

ARE OUR TEENS COPING WITH SOCIAL DISTANCING?

'Psychology Today' explains what occurs physiologically in the teenage brain.

Firstly, from a basic biological perspective, teens and young adults do not yet have command of the full set of executive functions, especially those related to planning and considering future consequences.

The prefrontal cortex is not fully developed until the mid-to-late 20s, which leaves many teens and young adults prone to impulsivity and unlikely to consider consequences that an older adult would contemplate.

Secondly, from a socio-emotional standpoint, many teens and young adults are in the developmental stage of identity formation (Erik Erikson). It is critical for them to have the opportunity to discover who they are, set their own boundaries, and establish their own values and beliefs - apart from those of their parents. They are often separating from their families, both geographically and socially, because they are developing their own identities. During this time, they may test the rules and boundaries imposed on them by parents and other authority figures - not because they want to be contrary - but because they are trying to answer the fundamental questions of

"Who am I?" and "What can I be?"

Thirdly, many teens and young adults may feel like they are unique and invincible - this is known as the personal fable. They may believe that no one has ever gone through anything like they are going through, and an illusion of invulnerability may make them believe that the COVID-19 virus could never affect them. Again, this is a common psychological phenomenon, but it may make them appear self-centered and increase the likelihood of impulsive behaviour.

So what can you do when your teen or young adult wants to defy government, or parent-mandated sanctions, regarding COVID and social isolation?

School was temporarily suspended for teenagers around the country and there is still no sense of when things will go back to normal.

Although teens may be putting on a tough front, many may be mourning the loss of

missed school, routine, friendships and peer interactions.

Lockdown means no school outings, no camp or Shabbatons, no in-house jokes and a loss of school-cultivated memories. For Matrics, as stressful as their year is, it's also a time in which the most valuable memories are accumulated.

Teenagers are naturally social beings, and whilst we are all struggling with missing our families and friends, it may be a particularly difficult transition for teens who are redefining their social lives and foregoing important rites of passage. These years are a critical part of development. Not being able to see friends, go to school events, play sports, can cause major disappointment, depression and anxiety.

We can all remember how important our friends were between 14 and 18 years of age.

As parents, how can we support our teens through this time? Especially if they struggling to express themselves and their frustrations is manifesting as anger and irritability.

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She gives us some guidelines on supporting our teens during this time:

1. Explore alternative ways to connect. Although nothing may completely replace what's been lost, a growing number of virtual events offer ways to stay connected in a less traditional format. Parents shouldn't force these ideas on their kids but be supportive in helping them explore virtual substitutes such as parties, get togethers, virtual braais and online game night.

2. Talk about the fact that this is a temporary situation. There will be opportunities to create different memories and more so, to create memories and narratives of this pandemic for future generations.

3. Be empathic: Parents may be tempted to remind their kids that they are lucky to be healthy during a worldwide pandemic and that in the big picture, missing a sport

event/ shabbaton etc isn't such a big deal.

But that is not helpful and not what they want to hear. Saying those words minimises what teens are feeling. And their feelings are not wrong. Although it seems logical to us, for teens it could feel like the end of their world.

The key is for parents to provide empathic listening for their teens, and also emphasize that you feel their sadness and loss.

4. Embrace technology: Technology rules shouldn't completely go out the window – parents should still be mindful of what platforms their children are using and make sure they are being safe.

But it's OK to somewhat relax the rules since kids will now rely on technology daily and for longer periods for school. And this might be a time when it's OK for teens to spend a little more time on social media and their phones to stay in touch with peers. Their phones are possibly their only access to their friends.... which for teenagers is their life-blood.

5. Teenagers tend to feel invincible, and they are likely to be well aware that the coronavirus is not as problematic for their age range as it is for older people. Parents are reporting a lot of pushback when teens are told they can't go out and get together with friends. The fact that data actually is on their side, that the coronavirus is less severe for them, is a problem in terms of realizing that if they become asymptomatic carriers the impact that could have on others might be severe. To emphasize this, encourage your teens to think outside of themselves. The more concrete your encouragement, the better. For example, you could model empathy and benevolence by writing letters to residents in nursing homes or assisted living facilities and have your teen join you. Or have them call their grandparents or loved ones so that they can hear the voices of people whose lives might be at risk if they get the virus from someone who is seemingly healthy and symptom free. If you give them opportunities to help and empathise with others, it may help them see beyond their own social woes and get a better sense of the bigger picture.

6. A lot of anxiety comes with lockdown. Give your teens the space they need and create room for them to share their worries. Listen without judgment (or without reassuring them that everything will be fine).

Allow them to feel miserable and frustrated. It's perfectly natural to feel that this is unfair. If you find that your child is exhibiting signs of depression or anxiety, reassure

them that they are not alone. If you think they may be in crisis or needing professional help, point them to trusted resources: mental health providers have geared up to provide online mental health treatment. The Chev 24 hour hotline contact no is: (082) 499-1010.

All in all, for reasons that are not really their fault, teenagers seem to have pulled the short straw in this pandemic. They are naturally and appropriately seeking independence, which often includes defiance.

The frontal lobe of the brain is still developing, which means that skills like impulse control, delayed gratification, and realizing the consequences of actions are not fully in place and they are very reliant on, and influenced by, their social networks.

So naturally, this is a difficult time for our teens. Let's bear with them, understand their outbursts and not take them personally and react! Let's empathise with their feelings about the injustice of their situation.

By being there for them, you are building their resilience and we will all come through this stronger, with improved connectivity and teenager / parent relationships.

