



The Pandemic and Kids' Mental Health

Tips and Strategies for Supporting a Teen's Resilience

Listen more than you talk. When you create opportunities for children to talk openly – and listen with your eyes and ears (putting down your technology) – adolescents are more likely to tell you how they're feeling.

Encourage new skill-building. Learning something new – to cook, play chess or other skill – helps teens to compensate for some of their temporary loss of independence. When a child works hard at something, improves, and is acknowledged for the achievement, self-esteem is boosted.

Encourage acts of kindness. Doing for others helps adolescents thrive: an errand for an elderly neighbor; soccer skills practice with a sibling; litter pick-up in the neighborhood. Helping others generates positive emotions and regulates teens' moods.

Acknowledge missed milestones. It may seem a teen is overreacting to activities missed through the pandemic such as a theater production, birthday party, or sporting event. When you validate feelings of loss, frustration or sadness, and remind your child of future milestones he or she will enjoy, your child feels heard, valued and a sense of hope.

Talk openly about alcohol and other drugs. When young people use substances to cope, they aren't learning to handle emotions in a healthy way. You can open up a conversation with a general question such as, "What are you learning in school about alcohol and other drugs?" Or "Are any of your friends experimenting with substances?" You can then ask a more specific question like, "What would you do if you felt pressured to use drugs?"

Watch for mood changes. If you note a change in your teen's moods or behavior, check in with open-ended questions: "I notice you're spending more time in your room. Can you tell me how you're feeling?" "You seem more frustrated than usual. Can you tell me about that?"

Be open about depression and suicide. Suicide is a leading cause of death among 10- to 24-year-olds. Any time children talk about life not being worth living, it's important to seek immediate professional help. Avoid brushing off comments with, "Oh, you don't mean that!" Rather, let your child know he or she is not alone, and while bad times may feel like they'll last forever, they're temporary. Talking with teens about suicide doesn't make it more likely to happen; it makes it less likely.

Know when to seek professional mental health support. Adolescents are often moody. But when moodiness persists and symptoms are ongoing and worsening – difficulties with schoolwork, sleeping more or sleeping less, or other persistent change in typical behavior – check in with your pediatrician or mental health professional.

Practice self-care. Even a few minutes of quiet, or deep breathing can calm your mind and help you to better manage incoming stress. Be mindful of staying connected with a trusted friend or partner with whom you can be honest about your emotions. As the saying goes, "A problem shared is a problem halved."

Check out [*Words Can Work*](#) products to support conversations with young people. Produced by [Jeanne Blake](#) with our advisor Dr. Paula K. Rauch and other experts from McLean Hospital and Massachusetts General Hospital.