about external things, such as the dark, insects or something bad happening to a loved one. In contrast, teenagers typically worry about themselves, including performance, how they are perceived by others and their body image. The ways in which anxiety manifests vary greatly, so staff should keep a close eye on the following symptoms: irritability, avoidance of new or challenging situations, withdrawal from social activity, trouble concentrating, extreme sensitivity to criticism, disruption in sleep, changes in eating habits, frequent complaints of physical ailments, e.g. stomachaches, headaches, and excessive worries or fears (Miller, 2026).

Depression is also a common and growing mental health concern diagnosed in childhood, and often co-occurring with anxiety. Recent data shows that four percent of children, ages 3-17 years have been diagnosed with depression. Depression is more common among older adolescents, especially females (Frank, 2024). Warning signs and symptoms of depression are similar to those of anxiety and include: loss of energy or motivation, neglect of personal hygiene, loss of interest in hobbies, social withdrawal, changes in eating or sleeping habits, increased irritability, and persistent feelings of helplessness, worthlessness and sadness.

### Tips to Help Manage Anxiety, Depression and Emotion Dysregulation

Offer breaks - time & space	Practice Mindfulness
Use the power of distraction	Actively listen
Lower body temperature with water or ice	Encourage calming breathing techniques

## KNOW STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT A CAMPER WITH ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVE DISORDER (ADHD)

ADHD affects about 11% of school-aged children and is characterized by developmentally inappropriate levels of inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity (CDC, 2026). ADHD significantly affects executive functioning, making tasks like planning, organizing, cognitive flexibility and emotional regulation more challenging (Barkley, 2025). If staff are able to recognize these symptoms of ADHD, it can signal to them to use proactive, rather than reactive strategies to support these campers. For example, children with ADHD may have trouble getting started on tasks and managing their time. Rather than becoming frustrated that these campers appear to not be following directions, counselors can anticipate this need and take steps to calmly reinforce the directions and/or model the behavior for them. Similarly, by understanding that campers with ADHD often have trouble with emotion regulation, counselors can look for triggers or warning signs that a camper may be frustrated and assist them in using coping skills to prevent themselves from escalating their negative emotions and behaviors. This effort for staff to be proactive will also lead to more positive interactions, thus helping to increase a camper's self-esteem.

### Tips to Support a Camper with ADHD

Give directions one step at a time	Use visual Schedules
Encourage eye contact	Provide clear consistent expectations of limits
Provide frequent positive reinforcement	Model directions & behavior

## KNOW WHEN TO SEEK HELP FROM AN AUTHORITY FIGURE

The supportive, family environment of summer camps promotes collaboration among all. Staff should never feel alone in managing the emotional and behavioral challenges of campers. It is crucial for each staff member to know when to seek support from a co-counselor, group leader or additional adult. When working to support a camper during difficult situations, one may become frustrated themselves. Self-awareness of one's own emotions and behaviors is key in maintaining a productive and positive environment to help campers learn and grow from their challenges. "Tagging out," and asking for help from a co-counselor can go a long way in preventing staff burnout and fostering camper development.

At times, campers may say, display, or report concerning behaviors that require the prompt attention of an adult staff member. Suicidal ideation is increasingly common among teenagers. According to the Center for Disease Control (2025), in 2023, twenty percent of U.S. high school students reported seriously considering suicide within the past year. If any camper expresses thoughts of self-harm or a threat to another person, this should be brought to an authority figure to assess the risk immediately. In such situations, the camper should not be left unsupervised and the reporting staff member may be in need of debriefing the situation once it is handled. If the staff member is unsure if the comments were said by the camper seriously or in jest, it's always best to err on the side of caution and share with an adult to further assess the situation.

Eating habits of campers may also present concerns that require additional support. Eating disorders affect a substantial portion of youth, with higher rates among females and adolescents. A common misperception about eating disorders is that the affected person is overly thin. However, a person can have an eating disorder and be average weight or overweight. Warning signs of eating disorders include: changes in what and amount an individual eats, restrictive eating, unusual weight fluctuations, unhappiness with their body, excessive exercise, and spending long periods of time in the bathroom. Eating disorders are not a choice and are often impacted by mental health disorders, such as anxiety and depression (McCarthy, 2022). If staff observe any of the concerns mentioned above, they should not hesitate to bring them to the attention of the appropriate adult and medical staff.

Staff should never feel alone with a camper's problem. When in doubt, ask for help!

## BE AWARE OF YOUR OWN MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

Young adults, ages 18-25, are at especially high risk for mental health disorders. Approximately 36% of people in this population have experienced a diagnosable mental health disorder in the last year. This is the highest prevalence rate of any adult age group, with anxiety and depression being most common, and ADHD and eating disorders also of concern (Mental Health Stats, 2026). Stressors related to transitions, such as developing new routines, forming new relationships and taking on more responsibilities, often trigger mental health concerns in this population. Given that the majority of counselors at a summer camp fall into this age category, it is crucial for them

to be aware of their own emotional, social and behavioral needs throughout the summer. It is helpful to have protocols in place for staff to seek their own support. In order to most successfully care for the needs of children, young adults need to prioritize their own self-care in the process.

By embracing the proactive strategies outlined here and maintaining a culture of mutual support, camps will help ensure a beneficial and enriching experience for all. Staff will be well-equipped to foster the confidence, resilience and positive sense of self that camp uniquely provides. Your staff will step into this summer with the knowledge that they are in an ideal position to make a profound, empowering and lasting impact on the personal growth and development of their campers.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lauren Stern has been a dedicated member of the camp community for decades, serving in various leadership roles from counselor and group leader to on-site psychologist and clinical consultant. In her capacity as a camp mental health professional, she provides vital support, guidance, and crisis intervention to directors, staff, campers and families alike. Her deep-seated passion for and understanding of camp, coupled with her clinical expertise, allows her to offer specialized staff training and realtime social-emotional support that fosters resilience and growth in the camp environment. Lauren has over 15 years of experience in the field of child and adolescent psychology, specifically within the public school system and private practice. This dual background provides her with a comprehensive understanding of the educational and social landscapes children navigate daily. Currently, Lauren is in private practice based in Northern New Jersey. She uses an integrative, strength-based and interpersonal approach to help clients navigate feelings of anxiety and depression, social dynamics, executive functioning and behavioral challenges and transitions across the lifespan.

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