

# HEEADSSS: A Psychosocial Interview Format for Adolescents

Interview Questions
Home & Environment
Education & Employment
Eating & Exercise
Activities
Drugs/Substances
Sexuality
Suicide/Depression
Safety



Adapted from Contemporary Pediatrics,, Getting into Adolescent Heads (July 1988), by John M. Goldenring, MD, MPH, & Eric Cohen, MD

## Background

Adolescence is a challenging time when many emotional and physical changes take place. Most adolescents make it through their teenage years and enter adulthood without major trauma. However, for some teenagers this may be a very dangerous time of experimentation. Social Workers can play an important role in helping with this transition. Many social workers find it difficult to discuss sensitive issues with adolescents. HEADSSS is a screening tool to assess risks that can be used for all adolescents. It provides a systematic approach to the adolescent interview progressing from the least threatening topics to the most personal and sensitive subjects. The acronym stands for: Home, Education/Employment, Eating, Activities, Drugs, Sexuality, Suicide/Depression, and Safety. This interview format is flexible and can be catered to all adolescents.

The note a social worker strikes at the outset of the assessment interview may affect the entire outcome. Parents, family members, or other adults should not be present during the HEADSS assessment unless the adolescent specifically gives permission, or asks for it.

## Confidentiality

It is not reasonable to expect an adolescent to discuss sensitive and personal information unless confidentiality can be assured. **All adolescents and families, including caregivers (most commonly a parent or both parents), should be told about confidentiality** at the beginning of the interview. Each social worker must determine the nature of his/her own confidentiality statement.

## Belief Systems

As a social work practitioner your own set of beliefs, based on your knowledge, experience, and level of tolerance in dealing with particular situations will set the standard in providing developmentally-appropriate care to youth and their families. Social work practitioners interfacing with youth may be confronted with difficult situations where this particular belief

system may be “tested”, if not challenged. Social workers should be prepared to engage with youth in a non-judgmental manner.

Based on particular individual belief systems, these are some “assumptions” that many of us may have about youth:

- youth live in a home with two parents
- all youth go to school and get along with peers and teachers
- all youth are heterosexual

It is of significant importance not to “assume”, but rather to ask non-judgmental questions in a respectful, caring fashion.

## Starting the Interview

- A. Introduction:** Set the stage by introducing yourself to the youth and parents. Suggestion -- If the parents are present before the interview, always introduce yourself to the adolescent first. In fact, ask the adolescent to introduce you to the other people in the room. This gives the adolescent a clear message that you are interested in him/her.
- B. Understanding of Confidentiality:** Ask either the parents or the youth to explain their understanding of confidentiality and the limits therein.
- C. Confidentiality Statement:** After the youth and family have given you their views on confidentiality, acknowledge their responses and add your views accordingly (confidentiality statement), based on the particular situation.

## Interview Elements: Home

### Opening Lines: (Less/More) Developmentally-Appropriate

	Less	More	Reason
<b>Home</b>	Tell me about mom and dad.	Where do you live, and who lives there with you?	Parent(s) may have separated, divorced, died, or left the home. Open-ended question enables one to collect “environmental” as well as personal history.

### Examples of POSSIBLE Questions

- Who lives at home with you? Where do you live? How long? Do you have your own room?
- How many brothers and sisters do you have and what are their ages? Are your brothers and sisters healthy?
- Are there any new people living in your home?
- Are your parents healthy? What do your parents do for a living?
- What are the rules like at home?

- How do you get along with your parents, your siblings? What kinds of things do you and your family argue about the most? What happens in the house when there is a disagreement?
- Is there anything you would like to change about your family?

Asking about parental abuse or substance use (also see *Drugs* section) may be difficult. Using a scenario may facilitate this line of questioning, i.e. "Working with youth I have learned from some 'kids' that their relationship with their parents is a difficult one; by this I mean they argue and fight. Some youth have told me that they wish their parents did not drink so much or use drugs. Is this a situation in your household? Has anything like it happened to you?"

## Interview Elements: Education & Employment

### Opening Lines: (Less/More) Developmentally-Appropriate

	Less	More	Reason
<b>Education &amp; Employment</b>	How are you doing in school?	Are you in school? What are you good at in school? What is hard for you? What grades do you get?	Poor questions can be answered "okay". Open-ended question ask for information about strengths and weaknesses and allow for quantification / objectification.

### Examples of POSSIBLE Questions

- Which school do you go to? What grade are you in? Any recent changes in schools?
- What do you like best and least about school? Favorite subjects? Worst subjects?
- What were your most recent grades? Are these the same or different from the past? Have you ever failed or repeated any years?
- How many hours of homework do you do daily?
- How much school did you miss last/this year? Do you skip classes? Have you ever been suspended?
- What do you want to do when you finish school? Any future plans/goals?
- Do you work now? How much? Have you worked in the past?
- How do you get along with teachers, employers?
- How do you get along with your peers? Inquire about "bullying".

## Interview Elements: Eating & Exercise

### Opening Lines: (Less/More) Developmentally-Appropriate

	Less	More	Reason
<b>Eating &amp; Exercise</b>	Do you have any struggles with eating or body image?	How would you describe your eating habits? Does your weight or body image cause you any stress?	Poor questions can be shrugged aside. Open-ended question allow you to explore possible eating disordered behavior or body-related self-esteem problems in a non-threatening way.

### Examples of POSSIBLE Questions

- What do you like and not like about your body?
- Have there been any recent changes in your weight or body?
- Tell me about any exercise that you do or get in your daily routine.
- What do you think would be a healthy diet? How does that compare with your current eating patterns?
- What would it be like if you gained/lost 10 pounds?
- Have you ever taken body pills or supplements that you hoped would bring about changes in your body?

## Interview Elements: Activities

### Opening Lines: (Less/More) Developmentally-Appropriate

	Less	More	Reason
<b>Activities</b>	Do you have any activities outside of school?	What do you do for fun? What things do you do with friends? What do you do with your free time?	Good questions are open-ended and allow youth to express him/herself.

### Examples of POSSIBLE Questions

- Are most of your friends from school or somewhere else? Are they the same age as you?
- Do you hang out with mainly people of your same sex or a mixed crowd?
- Do you have one best friend or a few friends? Do you have a lot of friends?
- Do you spend time with your family? What do you do with your family?
- Do you see your friends at school and on weekends, too? Are there a lot of parties?
- Do you do any regular sport or exercise? Hobbies or interests?
- Do you have a religious affiliation, belong to a church, or practice some kind of spiritual belief?
- How much TV do you watch? What are your favorite shows?
- Do you read for fun? What do you read?
- What is your favorite type of music? Favorite band?

- Do you have a car – use seat belts?
- Have you ever been involved with the police? Have you ever been charged? Do you belong to a group/gang?

## Interview Elements: Drugs & Substances

### Opening Lines: (Less/More) Developmentally-Appropriate

	Less	More	Reason
<b>Drugs, Substances</b>	Do you do drugs?	Some young people experiment with drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes. Have you or your friends ever tried them? What have you tried?	Good question is an expression of concern with specific follow-up. With younger teens, it is best to begin by asking about friends.

### Examples of POSSIBLE Questions

- When you go out with your friends or to party, do most of the people that you hang out with drink or smoke? Do you? How much and how often?
- Do any of your family members drink, smoke or use other drugs? If so, how do you feel about this - is it a problem for you?
- Have you or your friends ever tried any other drugs? Specifically, what? Have you ever used a needle?
- Do you regularly use other drugs? How much and how often?
- Do you or your friends drive when you have been drinking?
- Have you ever been in a car accident or in trouble with the law, and were any of these related to drinking or drugs?
- How do you pay for your cigarettes, alcohol or drugs?

## Interview Elements: Sexuality

### Opening Lines: (Less/More) Developmentally-Appropriate

	Less	More	Reason
<b>Sexuality</b>	Have you ever had sex? Tell me about your boyfriend or girlfriend.	Are you involved in a relationship? Have you been involved in a relationship? How was that experience for you? How would you describe your feeling towards guys or girls? How do you see yourself in terms of sexual preference, i.e. gay, straight, or bisexual?	What does the term "have sex" really mean to teenagers? Asking only about heterosexual relationships closes doors at once.

### Examples of POSSIBLE Questions

- Have you ever been in a relationship? When? How was it? How long did it last?
- Have you had sex? Was it a good experience? Are you comfortable with sexual activity? Number of partners?

- Using contraception? Type and how often (10, 50, or 70% of the time).
- Have you ever been pregnant or had an abortion?
- Have you ever had a discharge or sore that you are concerned about? Have you ever been checked for a sexually transmitted disease? Knowledge about STDs and prevention?
- Have you ever had a pap smear?
- Do you have any concerns about Hepatitis or AIDS?
- Have you had an experience in the past where someone did something to you that you did not feel comfortable with or that made you feel disrespected?
- If someone abused you, who would you talk to about this? How do you think you would react to this?
- *For females:* Ask about Menarche, last menstrual period (LMP), and menstrual cycles.

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## Interview Elements: Suicide/Depression

Every psychosocial interview should seek to identify elements that correlate with anxiety or depression, a common precursor to suicide. Many of the items in the suicide screen (see box below) may have already been determined in the psychosocial history:

- Severe family problems
- Changes in school performance
- Changes in friendship patterns
- Preoccupation with death
- Acting-out behavior and health risk behaviors, including drug, alcohol and substance abuse

Some specific items that are correlated with depression and/or possible suicidal ideation/behavior include (but are not necessarily limited to) the following:

- Sleep disorders (usually induction problems, also early/frequent waking or greatly increased sleep and complaints of increasing fatigue)
- Appetite/eating behavior change
- Feelings of chronic "boredom"
- Emotional outbursts and highly impulsive behavior
- History of withdrawal/isolation
- Hopeless/helpless feelings
- History of past suicide attempts, depression, psychological counselling
- History of past suicide attempts, depression, psychological counselling in family or peers
- History of drug/alcohol abuse, acting out/crime, recent change in school performance
- History of recurrent serious "accidents"
- Psychosomatic symptomatology
- Suicidal ideation (including significant current and past losses)
- Decreased affect on interview, avoidance of eye contact – depression posturing
- Preoccupation with death (clothing, music, media, art)
- History of psychosocial/emotional trauma
- Identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender youth

## Opening Lines: (Less/More) Developmentally-Appropriate

	Less	More	Reason
<b>Suicide/ Depression</b>	Are you currently feeling suicidal or that you want to harm yourself?	Do you ever have thoughts about hurting yourself, or wishing that you didn't exist? How have you handled such feelings in the past?	It does NOT increase the risk of suicide to ask about such thoughts/feelings. However, too direct an approach can cause an adolescent client to shut down.

### Examples of POSSIBLE Questions

- Have you felt stressed or anxious more than usual lately?
- Are you having trouble sleeping?
- Have you had thoughts about hurting yourself or wishing that you didn't exist?
- Tell me about a time when someone picked on you or made you feel uncomfortable.
- Does it seem that you have lost interest in things that you used to really enjoy? Can you tell me more about that?
- Do you find yourself spending less time with friends and people you care about?
- Would you rather just be by yourself most of the time?
- Have you ever tried to kill yourself, or planned to kill yourself but didn't follow through?
- Have you ever had to hurt yourself (by cutting yourself, for example) to calm yourself down or make yourself feel better?

Remember that any expression of suicidal intent or significant suicidal ideation is grounds for more extensive exploration and possible intervention. If you are concerned, you may want to consider including suicide risk assessment tools as part of your psychosocial interview. Many of these are available online, and include (but are not limited to) the following:

- [http://www.glaje.com/Scales/Suicidal\\_Beh\\_Quest\\_pre\\_assessment.pdf](http://www.glaje.com/Scales/Suicidal_Beh_Quest_pre_assessment.pdf)
- [http://www.integration.samhsa.gov/clinical-practice/Columbia\\_Suicide\\_Severity\\_Rating\\_Scale.pdf](http://www.integration.samhsa.gov/clinical-practice/Columbia_Suicide_Severity_Rating_Scale.pdf)
- <http://www.integration.samhsa.gov/images/res/SBQ.pdf>
- [http://foundationhhc.org/NAHC/LegReg/mbrs\\_only/ListservContrib/Clinical/Suicide-Risk-Asst-Tool.doc](http://foundationhhc.org/NAHC/LegReg/mbrs_only/ListservContrib/Clinical/Suicide-Risk-Asst-Tool.doc)

Always remember to ask for clarification and consultation from supervisors or other mental health professionals if you are unsure what to do in cases where you suspect significant risk of suicide or self-harm.

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## Interview Elements: Safety

### Opening Lines: (Less/More) Developmentally-Appropriate

	Less	More	Reason
<b>Safety</b>	Do you feel that you make wise decisions with regard to keeping yourself safe?	Have you ever made decisions that could have put you at risk of being harmed? How do you decide if a person/situation is safe for you?	It is important to ask questions regarding an adolescent's safety at school, home and during his/her free time. Asking specifically about violence, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and all forms of abuse are critical aspects of determining safety.

### Examples of POSSIBLE Questions

- Have you ever been seriously injured? (How)? How about anyone that you know?
- Do you always wear a seatbelt in the car?
- Have you ever met in person (or plan to meet) with anyone that you first encountered online?
- When was the last time you sent a text message while driving?
- Have you ever ridden with a driver who was drunk or high?
- Is there a lot of violence at your home? School? Neighborhood? Among friends?
- Have you ever been picked on or bullied? Is that a current problem?
- Have you gotten into physical fights at school or in your neighborhood? Does that still happen?
- Have you ever felt you had to carry a knife, gun, or other weapon to protect yourself? Do you still feel that way?
- Have you ever been locked up/incarcerated?

## Wrapping Up the Interview

### Suggestions for Ending Interviews with Teenagers:

- Ask them to sum up their life in one word or to give the overall "weather report" for their life (sunny with a few clouds, very sunny with highs all the time, cloudy with rain likely, etc.).
- Ask them to tell what they see when they look in the mirror each day. Specifically, look for teenagers who tell you that they are "bored". Boredom in adolescents may indicate that the youth is depressed.
- Ask them to tell you whom they can trust and confide in if there are problems in their lives, and why they trust that person. This is especially important if you have not already identified a trusted adult in the family. Tell the adolescent that he/she now has another adult -- the social worker -- who can be trusted to help with problems and to answer questions. Let them know you are interested in them as a whole person and that you are someone who wants to help them lead a fuller, healthier life.

- Give them an opportunity to express any concerns you have not covered, and ask for feedback about the interview. If they later remember anything they have forgotten to tell you, remind them that they are welcome to call at any time or to come back in to talk about it.
- For teenagers who demonstrate significant risk factors, relate your concerns. Ask if they are willing to change their lives or are interested in learning more about ways to deal with their problems. This leads to a discussion of potential follow-up and therapeutic interventions. Many adolescents do not recognize dangerous life-style patterns because they see their activities not as problems but as solutions. Your challenge lies in helping the adolescent to see health risk-taking behaviors as problems and helping to develop better strategies for dealing with them.
- If the adolescent's life is going well, say so. In most cases, you can identify strengths and potential or real weaknesses, and discuss both in order to offer a balanced view.
- Ask if there is any information you can provide on any of the topics you have discussed, especially health promotion in the areas of sexuality and substance use. Try to provide whatever educational materials young people are interested in.

**TABLE 1** The HEEADSSS psychosocial interview for adolescents

	<b>Potential first-line questions</b>	<b>Questions if time permits or if situation warrants exploration</b>
<b>Home</b>	<p>Who lives with you? Where do you live?</p> <p>What are relationships like at home?</p> <p>Can you talk to anyone at home about stress? (Who?)</p> <p>Is there anyone new at home? Has someone left recently?</p> <p>Do you have a smart phone or computer at home? In your room? What do you use it for? (May ask this in the activities section.)</p>	<p>Have you moved recently?</p> <p>Have you ever had to live away from home? (Why?)</p> <p>Have you ever run away? (Why?)</p> <p>Is there any physical violence at home?</p>
<b>Education and employment</b>	<p>Tell me about school.</p> <p>Is your school a safe place? (Why?) Have you been bullied at school?</p> <p>Do you feel connected to your school? Do you feel as if you belong?</p> <p>Are there adults at school you feel you could talk to about something important? (Who?)</p> <p>Do you have any failing grades? Any recent changes?</p> <p>What are your future education/employment plans/goals?</p> <p>Are you working? Where? How much?</p>	<p>How many days have you missed from school this month/quarter/semester?</p> <p>Have you changed schools in the past few years?</p> <p>Tell me about your friends at school.</p> <p>Have you ever had to repeat a class/grade?</p> <p>Have you ever been suspended? Expelled? Have you ever considered dropping out?</p> <p>How well do you get along with the people at school? Work?</p> <p>Have your responsibilities at work increased?</p> <p>What are your favorite subjects at school? Your least favorite subjects?</p>
<b>Eating</b>	<p>Does your weight or body shape cause you any stress? If so, tell me about it.</p> <p>Have there been any recent changes in your weight?</p> <p>Have you dieted in the last year? How? How often?</p>	<p>What do you like and not like about your body?</p> <p>Have you done anything else to try to manage your weight?</p> <p>Tell me about your exercise routine.</p> <p>What do you think would be a healthy diet? How does that compare to your current eating patterns?</p> <p>What would it be like if you gained (lost) 10 lb?</p> <p>Does it ever seem as though your eating is out of control?</p> <p>Have you ever taken diet pills?</p>
<b>Activities</b>	<p>What do you do for fun? How do you spend time with friends? Family? (With whom, where, when?)</p> <p>Some teenagers tell me that they spend much of their free time online. What types of things do you use the Internet for?</p> <p>How many hours do you spend on any given day in front of a screen, such as a computer, TV, or phone? Do you wish you spent less time on these things?</p>	<p>Do you participate in any sports?</p> <p>Do you regularly attend religious or spiritual activities?</p> <p>Have you messaged photos or texts that you have later regretted?</p> <p>Can you think of a friend who was harmed by spending time online?</p> <p>How often do you view pornography (or nude images or videos) online?</p> <p>What types of books do you read for fun?</p> <p>How do you feel after playing video games?</p> <p>What music do you like to listen to?</p>
<b>Drugs</b>	<p>Do any of your friends or family members use tobacco? Alcohol? Other drugs?</p> <p>Do you use tobacco or electronic cigarettes? Alcohol? Other drugs, energy drinks, steroids, or medications not prescribed to you?</p>	<p>Is there any history of alcohol or drug problems in your family?</p> <p>Does anyone at home use tobacco?</p> <p>Do you ever drink or use drugs when you're alone? (Assess frequency, intensity, patterns of use or abuse, and how patient obtains or pays for drugs, alcohol, or tobacco.)</p> <p>(Ask the CRAFFT questions in Table 5, page 25.)</p>

**Potential first-line questions****Questions if time permits or if situation warrants exploration****Sexuality**

Have you ever been in a romantic relationship? Tell me about the people that you've dated.  
 Have any of your relationships ever been sexual relationships (such as involving kissing or touching)?  
 Are you attracted to anyone now? OR: Tell me about your sexual life.  
 Are you interested in boys? Girls? Both? Not yet sure?

Are your sexual activities enjoyable?  
 Have any of your relationships been violent?  
 What does the term "safer sex" mean to you?  
 Have you ever sent unclothed pictures of yourself on e-mail or the Internet?  
 Have you ever been forced or pressured into doing something sexual that you didn't want to do?  
 Have you ever been touched sexually in a way that you didn't want?  
 Have you ever been raped, on a date or any other time?  
 How many sexual partners have you had altogether?  
 (Girls) Have you ever been pregnant or worried that you may be pregnant?  
 (Boys) Have you ever gotten someone pregnant or worried that might have happened?  
 What are you using for birth control? Are you satisfied with your method?  
 Do you use condoms every time you have intercourse? What gets in the way?  
 Have you ever had a sexually transmitted infection or worried that you had an infection?

**Suicide/  
depression**

Do you feel "stressed" or anxious more than usual (or more than you prefer to feel)?  
 Do you feel sad or down more than usual?  
 Are you "bored" much of the time?  
 Are you having trouble getting to sleep?  
 Have you thought a lot about hurting yourself or someone else?  
 Tell me about a time when someone picked on you or made you feel uncomfortable online.  
 (Consider the PHQ-2 screening tool [Table 6, page 26] to supplement.)

Tell me about a time when you felt sad while using social media sites like Facebook.  
 Does it seem that you've lost interest in things that you used to really enjoy?  
 Do you find yourself spending less time with friends?  
 Would you rather just be by yourself most of the time?  
 Have you ever tried to kill yourself?  
 Have you ever had to hurt yourself (by cutting yourself, for example) to calm down or feel better?  
 Have you started using alcohol or drugs to help you relax, calm down, or feel better?

**Safety**

Have you ever been seriously injured? (How?) How about anyone else you know?  
 Do you always wear a seatbelt in the car?  
 Have you ever met in person (or plan to meet) with anyone whom you first encountered online?  
 When was the last time you sent a text message while driving?  
 Tell me about a time when you have ridden with a driver who was drunk or high. When? How often?  
 Is there a lot of violence at your home or school? In your neighborhood? Among your friends?

Do you use safety equipment for sports and/or other physical activities (for example, helmets for biking or skateboarding)?  
 Have you ever been in a car or motorcycle accident? (What happened?)  
 Have you ever been picked on or bullied? Is that still a problem?  
 Have you gotten into physical fights in school or your neighborhood? Are you still getting into fights?  
 Have you ever felt that you had to carry a knife, gun, or other weapon to protect yourself? Do you still feel that way?  
 Have you ever been incarcerated?