

## Adolescents – When to Really Worry

We have written articles about resilience in the past, and in a way, this is another one. However, the increase in the level of anxiety in both students and their parents in recent years has prompted us to again address the questions, 'What is normal teenage angst?', 'How do we help?' and 'When should we really worry?'

While it is our natural instinct to protect our children from harm and from hurt, it is really important that we educate them about what to expect from life and, in particular, from their adolescent years.

Life can be tough, things can go wrong, people can be unkind, life can be unfair, and some people get more than their share of hardship. We know these things are true, now as much as they have ever been, and can affect us at any age. And how well we manage these stressors can seriously impact our mental well-being at any age.

Adolescence brings its own complications to the mix with the rapid changes that are occurring in the body and in the brain throughout these vital, formative years. During this time, and for no particular reason, it is reasonable to expect that your teen will experience some anxiety about their appearance, body shape, growth and sexuality. They may be self-conscious and over sensitive, seeing perceived defects (which are hardly recognisable to others) through their own magnifying glass. They may begin to withdraw from the adults in their life, as they start to see you through developing adult eyes. They may even become vocal in their criticisms of you, your own relationships and parenting methods.

Communication may become reduced, even monosyllabic, and they may develop a desire to keep their life 'private'. It is reasonable to expect mood swings and even the odd angry outburst. To you, your teen may appear to be out of control; they will almost certainly be feeling 'out of control' (not that they are likely to tell you this). Adolescent Psychiatrist Dr Michael Carr-Gregg puts it rather articulately when he says:

'A teenage brain is not just an adult brain with a few kilometres on the clock, but a rather high powered one with steering problems AND faulty brakes'.

It is normal for adolescents to become very interested in their peers, as they try to fit in and establish their own identity and individuality. They often turn to music, fashion, hairstyles, body piercing, tattoos and risk-taking to do this. They are not very good at reading emotional cues from each other, or from you, and can sometimes misinterpret relatively innocent remarks as personal criticism. As they reach later adolescence and are on the way to establishing their own identity, they generally realise that you are not the enemy. If you have managed to keep your relationship intact, they will look to you for guidance, strategies and support in setting future goals.

So, how do we maintain our relationships while we are being shut out, judged and rejected? How do we keep our reluctant teenager safe, and how do we know when to really worry?

It is never too early to teach our children behaviours, thought processes and strategies which will build resilience. But we need to do just that. Resilience needs to be both taught and modelled. Children need to transition into and through adolescence forming a positive identity. They need to establish a set of good friends, they need to develop meaningful goals for their future, and (here's the hard one) they need to break some of the emotional bonds and dependency that tie them to their parents.

We can best support our teens through these difficult years by:

- Encouraging positive thinking. Positive self-talk promotes self-esteem and confidence. Support your child by modelling this yourself. Commend effort.

Acknowledge when things are tough. Let them know when they are doing a good job. Be encouraging, for instance, 'You've had a lot of homework this week and a few late nights getting it done. Well done. Let's make sure you have some time out this weekend'.

- Help them to find what they are good at. We all need regular activities which we enjoy and do well. Sport, art, music, dancing are probably the obvious ones, but not the only ones. Activities such as these build self-image and confidence. They also bring them into contact with like-minded peers and expose them to good adult role models or mentors.  
Young people need an adult they can talk to. Someone they trust and who makes them feel safe, valued and listened to. It doesn't have to be a parent. It may be an aunt or uncle, grandparent, teacher, or coach. Someone in the adult world with whom they feel connected and who provides a positive role model.
- Teach your child to be emotionally intelligent. Help them to recognise and to talk about their feelings. Normalise these. It is unrealistic and not normal to be happy all the time. Start when they are young. Help them find the right words if they struggle to do so. Encourage your child to own their emotions as a normal part of life and not to blame others for them. Model this.
- Model confidence in your own ability. If you put down and disparage your own efforts and usefulness, it is reasonable to expect your child to do the same. Be honest about times when things have been tough or scary and say what you've done that got you through. Help them deal with set-backs. Don't 'fix' things. Normalise their feelings of frustration, annoyance, disappointment, hurt or anger. Help them to express what they are feeling. Just listen, without judgement or advice. Restate your belief in them. Let them know you are there and will help them get through. Explore options, help them make plans. Gently remind them of the things they love and suggest they take some time out doing those. Encourage self-care, regular sleep routine, good food, some fun exercise and time with friends.
- Grow self-respect. A child who believes he/she matters will expect to be treated respectfully by others and is likely to be less vulnerable to bullying. Self-respect grows out of setting standards for behaviour and how you treat and speak to each other in your home.
- Empathy, respect for others, kindness and fairness are also linked to resilience. The resilient child doesn't always need to go first, get the highest score or win the game. A resilient child can enjoy another's success and offer genuine congratulations to their winning opponent. Of course, they will experience disappointments but will tend less to dwell on these and be less likely to measure their own worth by what they win and who they better. A child who demonstrates these qualities is more likely to make friends, be liked by others and importantly, like themselves.

Remarkably, the vast majority of teenagers survive their adolescence unscathed. So, how do you know when to really worry?

First up, trust your instincts. You know your child best. You are best placed to notice changes in behaviour that are cause for alarm. Keep the channels of communication open (as best you can) and learn how to talk in an adolescent-friendly way. This connection to their adult care giver is vital.

Dr Michael Carr-Gregg, in his book *When to really worry*, suggested the following warning signs are a cause for concern that should not be ignored.

Friendships:

- Withdrawal from normal/usual social events

- Absence of friends, sudden change in peer group or secrecy around friends
- Hanging out with significantly older friends
- Having friends who self-harm or use illicit substances

#### Inner World

- Pervasive sadness
- Inflexible thinking
- Sudden personality change
- Substance abuse
- Obsession with death/suicide
- Inability to bounce back after stress

#### Family

- Overly dependent on one or both parents
- Intense hatred of one or both parents
- Refusal to negotiate rules or boundaries
- Frequent conflict with siblings and other family members

#### School

- Sudden decline in academic performance.
- Refusal to do or lying about homework.
- No relationship with teachers.
- Hatred of school.
- Refusing to go to school or truanting.

#### Internet

- Sexting
- Internet addiction
- Possessing, transmitting violent or degrading sexual images
- Lying about internet use

Other signs that you might notice, or might be brought to your attention by others, might include:

- Tearful, sullen or out of sorts for 2 weeks or more
- Appears to lose interest in life and no longer seems to enjoy the things that give them pleasure
- Difficulty sleeping
- Apathetic or excessively tired
- Shows persistent, uncharacteristic irritability
- Extreme obsession with appearance or food
- Gains or loses lots of weight
- Engages in uncharacteristic delinquent, thrill seeking or promiscuous behaviour
- Repeats seemingly pointless behaviours
- Makes comments like, 'I don't want to be here anymore', or 'Soon I won't be a problem for everyone'.

We are always happy to have a conversation if you are concerned about your child. Please don't hesitate to contact us here at school. We know you love your children and that

sometimes it is difficult to know which is the best way to act. Never be afraid to seek a professional or second opinion if you are unsure. Find a youth-friendly GP.

We have relied heavily on Dr Michael Carr-Gregg's work in the writing of this article, and we would also like to draw your attention to two good websites where you can tailor your questions:

<https://parents.au.reachout.com/common-concerns>  
<https://kidshelpline.com.au/parents>

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