

Teen Stress: How Parents Can Help

You may not be able to relate to their stressors, but you can definitely help them cope.



By Laura McMullen^[1] Feb. 17, 2014 Comments SHARE

Watch any John Hughes movie, and it's easy to dismiss teen stress as a melodrama of hormones and prom dates. In reality, teenagers have a lot to fret about, including, to be sure, what parents may perceive as melodrama. But even if parents can't quite relate to them, the fact is, many teens are stressed, maybe as much as their parents.

In fact, in the American Psychological Association's "Stress in America" survey^[2]^[3], released in February, teenagers rated their stress during the school year at an average of 5.8 on a 10-point scale, while adults averaged a 5.1, and 3.9 was considered a healthy stress level. And whether you're 14 or 41, too much stress is not particularly fun or healthy^[4] for anyone.

To help your teens manage their stress, you first have to understand where they're coming from, and it doesn't require a seance with your class ring and REM records. Just know that their lives are changing, often in dramatic ways. "They have a bit more independence and more freedom, and with that comes more responsibility and decision making, and that can be difficult," says D'Arcy Lyness, a child and adolescent psychologist and behavioral health editor for Nemours' KidsHealth.org. "All that may seem simple to parents," she says, "but for teens, it's all new territory."

Most teens are bidding adieu to the world where parents chose just about everything for them. Now they must decide for themselves between soccer or school play or debate club or church; between studying or sleeping or spending or smoking^[5]; between work or community college or state school or Ivy League.

[Read: Your Kid Smokes. Now What?^[6]]

Not only are teens facing decisions, but as they choose, "They're developing their own inner compass," Lyness says. At any age, how we choose to spend our time and the decisions we make seem to reflect our values, and that can weigh heavily on teens. And as they lay this foundation for their adult lives, most teens have no shortage of influencers^[7]. What would mom do? How would grandpa, or my best friend, or my teacher, or Jesus or Katniss Everdeen decide?

This stressful concoction of decision making and transitioning to adulthood — not to mention puberty — brews continuously inside teens. On top of that, teens face situational stressors: an F on their pre-calculus test; a friend talking behind their back; a coach benching them; a prospective college costing too much.

If some of these stressors seem like John Hughes-grade worries compared to those in your life, remember that this isn't *your* life. If you work in an office nine hours each day, trouble at work would likely worry you, right? Most teens spend much of their time at school, and so the academic and social troubles between those walls are a big deal. Plus, "Many teens don't have a lot of downtime to relax and regroup, and everyone needs that in their lives," Lyness says.

[Read: How to Tell If Your Kid Is In Trouble^[8].]

Still can't relate without dusting off your yearbook? You and your teen might stress

about the same stuff and not even realize it. In a 2013 HealthFocus International study, about 60 percent of teens said they worry about their parents' financial situation. Forty percent worry they won't be able to find a job after they complete their education; and 60 percent agree that it's up to their generation to save the planet.

If you're a little surprised by these numbers, you're not alone. "How can parents even know what's stressing their teen?" Lyness speculates. It's a tough question, especially because "teens don't articulate that to parents, and because they're trying to be more independent, they may come to their parents less readily." So, parents should come to them — in small doses.

"Have that day-to-day, friendly, open conversation about nothing," Lyness says. "It's not prying or fault-finding. It's: 'How's your day?'" Check in daily, and if you can, share regularly-planned activities. Walk the dog, grocery shop^[9], cook dinner, run or simply drive your teen to band practice. Doing these seemingly small activities together "sets the stage for easy conversations, and then your teen is more likely to talk to you when they need your help," Lyness says. "You're never going to go to your parents if it's more of a squawking relationship."

[Read How and Why to Make Small Talk^[10].]

Notice, too, when your teen is grouchy, slamming doors and complaining. And before chalking up their behavior to typical teenage hormones, Lyness warns: "Maybe it's just hormones or typical adolescence, but either way, adolescence is really stressful. It's not just hormones in a vacuum ... there's still a context for what they're going through."

Instead of immediately finding fault in their attitude, try your best to recognize that these actions are likely signs of stress. (Don't you get a little grumpy when your mother-in-law visits, or when your boss criticizes you^[11]?) Ask in a supportive tone: "How can I help?" Lyness suggests.

You can likely help by showing teens' stressors in perspective. Don't dismiss their stress, but "help them think: How can I solve it and move past it?" And if they come to you with one of those many new decisions they're facing, remember that it's not about you. "Parents will have their opinion, and it's OK to share it with their teen, but it shouldn't be front and center," Lyness says. Responding to their dilemma with "here's what you should do" may have worked when they were 10, but not anymore. After

hearing that advice, it's unlikely that your teen will come back for your input again.

Instead, "Listen more than you advise," Lyness says. "Help draw out your teen's opinion." Try something along the lines of: "You seem to have mixed feelings. Why don't you tell me both sides," Lyness suggests. Of course, there are exceptions to this approach, like if the teen is making a dangerous decision and a parent must lay down the law. But in most cases, parents should be able to offer some counsel, but mostly support, as their teens talk through their stress. By learning how to make these decisions, Lyness says, "they're learning the process of dealing with stress, managing multiple responsibilities, growing their independence, and still being able to ask for support and guidance when they need it — and we never outgrow that."

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