

**PRACTICAL TIPS FOR NAVIGATING LIFE WITH YOUR TEENAGER**  
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**RIDING THE ROLLER COASTER OF TEENAGE EMOTIONS**

- Normalise the full range of emotion, a spectrum from the most pleasant to least expectable and essential.
- Mental health is not about feeling good.
- It is about having the right feelings at the right time and being able to manage those feelings effectively – do they make sense and are they proportional?
- Descriptions of teenage emotional pain, which can be vivid and disturbing, don't add emotional distress, they reduce it.
- It is helpful for teenagers to rely on a range of defences that offer relief without distorting reality – e.g. humour or externalisation - managing a difficult emotion by getting someone else to feel it instead (often the loving parent).

**HEIGHTENED EMOTION BEFORE BED**

- Some teenagers want to talk a lot at night.
- It is a strategy for setting their own agenda and ending the conversation when they want.
- Be calm and steady, gently remind them that all our thoughts tend to be more malevolent at night.

**THE TEENAGE BRAIN – A REWIRING**

- By the end of adolescence the brain has been overhauled making it the faster and more efficient.
- BUT this upgrade does not proceed evenly throughout the brain – first geared towards the lower, evolutionarily ancient parts of the brain and only later to more sophisticated, higher ones.
- AND it isn't complete until our teenagers are in their 20s.

**SEPARATION-INDIVIDUATION: ESSENTIAL AND PAINFUL**

- Separation = building an identity distinct from your parents
- Individuation = having an identity that is wholly distinct from ours.
- Girls tend to find it harder to separate from mums, they often feel closer to them or more alike, and so have to push away with more force.
- Put together separation and individuation are a no-win situation for parents in which everything we do is annoying!

**WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ANXIETY**

- Anxiety is unhealthy when doesn't make sense, either because there is nothing to worry about or the scale of the anxiety is out of proportion to the threat.
- When the reaction is out of proportion our thinking is usually off-track in two ways: 1) over estimating how bad the situation really is 2) underestimating our ability to deal with it.
- Ruminating – thinking constantly, repetitively and fruitlessly about a painful subject is exhausting and needs strategies.

**STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING ANXIETY**

- Imagining the worst case scenario can't change an unwanted situation but it can sometimes change how adolescents think about it.
- Instead of focusing help on our teens becoming happy about the situation, help them become more realistic about it.
- Build the capacity to observe feelings dispassionately: adopting a perspective of noticing feelings but not engaging with them can help.
- The immersive emotional experience of listening to music has been found to speed the adolescents through and out the other side of negative emotions.
- Helping teens observe the situation from third person perspective reduces the distress and allows them to think more rationally about the challenges.
- Put their name in front of whatever criticism it is that they're levelling against himself, it turns out we nicer to ourselves and we do that, "I'm so stupid" is much easier to say than "Sophia, you're so stupid."
- Helping teenagers to gain some distance can also be useful. "What do you think future you would have to say about what current you is going through right now?"

**HOW TO HELP A TEENAGER WHO IS RELUCTANT TO TALK**

- Show your teenager how to talk openly about hard things by doing so yourself.

- “Roses and Thorns Practice” (Lisa Damour) to describe best and worst parts of your day.
- Don’t put teenagers on the spot.
- Steering clear of direct questions, instead of “how are you feeling about your upcoming test?” ask “what are others saying about the test?”
- Save your questions for times when you and your child are side-by-side not face-to-face: drive or a walk.
- Initiate tricky conversations when teenagers have an escape route, for example in the car, 5 minutes from home so they can go to their room.
- Go gently and try not to be dogmatic. “I wonder if” you’re feeling a bit down, “I sense that you might be frustrated”, “could it be that you are sad as well as angry?”
- Build in take up time for adolescents, make some space between when you ask the question and expect an answer “you’ve not seemed yourself the last couple of days, if you want to chat at any point this weekend I’m here.”
- Some of us like to talk through thoughts as they take shape, others like this process to happen in their head before they speak.
- Value non-verbal expression: physical activity, creative outlets.
- Lend support in other ways. A favourite drink, our quiet company, an invitation to watch their favourite movie.

### **SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT GENDER DIFFERENCE WHEN IT COMES TO TALKING**

- Boys are more likely to turn to distraction and girls are more likely to turn to discussion.
- Boys encourage each other to adopt emotional self-reliance and stoicism as defining features of emerging masculinity.
- Get the men in their lives to play their part – we should not leave the emotional work to women.
- Mothers are more likely to talk to their children about their inner lives we socialise girls and women to be fluent in the language of emotion in a way we don’t boys.
- Technology can be your friend. Addressing emotionally charged topics by text gives teenagers less pressure.

### **ADDRESSING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR**

- Engage as little as possible.
- Instead of responding to rudeness, offer choices: they can be friendly, be civil whilst telling you what’s wrong or let you know they needs space.
- There are times when it is entirely appropriate that our faces should show just how unhappy we are with a teenager’s poor judgement.
- When you act in ways you regret apologise - you are modelling how to make things right.
- Pick your battles and try to enjoy them and having them enjoy you when they’re being pleasant.
- Don’t hold a grudge. The more we can be with them moment by moment the better.
- If you say “I told you so” expect them to keep things to themselves in the future.
- Listen to your teen’s feedback about your shortcomings, they are usually spot-on.

### **CONSTANT APOLOGISING AND EMOTIONAL SPIRALLING**

- Remaining calm when they become undone communicates the critical point that we are not frightened by their acute distress and so they don’t need to be either.
- Constantly apologising is often a sign that a child is feeling ashamed. Manage shame with empathy.
- Two words that fail to convey empathy in almost any situation are “at least.” e.g. “I only got a small part in the play” “At least you got a part.”
- Sometimes apologising is a clever strategy to steer conversations away from where you need them to go, keep an eye on that and if it is a patten say something like: “It can be really hard to think people are upset with us, it’s ok that you’re sad but that you still need to talk about what needs to be addressed.”
- Talk about parts of us – the part that feels embarrassed, the inner critic who says awful things.
- Listening in the face of distress is really powerful.
- We often don’t need to provide solutions, often just saying “that sounds awful, I’m sorry” is adequate.

### **SLEEP – THE GLUE THAT HOLDS HUMAN BEINGS TOGETHER**

- Taking sleep seriously is important.
- Sleep affects our ability to regulate emotions.
- Increasing physical activity, and the intensity of physical activity has been found to improve sleep quality in both adolescents and adults.
- Have a conversation about their phone and computer use in the evening; avoid both for an hour or so before bed is helpful.

- Avoiding caffeine after 12 PM.
- Build a process of winding down for 1-2hrs into their sleep routine.
- Be creative about how you might be able to instil more sleep in your teen. Weekend lie ins, an experiment in which they sleep more for just a couple of nights to see if it makes a difference.

### **BUILDING RESILIENCY AND A POSITIVE MINDSET**

- Resiliency comes from tolerating difficult situations.
- As parents we cannot prevent emotional pain in our teens. Our role is to help them tolerate discomfort rather than exile it altogether.
- Avoid reassurance, it doesn't help. Instead, be curious – "it sounds hard to feel this down on yourself, let's think together what's going on."
- Talk about parts of self – the internal narrative we all have. "What about the part that thinks you're better than you say?"
- Encourage your child to tell you precisely about these situations, it is associated with better emotional regulation and a more positive mindset.

### **FRIENDSHIP DYNAMICS**

- Talk in specific terms about what makes any good relationship friendship or other.
- Healthy relationships are equitable, kind and enjoyable, they bring out best aspects of personality.
- Unhealthy relationships are lopsided, harsh or stressful, leave us feeling anxious or uneasy or bring to the surface of traits in ourselves that we liked least.

### **ABSTRACT THINKING AND EXISTENTIAL CONCERNS**

- It's not unusual for teenagers to become alarmed by life's impermanence, to worry about illness or death.
- Also, teenagers face the unsettling prospect of a future marked by ongoing environmental, political and social turmoil. That's before we even think about the impact of Covid.
- Most of the time, teenagers can set aside these disconcerting worries but sometimes they get stuck. In these cases it's important to give the young person a chance to talk about their feelings but one that doesn't provide sufficient relief we need to try something else.

### **STRATEGIES TO HELP TEENAGERS REGAIN EMOTIONAL CONTROL**

- Distraction = wise strategy for emotion regulation, especially for problems with no easy solution.
- Think of other activities which they can do to get the worries to quiet down a little: YouTube memes, plan your perfect summer, play an online game, watch a favourite movie, redesign your bedroom.
- Being of service to others helps – it is hard to be sad and useful at the same time.
- Set aside "worry time" by designating a specific time-limited space to concentrate on them e.g. 10 minutes to talk with you after dinner daily and then stretch it to every few days.
- Distraction presses pause and allows teenagers the chance to put their worries into perspective.
- Don't underestimate the power of tiny, soothing treats: drinking hot chocolate, taking a quiet walk with the dog, tidying their room, having a long bath, baking, playing video games, drawing, writing poetry.
- Deliberate breathing, so useful! When we are overwhelmed by emotion one method that can help is to breathe deeply and slowly.
- It's a biologically-based intervention that allows us to tap into and control the workings of our nervous system.
- The part of the brain which perceives threat is not very discriminating, It reacts in the only way it knows and raises your heart rate, speeds up your breathing - it's getting your body ready to fight or run regardless of what you're actually facing.
- It directs the sympathetic network to mobilise our fear response system; fight, flight or freeze.
- The second branch of the nervous system is the parasympathetic which takes over when the threat subsides and it works to quieten the activity of the sympathetic nervous system.
- Controlled breathing helps to take us out of "fight and flight" and into "rest and digest" mode.
- Breathing deliberately, deeply and slowly feeds information to our brain that the threat has subsided and sets in motion the calming action of the parasympathetic network.

### **MANAGING SCREEN TIME**

- Help your teenager understand the algorithm nature of online content.
- Teenagers don't always realise that their online experience is heavily influenced by what they search for.
- Think about how much space technology takes up in their lives? The crucial word is balance.

- Basic rules can make a big difference: set boundaries for when and where devices can be used and, this is hard, observe the same rules yourself.
- Really think about whether digital technology should be in anyone's bedroom overnight.

### MANAGING REVISION AND EXAM TIME – SOME OBSERVATIONS

- Exam time is hideous – we are all doing GCSEs.
- Saying “Just do your best” usually enrages rather than motivates.
- Ditto saying “just do your best” translates to teens as “even your best might not be good enough for me”.
- Instead say, “I believe in you, I know you are doing your best” because even if they are not working hard enough, they are doing the best they can.
- You could add “if I can help you to work harder so that you are happier with your grades in August, let me know.
- Bring it back to the fact that these are their exams and their results.
- Care – but not too much, if we are too invested in our child's success we can make them anxious about disappointing us.
- If they are not working at all they are blocked in some way – no child wants to fail their exams. Help them articulate it, as in “I reckon you are daunted by everything and perhaps don't know where to start, how can I help?
- It's about being creative rather than judgemental - how about I do my emails in the kitchen while you revise? Shall we produce a quizlet together?
- Don't tell them what to do, ask how you can help.
- Do you want me to think with you about this?
- My two favourites: Is there anything I can say that would make this worse?
- AND: I trust that you got this, if you haven't, please know that you can talk to me about it.
- Also, buy really good snacks.
- Don't take away their phone, if they are too resentful about having taken it away this will sabotage revision. Negotiate and use apps like Flora.
- GCSEs go on for ever. Help them plan. Divide the day into 3 and work 2 out of the 3.
- Let them have a day off a week to avoid burn out during exams.
- Spoil them even though they are foul to you – their awful behaviour is a manifestation of fear.
- Keep an eye on sleep.

### OCD AND EATING DISORDERS.

- We should be concerned of teenagers using compulsive behaviours to bring unwanted emotions under control.
- Anxiety may be spiked by an intrusive thought (the obsession) prompting an overwhelming urge (the compulsion) to engage in a behaviour that temporarily lowers anxiety which provides immediate, if short lived emotional relief.
- Keep an eye out for compulsions that are used more generally to thwart distress, these could include emotional eating or compulsive dieting or exercise.
- Thinking about eating disorders. Pay attention if your child starts dieting, eating healthy or limiting her food choices, such as becoming vegan.
- Not all children who diet develop eating disorders but those who do always start by restricting certain foods.
- Eating disorders progress slowly and children go to great lengths to hide them.
- If your child is skipping meals, lying about having eaten, exercising excessively or vomiting after food address it, when caught early these issues are easier to address.
- Eating disorders and OCD require specialist support so if you are worried about your child, see your GP.

### SIGNS THAT YOUR CHILD IS STRUGGLING

- If sleeping, eating normally, enjoying usual activities probably don't need to worry.
- You don't need to worry if your child is sad about something for a little while, you should be concerned if they are sad about everything for days at a time.
- Being highly irritable is a symptom of depression that we see more in adolescents than adults.
- When teenagers mention wanting to hurt themselves or suicidal thoughts they should always be taken seriously.
- Teenagers who are hurting themselves are letting us know they are suffering and that they don't have healthy ways to express that suffering.
- Adults sometimes avoid this topic because they worry that bringing it up will make teenagers more likely to experience suicidal feelings.
- All the research shows that asking non suicidal teens about suicide does not make them feel any worse and for teens who are feeling suicidal it alleviates distress.