

How do we support teenagers during the Corona Virus outbreak and the impact of isolation?

Introduction

Many teenagers will struggle with isolation. Below are some tips / guidance on how to support your teenager during these difficult times and allow them to see the bigger picture.

Teenagers have developmental motivations that can make the process of isolation at home much more challenging. The hormonal changes that come with puberty conspire with adolescent social dynamics to make them highly attuned to social status and peer groups.

Friends feel like everything for many teenagers which can make social isolation even more challenging. Losing contact with friends and not being able to 'hang out' can have a negative emotional impact. Many teenagers resent being treated like children. A key desire for many teenagers is to be more independent from their parents. Hence many teenagers will struggle to follow the new guidelines for social isolation which can lead to increased tensions with parents and stress within the home.

What can we do to encourage teens to comply with social-distancing measures and reduce tensions within the home? I'm sure many of you are already implementing the following advice.

Advice

Treating teenagers like competent young adults may produce benefits during these challenging times which can be encouraged by the following:

- **Expecting them to contribute to your household in meaningful ways.** They can help with meal preparations and household cleaning and keeping family spaces clear of their belongings. They can also help with cleaning by vacuuming and wiping down the counters. Displaying positive behaviours towards their siblings and reducing conflict is a meaningful contribution for the whole family. Planning fun activities for the family to do together will also help to promote harmony within the home environment.
- **Allowing them to manage themselves, their own schoolwork, and their other responsibilities without undue parental pressure.** Parents should set clear expectations and help establish a structure and support they need to operate under current conditions implemented by the government. Parents should also continue to engage with them. However, it does mean that we give them the space to operate freely within the limits agreed by the family.
- **Ask them to help us with our work.** One easy way of doing this is explaining the importance of meetings in the world of work. Many parents will be working from home and holding online meetings where constant interruptions with questions or issues which are not urgent can become increasingly frustrating and a source of tension. This

can be resolved if the importance of such meetings is explained to your teenage son and any issues can be dealt with after the meetings have been completed.

- **Using non-controlling, non-directive language.** A positive way to approach this is by asking questions phrased in the following ways: “Is there anything that I can do to help you get some exercise today?” “What’s your plan for getting your homework done?” This makes it clear that they are still in control of their own behaviour, and it helps them connect to their own motivations and intentions. Often teens simply need to make a plan, and sometimes if they aren’t asked to articulate it, they won’t do it— especially those who are used to being nagged because they know their parents will eventually get frustrated and do their planning for them.
- **Acknowledge that all of this is *so challenging*.** Many students coming home from school are experiencing great losses right now. Their feelings of grief, anxiety, stress, and isolation are hard to cope with. One of the great lessons of adulthood is that they can do challenging things.
- **Recognising the role of Social Media.** Ensure down time and allow them to maintain contact their friends via Social Media etc. This will help to reduce their feelings of isolation. However, this does need to be monitored closely as Social Media can be misused and its overuse can have negative impacts such as interrupting sleep patterns. Teenagers should be encouraged not to use electronic equipment after 9pm as the research suggests this has a negative impact on sleeping.
- **The following are possible comments which can be said to a teenager who is resisting isolation:**
 1. We know that you want to see your friends. We know that you are bored and lonely.
 2. We hope you see clearly that you are not a passive actor here, along for the ride. Your actions are directly affecting the course of this crisis.
 3. We are wondering: What do you truly care most about in this crisis?
 4. Who can you help, and who are you concerned that you might harm? How can you use your skills to help the world right now?
 5. Your grandchildren are going to ask you about the role you played during this pandemic. What will you tell them?
 6. Show them news reports coming out of Italy and the USA which emphasise the need to stay at home.
 7. Help them see that this is not about what they want or expect from life. It’s about what life is expecting from them. We expect them to rise to the occasion; to be a part of the solution, not a part of the problem.

8. Help them understand that the best outcome right now is that the virus is brought under control before our hospitals collapse.

Summary

Teenagers are going to learn important life lessons. We are teaching our children both directly and through our own example how to take responsibility both for ourselves and our immediate family, but for our local and global community, as well.

We are all being called to demonstrate our character and commitment to others and to the wider society. Our young people have a key role to play as well and now can reveal their full potential.

The above has been adapted from the work of:

Christine Carter, Ph.D.

She is the author of [*The New Adolescence: Raising Happy and Successful Teens in an Age of Anxiety and Distraction*](#) (BenBella, 2020), *Raising Happiness: 10 Simple Steps for More Joyful Kids and Happier Parents* (Random House, 2010).