

Teens and COVID: Challenges and Opportunities Part 1

Assembled by SSIO-USA Mental Health Professionals for SSIO members

Teens face unique challenges as they struggle to cope with the COVID pandemic. Social distancing is especially hard for teens who may feel cut-off from their friends. They may also be facing big let-downs as graduations, proms, sports seasons, college visits and other long planned events are cancelled or postponed. To summarize, here are some emotional themes that adolescents/young adults have been facing during this time:

- Grief and loss- around significant life events.
- Boredom- Lacking engagement due to repetitive activities.
- Anxiety- over uncertainty; heightened emotions and mood issues.
- Hopelessness and helplessness- every decision about COVID made without their consent.

Watch for signs your teen may need more support

Teens who feel sad, depressed, hopeless, nervous or angry, during the COVID-19 pandemic may need more support. Be aware of the signs of mental health problems in teens such as frequent irritability, changes in weight or sleep and/or eating habits, repeated thoughts about an unpleasant event and conflicts with friends and family.

Children react, in part, on what they see from the adults around them. When parents and caregivers deal with a disaster calmly and confidently, they can provide the best support for their children. Parents can be more reassuring to others around them, especially children, if they are better prepared.

“Children have unselfish love; they are innocent onlookers; they observe the actions of the elders and learn their lessons from the home much earlier than from school. So parents have to be very careful in their behavior with the children and between themselves.” ~ Sathya Sai Baba

Parenting strategies for teens

Help teens manage their emotions. Whatever emotional experience your child is having is ‘OK.’ Be mindful of your own emotional experience first. Our emotions create the environment of the home, e.g. your anxiety about COVID. Ask yourself: What do I need to do for self-care to keep myself mentally on track? Here are some parenting strategies to help teens:

- Pay attention: to mood changes in teens- children will express emotions in any form or outlet to convey their moods.
 - Look for any small changes in emotional expression including eating habits, sleep changes, aggressiveness, and other behaviors.
 - Try to determine what they actually need through expressed anxiety, anger, and depression.
- RAIN acronym (Tara Brach)¹- steps to help teens get their needs met.
 - Recognize what is happening- some emotional turbulence and/or subtle changes.
 - Allow the teen’s emotions to be there, just as is, non-judgmentally.
 - Investigate- delve deeper into what might be happening for the teen- this takes time, patience, curiosity, giving the language of emotional expression to the teen.
 - Nourish/Nurture- the unmet need that is uncovered in this process.

If emotional issues are unresolved, they will manifest themselves in other ways.

- Model balance through self-care and inner peace. “First be, next do, then tell.”
- Clarify Expectations- not that teens will like this, e.g. telling them we need to ‘shelter in place’ to slow the spread of the virus. Expectations may need to change through time.
- Engage- Help teens to find creative solutions to the challenges they are experiencing.
 - “Am I making a decision based on fight or flight due to fear/panic, or am I being reasonable and creatively engaged toward a solution? I can’t do that if I am in the panic/fear mode.”
 - “Sit back” and help create that perspective for adolescent.
 - Say to teen: “What can we do to creatively problem solve so that we can reclaim that loss?”
- Affirm and celebrate- Be completely sincere- affirm/celebrate that they’re making it through this as they implement positive solutions.
- Work together to create a new normal - Help your teen create a healthy and productive routine.
 - Stick to a schedule that works with online learning. Set a time to wake up, exercise, shower, get dressed, have breakfast, or whatever they need to start the “school day.” Like they would be in class, phones should be off while doing schoolwork. Keep the TV off during school hours, too, and limit time watching the news. Plan mini breaks and a 1hour lunch break.
 - Make dinner a transition time between the "school day" and the evening. Dinner is a great time to gather the whole family together to talk and share a meal. Try fun conversation starters, such as, “My favorite part of today was...” or "Today I am grateful for..." Or, enjoy quiet time.
 - Allow "down time". It's normal for teens to crave more privacy from their family. Give them space for some quiet time, creative time, music time, or to virtually hang out with friends. This can help ease any feelings of being isolated from their friends or difficulties with routine-change.

Young people today are totally oblivious to the importance of dedicating their lives to great ideals. It is up to the parents to endeavor to make their children lead purposeful lives ~ Sathya Sai Baba

References

Resources ~ RAIN: Recognize, Allow, Investigate, Nurture ~Tara Brach <https://www.tarabrach.com/rain/>
 American Academy of Pediatrics <https://www.healthychildren.org/>
 Center for Disease Control <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-lifecoping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>
 Webinar: Parents, Kids and Mental Health During the COVID-19: <https://youtu.be/TL7Jr5LPjNE>