

Supporting Your Teen During the Pandemic

We are months into the COVID-19 pandemic, and many of us are trying to find ways to stay positive through our worlds have been derailed. While some have become adjusted to this “new normal”, others continue to struggle with social distancing restrictions, financial instability, and the tragedy that has been brought on by this disease. A lot of households are stir-crazy. We’ve played all of our board games, solved all the jigsaw puzzles, and have watched every family movie imaginable. Some of us are following news feeds religiously looking for hope that our lives will return to their regular routines, while others are realizing that our lives will never be the same again.

This derailment has especially affected the teens in our lives, especially our seniors in high school. Whether your teen woke up eagerly for school every day, complained about having to go to school every day, or begged to stay home, their academic year has been snatched away from them. Major events like prom, sporting events, and graduation have been postponed or canceled. This is a jolt no one expected.

I have the privilege of working with teens as an adoption worker and a dance instructor. In the field of adoption, my

heart breaks for teenagers in the foster care system whose lives are already so uncertain. Living through a pandemic is retraumatizing as their routine has been broken and they are plagued with the question they ask themselves so often, "What happens next?" Any ideas of stability they once were able to cling to have disappeared. I hear sounds of defeat and apathy when I speak to them. Though they are one of the most resilient subgroups in our population, even they have become weighed down by the pandemic. As a dance instructor, I meet with teens virtually every week and hear their cries for normalcy. One teen told me she was waking up from her daily "depression nap" to take a virtual dance class. My seniors in high school fearfully ask questions like "Do you think we'll ever return to the studio?" "What will we do about the recital? Am I going to be able to perform again?" I'm sure similar questions are being asked by teens who are involved in other extracurricular activities. This is a scary, unpredictable time for our youth.

Think about your teenage years. What was important to you back then? How did you cope when life got stressful? Were you an honor student who participated in as many school activities as possible? Even if school wasn't your cup of tea, did you enjoy socializing with your friends on weekends? Some of us had the responsibility of taking care of our households at an early age. Imagine having that responsibility amidst a pandemic. No matter how "adult" we

thought we were as teenagers, I'm sure we would've been at a loss, as some of us are now, if we had to live through a pandemic like the one we are facing. It's important to show empathy towards the teens in our lives who are trying to cope as best they can.

So how do we help? How do we support the teenagers in our lives when they are asking us to give them answers? They are begging for security. We may not have the answers to all of the complicated questions the pandemic has presented, however, being present for our teenagers is so important during this time. Let's be honest. Raising children of any age group has its own challenges. If you have a teen in your home, you've already experienced their teenage angst long before this pandemic arrived. With such uncertainty and minimal activities to process, I'm sure this angst has increased. As we are trying to manage our own sanity during quarantine, we can easily become dismissive of our teens and label their bereavement as dramatic. When we experience the changing moods of our teens, it's easy to send them to their room so you don't have to "deal" with their emotions. I challenge you to do the opposite. Listen. Even if it's the third time they've told you about how their sports season was cut short or how they didn't get to finish the art project they were working on in school. They need to feel like they have a voice, and the best people to validate their emotions are their parents/guardians. Be open to

sharing about losses you've experienced during the pandemic or even past losses. Brainstorm ways for your teens to stay connected, not only to your family, but with their friends. Thankfully, social media is a great way for teens to stay connected while separated. Allow your teen to positively stay connected to their peers.

Even if your teen has never experienced any mental illness symptoms before the pandemic, it's important to learn the warning signs. According to the National Alliance of Mental Illness (nami.org), 50% of all lifetime mental illnesses develop by age 14 and 75% develop by age 24. Quarantine can be an incubator for mental illness. Factors like isolation, a lack of physical activity, hypervigilance of proper health precautions, and constant reminders of mortality via news reports can all contribute to the deprecation of mental health. Pay attention to the unhealthy patterns. If you see patterns of your teen isolating themselves and showing increased symptoms of irritability, perhaps it's a good idea to have a conversation with them, or at least give an open invitation to talk. Sometimes separating from family members is necessary and very healthy. We all need alone time. However, if the separation is excessive and you see clear changes in your child's personality and mood, there may be a bigger issue at hand. Some symptoms of depression you may see in your teen include hopelessness, a change in eating and sleeping habits, loss of interest in

activities that used to bring them joy, anger or irritability, and thoughts of death or suicide. If your teen is experiencing anxiety, it may present itself as constant worrying or irrational fear, insomnia, or panic attacks. If you see that your teen is having any of these symptoms and they are not able to manage the symptoms on their own, it is time to seek help. Remember that just like any physical ailment, we all get sick sometimes. If you see signs of depression or anxiety in your teenager, it is not something for them or you to be ashamed of. Being able to talk openly about depression and anxiety with someone you love is a great way to cope. Similar to physical illnesses, some ailments can be treated at home and others need professional help. Do not be afraid to seek professional counseling. If you feel your child needs extra support, please contact Discovery Mood & Anxiety. We offer online TeleHealth Treatment through the Zoom video conferencing app. With the gift of technology, your teenager can talk with a therapist from the comfort of their home through virtual counseling. This is a tough time for all of us. Though your teen may not say it, I'm sure they are struggling too. Reach out and give as much support as you can. They will thank you for it, if not now, then later.

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wellness. April has a BA in Sociology and has worked as a therapeutic staff support, family-based counselor, and drug and alcohol counselor before transitioning to child welfare, where she helps foster children and foster families process past traumas. April is passionate about the arts and spends her evenings teaching dance classes to all ages.