**MENTAL HEALTH FORUM Q7 Q&A FOR YEAR 7 PARENTS AND CARERS: A SUMMARY**

**FRIENDSHIP ISSUES**

* Rise in problems children experienced with friendships during the pandemic, yet to settle fully.
* The skills children learn about friendships are honed when they get endless opportunities to practice, Covid made this harder.
* When young people are struggling to feel connected what can bind them is to gang up on someone.
* The sense of being a group together is drawn from them mutually disliking the same person.
* The gift that parents can give adolescents is the gift of perspective. Being dropped by friends is awful but it will ultimately be a challenging chapter in a very long book.
* What can we do to support our children with this issue?
* Turn your energies to who’s out there who would welcome you.
* Remind them that how they treat you in private and how they treat you in public should be the same.
* Encourage flexibility in your child when it comes to finding friends. Finding your tribe is often about finding the other people who are looking for a group.
* Teach Your children what a good friendship should look like.
* 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.
* In the face of an unhappy friendship dynamic ask the question: what would you gain by keeping this friendship, and what would you lose?

**HANDLING STRESS AND CHALLENGES WHEN YOU ARE SHY AND DON’T WANT TO ASK FOR HELP**

* Avoid the temptation to reassure, it doesn’t help. Instead, be curious – “it sounds hard to feel like this, let’s think together what’s going on.”
* Encourage your child to tell you precisely about these situations with “emotional granularity”.
* Fine-grained precision about feelings is associated with better emotional regulation, better mental health overall and a more positive mindset.
* Helping teens step outside themselves and observe the situation from third person perspective reduces overall distress and allows them to think more rationally about the challenges they face.
* Talk about parts of self – the internal narrative we all have. “What about the part that thinks you could ask for some help?”
* Explore your child’s reluctance and ask: “If your best friend said to you what you just said to me would you say back?”
* 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.
* 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?”

**IGNORING AND TOLERATING NEGATIVE SOCIAL INTERACTIONS**

Resiliency comes from tolerating difficult situations.

* Helping your child to mentalise, imagine into someone else’s experience has been proven to improve wellbeing.
* If your child is ruminating then distraction is often helpful. There are strategies further on.

**ISSUES TO DO WITH BODY IMAGE AND DISORDERED EATING**

* Not all children who diet develop eating disorders but restricting certain foods is often a precursor.
* Eating disorders progress slowly and children go to great lengths to hide them.
* How to tell if your child has an eating disorder? Separate this into intuition and observation.
* Intuition is listening to your gut, if your gut is telling you to be worried, pay attention to that.
* Observation is noticing things like:- eating very little and exercising intensively. Or food has become an enemy, something to be avoided and minimized, controlled and contained, exercise has become like a punishment. Sensing that your child is consuming a lot of food and engaging in compensatory behaviours like vomiting. Becoming furtive about what, how and when one eats is a common occurrence in anorexia, bulimia and other eating disorders. Warning signs also include losing weight, behaviours that veer from previous norms, such as suddenly skipping family meals or refusing to eat food from entire categories, such as carbohydrates or processed foods.
* Pay close attention if adolescents express a lot of guilt or anxiety around food or eating, or feel unhappy or uncomfortable with their bodies.
* Frame it around wanting our kids to be taking really good care of themselves, always push the idea of taking good care of yourself, eating when you’re hungry, eating a wide variety of balanced and enjoyable foods, exercising in a way that’s physically enjoyable, it’s all about the self-care.
* Model for kids a balanced approach to eating, that we enjoy all foods, that we eat in ways that are enjoyable and also nutritious, and that involve treats.
* Steer clear of diet culture, a view of human value being tied to a number on a scale.
* Shame is heavily correlated to people who overeat so think carefully about how you address overeating.
* When adolescents take an interest in managing their weight, they often go looking for guidance online which can be problematic. They are likely to come across harmful “thinspiration” and “fitspiration” posts celebrating slim or sculpted bodies, or even sites that [encourage eating disordered behaviour](https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/18/4/2186).
* Eating disorders don’t discriminate. They affect every socio-economic group and ethnicity. Historically, we have thought of this as being a disease that affected girls but boys are having the same troubles but they tend to talk in terms of getting fit, getting lean or being muscular.

**ADOLESCENTS AND EMOTIONAL CONTROL**

* Normalise the full range of emotion adolescents experience.
* Spectrum from the most pleasant to least is an expectable and essential aspect of human experience.
* Be careful not to mistake extreme emotional intensity which is natural to adolescence as psychological fragility. They can be dramatic!
* Widespread message that mental health means feeling GOOD has led many parents and teenagers to worry that feeling BAD is grounds for serious concern.
* 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 given the situation.
* We can be confident in their overall emotional health so long as:

1. They have feelings that make sense in light of their circumstances.
2. They find adaptive ways to manage those emotions - hold themselves together quite ably at school and then at home can finally let themselves fall apart.
3. Rely on a range of defences that offer relief without distorting reality – circuit breakers to ease emotional discomfort e.g. humour, externalisation managing a difficult emotion by getting someone else to feel it instead (often the loving parent).

**STRATEGIES TO HELP TEENAGERS REGAIN EMOTIONAL CONTROL**

* Distraction = wise strategy for emotion regulation.
* Distraction valuable way to reduce stress caused by a problem with no easy solution.
* Think of other activities which they can do to get the worries to quiet down a little: plan your perfect summer, play an online game, watch a favourite movie or think about how you’d redesign your bedroom – let your teenager’s wonderful mind get occupied with something other than the thing that worries them.
* Being of service to others helps – it is hard to be sad and useful at the same time.
* Setting aside “worry time” can also be a helpful strategy. Pull the young person’s thoughts away from what’s upsetting them by designating a specific time-limited space to concentrate on them.
* Be disciplined and set a time to talk about worries with you for 10 minutes after dinner initially this might need to be every day but then you stretch it out.
* Distraction presses pause and allows teenagers the chance to put their worries into perspective.
* Neurological developments in the teenage brain cause adolescents to feel everything more acutely than the rest of us do so when your teenager is obviously unhappy but not in the mood to talk don’t underestimate the power of tiny, soothing treats.
* Deliberate breathing, so useful! When we are overwhelmed by emotion one method that can help is to breathe deeply and slowly.
* Our nervous system comprises two networks, one of which is the sympathetic network which responds to our moment to moment experiences and when we perceive a threat, activates.
* The part of the brain that perceives threats is reptilian and it’s not very discriminating. 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.
* We talk about taking us out of “fight and flight” and into “rest and digest” mode. Eventually, anxiety will quieten and the parasympathetic network will activate and calm your body down.
* Breathing deliberately, deeply and slowly starts the engine of the parasympathetic network.

**MANAGING SCREEN TIME**

* Nobody parenting a teen today has direct experience of this from when they were young.
* We do not use tech the way our teens do: that’s a factor in our bewilderment.
* Teens are innately drawn to screens because it offers connection.
* Picture isn’t clear on impacts emotional health – some studies say more screen use = more mental health problems, others say digital technology can actually contribute to their sense of wellbeing.
* Much research is correlational, meaning it can establish a relationship between tech and adolescent moods but it can’t prove that one of these variables causes the other.
* A correlation between phone use and depression could mean that teens who spend a lot of time on their phones are more likely to become depressed or that teens who become depressed start spending a lot of time on their phones.
* 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? 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.
* Having technology in the bedroom overnight undermine sleep and using devices behind closed doors and especially at night seems to invite trouble.
* FOMO: acknowledge the tension here but know that it will decrease because of the power of peers working.

**A BRAIN UNDER RECONSTRUCTION**

* Understanding what’s behind challenging behaviour that teenagers are capable of makes it easier to know how to respond.
* This is about a brain under reconstruction.
* By the end of adolescence the brain has been overhauled and upgraded.
* BUT this upgrade does not proceed evenly throughout the brain – it is first geared towards the lower, evolutionarily ancient parts of the brain and only later to more sophisticated, higher ones.
* One of the first areas to be upgraded is the limbic system, home to the amygdala which is tasked with evaluating incoming information and generating emotions and it can be a bit clunky!
* Later the renovation moves on to the prefrontal cortex – the bit of the brain responsible for planning, decision making and maintaining a sense of perspective. BUT, that happens by the time they are in their 20s.
* Unfortunately all this neurological change happens at the same point as Separation-individuation.
* Separation = building an identity distinct from your parents – establishing your own brand. When parents’ branding does not align with teen’s emerging brand it is really annoying.
* Individuation = having a brand that is wholly distinct from ours.
* Put together separation and individuation are a no-win situation for parents in which everything we do is annoying!

**STEALING**

* Stealing is not about you and your parenting—it’s about your child and the inappropriate ways they’re choosing to solve their problems at the moment.
* One thing that may help is recognizing that both lying and stealing are more about lack of effective problem-solving skills than moral issues or character flaws.
* It is important to hold children accountable for the behaviours and even more important to help them develop more effective coping and problem-solving skills. Understand that your child is using faulty thinking as a way to solve their problem.
* When you catch your child using this faulty thinking, you can say:
* *“Just because you want something doesn’t mean it’s okay to take it without asking.”*
* And then ask:
* *“What should you do next time?”*
* It’s important that you don’t allow your child to keep what they took. They should *never* benefit in any way from taking something from someone else. You don’t ever want stealing to pay off.
* No matter what parents you have, no matter what mental health diagnosis, no matter what stage you’re in, it’s wrong to steal because it hurts others.
* Stealing within the family should have the same consequences as stealing from a store, whether it’s from a sibling or a parent.
* Labelling, yelling and name-calling does not change the behaviour. Discussions about the rights of others and respect for other’s property, followed by a consequence the child must carry out, are the preferred ways of dealing with theft in the family.

**ADDRESSING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR**

* Teens who do this are doing exactly what they should which makes it a lot less personal than it feels.
* It’s not good for teens to feel that they can get away with treating people badly but when they are behaving like this try the following:
* Engage as little as possible.
* Instead of responding to rudeness, offer choices of how they can interact: they can be friendly, tell you what’s wrong whilst being civil or let you know they needs space.
* When you act in ways you regret in the face of this behaviour apologise, in the process you are modelling how to make things right.
* Think about how you react if your child acts as if nothing has happened. You might want to re-visit how they have been but there is a lot to be said for enjoying them and having them enjoy you when they’re being pleasant.
* Don’t hold a grudge. Teen moods shift so quickly that it’s easy to feel furious at them for something they’ve already forgotten. The more we can be with them moment by moment the better.
* Teenagers are likely to keep things to themselves if they have reason to think will come back at them with any version of I told you so.
* Listen to your teen’s feedback about your shortcomings, they are usually spot-on.

**SELF-HARM**

* 17% of teenagers engage in self-harm on a regular basis, some studies say that up to 60% will try it at some point.
* This is fundamentally an attempt at coping, a way of discharging anger against themselves, punishing themselves or, for those who feel numb, an act that brings them back and able to feel again.
* At least a third of those who self-harm are boys
* In girls hatred of their body is often a trigger
* We see it more in children who are sexual and gender minorities
* Adolescent emotions are really powerful and they can be very destabilising for teenagers.
* They can feel easily overwhelmed and they can be really impulsive.
* Critical question to ask is whether it is accompanied by suicidal thoughts.
* The key is not to be afraid of distress, whether you’re an adult or teenager. Distress is a part of life, it is inevitable, we can’t avoid it. We can cope with it in ways that bring relief but don’t bring harm.
* So the script is something like this: We can talk about this, you can explain to me but here’s what I know, you’re doing this because it works for you, you’re coping with something – I am all for you coping with distress, we need to find a way for you to cope whereby you’re not getting hurt and really put the emphasis there and the attention there – let us find a way for you to cope in which you don’t get hurt.
* Don’t push it away, don’t dismiss it, don’t shame the child.
* Really settle in for a conversation about what else could you do when you feel like hurting yourself.

**WHAT CAN I DO AT HOME TO SUPPORT MY CHILD'S MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING?**

* One of the best ways to support your child’s mental health and well-being is to know the common triggers 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.

**HELPING WITH CRIPPLING ANXIETY**

* 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.
* Also, a lot of the time when teams report feeling anxious what they really communicating is I don’t feel calm.
* When people are having an anxious reaction out of proportion to the actual situation their thinking is usually off-track in two ways they are over estimating how bad the situation really is and underestimating their ability to deal with.
* Ruminating – thinking constantly, repetitively and fruitlessly about a painful subject is exhausting and needs strategies.
* Imagining the worst-case scenario, whilst it can’t change an unwanted situation, 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.
* Amongst anxious or depressed teenagers researchers found that learning to regard emotions with detachment, to adopt a perspective of noticing feelings, not denying them but also not engaging with them brought significant relief.
* 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.
* Research - 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, especially it seems in my experience with boys.
* Addressing emotionally charged topics by text gives teenagers less pressure. They don’t have to look at us, they can take as long as they need to answer and a written response may result in a far more precise account of how they feel and they would ever communicate in person.
* Some teenagers are extremely reserved at home but chat happily with friends or trusted adults outside the family. Whilst painful, if your teenager is expressive with others, you probably don’t need to worry.
* Show your teenager how to talk openly about hard things by doing so yourself. We know that what gets modelled at home makes a real difference.
* Roses and Thorns Practice – Lisa Damour to describe best and worst parts of your day.
* Teenagers who don’t like to talk really don’t like to be put on the spot.
* Steering clear of direct questions. So instead of “how are you feeling about your upcoming test?” ask “what are others saying about the test?”
* And when they say “I don’t know” - they may not know or they may be communicating “I do know but I have no intention of telling you!” – “fair enough, I’m here if you want to think about it together.”
* Save your questions for times when you and your child are not face-to-face: drive or a walk, side-by-side.
* The abstract nature of emotions makes them especially challenging to talk about compared to asking questions about facts and events.
* Go gently and try not to be dogmatic. “ I wonder if” you’re feeling a bit down, “I sense that you might be frustrated”
* Promise adolescents a very high degree of confidentiality at home. Our teenagers deserve to have a place where they can process, or at least dump, delicate details about themselves and about the other kids with whom they must find a way to coexist.
* To account for adolescents who need time to think about what they’re feeling, build in some space between your question and their answer “you’ve not seemed yourself the last couple of days, if you want to chat at any point this weekend I’m here.”
* Value non-verbal expression. Some teenagers use non-verbal tactics for emotional tension: physical activity, creative outlets, more on this later.
* Listening to music as a way of managing feelings is really helpful. Teens use playlists they’ve created to shake off a bad mood and it’s backed up by research: the immersive emotional experience of listening to music has been found to speed the adolescents through and out the other side negative emotions.
* Lend support in other ways. A favourite drink, our quiet company, an invitation to watch their favourite movie.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

* Let’s remember that mental health is not about feeling good all the time.
* It’s not always easy for teenagers to accept that they will at times have to live with some emotional discomfort.
* When our teens become upset, our intention should be to help them manage their emotions well: gaining relief from destabilising emotions by finding healthy ways to express them and taking a break from unwanted emotions by using healthy tactics to bring them under control.
* As parents we cannot prevent emotional pain in our teens. I would say our role should be helping them manage discomfort when it comes rather than banish it altogether.
* It isn’t necessary or for that matter even helpful for us to remain thoroughly unruffled by everything our teenagers bring, there are times when it is entirely appropriate that our faces should show just how unhappy we are with a teenager’s poor judgement.
* It is also the case however that we should make ourselves a secure base that adolescents can count on when they need to psychologically regroup and one of the ways that we do that is by accepting that emotional upheaval is a central tenet of adolescence.
* Finally, Remember that descriptions of adolescence emotional pain which can be really quite vivid and disturbing don’t add to their emotional distress, they reduce it.