



EXTENSION

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Helping adolescents with their negative emotions

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What is adolescence?

Adolescence (ages 10-18 years) is an age marked by key developmental changes (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). For instance, brain maturation increases advances in cognition, such as abstract thinking (Steinberg et al., 2006). Teens experience physical and hormonal changes in their bodies, which can influence how they see themselves and how others perceive them (Pfeifer & Allen, 2021). As children develop, their ability to understand a range of emotions increases (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002). Moreover, they become more aware of their own emotions. At the same time, teens become more skilled at controlling their emotions compared to younger children (Eisenberg et al., 2008).

Why are these changes important?

Changes in the brain during the teen years affect how young people feel and how they get along with others (Steinberg et al., 2006). The part of the brain that helps with thinking, making decisions and controlling emotions (called the prefrontal cortex) doesn't fully develop until a person is in their mid-20s (Paus, 2009). Because of this, teens may take more risks and have more mood swings. Another part of the brain that controls emotions like fear, anger and pleasure is more active during the teen years (Steinberg et al., 2006). This can make emotions feel more intense and make it harder to handle stress.

Puberty brings changes in hormones that can affect mood, sleep and the body's reaction to stress (Sadeh et al., 2009). Not getting enough sleep can make it harder for teens to control their emotions (Yang et al., 2023). Lack of sleep increases the risks of mental health problems like anxiety or depression (Xie et al., 2025).

The teen years are a time when emotions feel stronger, but the brain is still learning how to handle them (Steinberg et al., 2006). During this time, the brain builds stronger connections based on habits. If teens use unhealthy coping behaviors, these habits can stick around and cause problems later in life (Wingo et al., 2015).

Suggestions for adolescents

Use healthy coping mechanisms

One suggestion for teens is to maintain healthy coping skills. For instance, deep breathing exercises, journaling or doing physical activities can help relieve stress.

It's OK to talk about your emotions

Be open about your emotions with your friends, parents and/or trusted adults. Take time to explain the personal boundaries that you want to keep in your life.

Setting boundaries for yourself

Set boundaries for yourself with those around you. It's important to take time for yourself. You are important!

Recognize and accept your emotions

It is important to recognize and accept your own emotions. Try not to suppress or bury them, even if they are uncomfortable. Negative emotions are not bad things. They can be natural reactions to the world around us.

Express yourself through art and music

Another idea is expressing yourself through art and music. These types of expressions do not always require words. Moreover, art and music can help you gather your thoughts and learn how to cope with stress.

Find reliable social connections in life

Having supportive and reliable relationships in life is important as it allows you to talk and share about what's going in your life. These people may be grandparents, older siblings, coaches, teachers, counselors, ministers or even a friend's parent.

Suggestions for parents

Be a good role model

Even when life is stressful, try to be calm. Your teen is very observant and can see how you deal with stress and negative emotions. They know when you are in control of your emotions. Your teens can learn healthy habits from you. Moreover, they may open up more to you when you are calm.

Be interested in your teen's daily lives and emotions

Try to keep an open mind and nonjudgmental with your teen. Be interested in what they are doing and feeling. Your teen likes it when you are interested in them.

Create a supportive home environment

Create a home where your teens can freely express their emotions. Teach them how to process their feelings when you are not around.

Be available for your teen when they have life issues

Be there for your teens when they are having a stressful day. Try to help your teen in problem-solving rather than fixing the problem for them. Offer advice if they ask. They will appreciate your help, and will become more independent.

Encourage healthy ways of coping with stress

Encourage your teens to recognize daily stress and know how to cope with it. It's a good idea for you to use healthy coping skills when you are having a bad day. For instance, exercising, meditating and doing fun hobbies are healthy ways of dealing with stress.

Teens need to understand that they are not alone

Consistently be there for your teens. Listen without judgement to what they have to tell you. Treat this relationship as a safe space to share for them. Moreover, it's important to remind them that they are not alone, and that you will always be there for them. Share with them how you handled stress and negative emotions as a teenager and today as an adult. It's important they see you as a real person who always cares and is there for them.

Online mental health resources for parents and teens:

- Crisis text line: Feeling overwhelmed, text HOME to 741741. It is a confidential text-based mental health support and crisis intervention line. <https://www.crisistextline.org/>
- Teen line: This program provides resources for young people through a hotline of trained teen counselors. Teens get help from other teens instead of adults. <https://www.teenline.org/>
- Suicide prevention lifeline: It is free 24/7 confidential support for people in distress with crisis resources. Either call or text 988. <https://988lifeline.org/>
- Other resources for teens and their parents are family readiness and advocacy centers. They are another great asset if you want to see a counselor. Advocacy centers in Oklahoma:
 - <https://cacok.com/>
 - <https://okcountycasa.org/>
 - <https://carecenter-okc.org/>

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