

How to Support Teenagers as They Head Back to School

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FULL TEXT

Adolescents are readying for the next step in a seemingly endless set of challenges. Here's how to help them regulate their emotions.

Many teenagers are feeling understandably upset as they face a third school year disrupted by Covid-19. Some are frustrated about the return to masks and other precautions. Others are nervous about how they will stay safe at school, or worried about eagerly anticipated activities being postponed or canceled. They might be angry about the seeming never-endingness of the pandemic. As adults in their lives, how should we be trying to help them handle all of this turmoil?

First, let's accept that any of these emotions, however unpleasant, are not harmful or grounds for serious concern. Rather, they are almost certainly evidence of mental health; teenagers who are unhappy about how this fall is shaping up are likely having the right feelings at the right time. What counts is how they regulate these feelings.

How teenagers express and contain emotions

If you have teenagers in your care, think about their swelling emotions like the water in a cresting river: You want to keep it moving but not let it burst the banks. At times, adolescents will need to express their distress and frustration freely. In other moments, they may need to contain powerful feelings that threaten to leave them feeling flooded.

On their own, adolescents regulate their feelings more effectively than they tend to get credit for. They often keep their emotions flowing simply by talking about what's bothering them. In these moments, adults sometimes let our protective instincts get the better of us; we respond with alarm or advice when it's usually more helpful to tune in and empathize. If a teenager tells his dad that he's feeling discouraged by the pandemic's persistence, the father might recognize the value of just letting his son vent, instead of trying to "fix" things. Listening intently and offering genuine compassion may be all that's needed to keep his son's emotional waters from building up.

Not all teens are talkers though. Adolescents looking for psychological relief may need a good cry to release their frustration about the havoc caused by the pandemic. Others might temper their emotions by engaging in intense physical activity. So long as it's safe, don't be put off by how young people discharge psychological tension. You might not love the sound of heavy-metal music coming from your kid's room, but research shows that listening to sad or angry music can help young people process and ease distress.

It's critical that adolescents find effective ways to express their feelings, but that is only half of what it takes to regulate emotions. They also need to make use of adaptive strategies that contain feelings before those emotions become overwhelming. For example, a teenager might quiet her nerves about the unpredictable academic year ahead by meticulously organizing her school supplies. Another kid might take a break from worrying about the Delta variant by getting lost in a book or TikTok videos.

What adults can do to help

Especially in the psychological monsoon of the pandemic, many adolescents won't be able to regulate their feelings entirely alone. They might sulk in silence and need encouragement to open up, or they might become distraught and need support to regain their composure. For those times when adults need to step in as emotional civil engineers, here are some tested methods that can help teens express, or contain, their feelings.

To get feelings flowing:

- *Get out and about* If a teenager seems to have shut down, you might help get their feelings flowing by going for a walk or a car ride together. Teens can be more inclined to share what's close to their hearts when they don't have to make eye contact.
- *Keep them off the emotional hot seat* Young people can also be more communicative when they're not put on the spot. You may get a fruitful, if indirect, conversation going by asking a teen what she's hearing about her classmates' worries instead of posing direct questions about her own. And some adolescents will communicate a great deal about what's on their minds, but only when you inquire by text.

To prevent emotional floods:

- *Serve as a sandbag* In adolescence, short meltdowns are to be expected. Teenagers sometimes seem to be drowning in feelings because the emotion-generating part of their brains can readily outmatch their ability to maintain perspective. By being a calm and patient presence, a parent can often help an overwrought teenager gain control over a surge of distress. When adults offer their quiet company, or gently ask if the teen might want some fresh air, they communicate confidence that high emotional waters typically recede on their own.
- *Try distraction* Sometimes teenagers need help to just stop focusing on a problem. Talking about what's wrong may offer some adolescents relief, but in other cases, ruminating only leaves them feeling worse. When a teenager goes from contemplating a problem to agonizing over it, distraction is a perfectly appropriate and healthy tactic. A parent might suggest that the teenager set the issue to the side, go do something fun or useful, and then, perhaps, return to the topic at a later point.

When to be concerned

So long as teenagers can express and contain emotions in ways that provide relief and do no harm, you can trust that they are regulating their feelings effectively. This is true even if they need support from adults —and even if they are often upset. So how can you tell if it's time to worry about a teenager's emotional health?

Put simply, emotions should not be controlling a young person's life. Adolescents who become so swamped by anxiety that they cannot do the things they want or need to do —such as enjoy time with friends or focus on their school work —should seek professional help. Likewise, teenagers who are at the mercy of low or dark moods, or pose a danger to themselves or others, require and deserve the care of health professionals.

You should also keep a watchful eye on teenagers whose emotions seem hopelessly dammed up. Persistently refusing to express feelings or working actively to inhibit them has been linked to poor mental and physical health outcomes in adolescents. When they seem to have no healthy way to relieve the near-universal distress caused by the pandemic, or rely on substances to numb their inner lives, it's time to seek consultation with a health care provider.

It's an understatement to say that living under Covid-19 has been a long, stormy season for adolescents and those who care for them. As we enter this new, still challenging phase of the pandemic, families might take comfort in knowing that the goal is not, and has never been, to banish uncomfortable feelings. The aim is for teenagers to regulate their emotions, sometimes on their own, and sometimes with the help of loving adults.

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