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## **Overwhelmed by Your Teenager? Welcome to the Club!** **Top Tips for Parents with Struggling Teens**

By Jaclyn Rink, MS

It took me many weeks of merely thinking about this newsletter article before I actually sat down to write it. Simply, because it felt overwhelming. What in the world would I write about while trying to compose an article for parents who are struggling with their teenagers? There are about a billion different dilemmas that could be discussed, a million questions to be answered, and most often, when we feel like we have FINALLY figured something out; surprise! Our teen's mood changes. We end up totally thrown off track, with a whole new set of questions.

As I was stressing over what I was going to say to you, I realized that how I was feeling probably mirrors a sentiment that you feel every day being a parent of a teen: overwhelmed. Additionally, we are probably having some other similar thoughts, such as, "what am I supposed to say to them?," "when am I supposed to find the time," and the infamous, "I am not good enough," (which all of us feel at some point in our parenting careers).

I've been a practicing child psychologist for the past 5 years, and if I've learned one thing, it's that parents often just need someone to help them wade through all of the messy, complicated details of their teen's life. Most of the time, they have the skills to appropriately help their child, as well as the gut instinct to know what it is that they need. Unfortunately, so many other things can get in the way to cloud that innate parental judgement, especially when your teen has a history of depression, suicide, and/or self-harm, which causes parents to become extra careful with what they say and do (rightfully so). Many of my parents who live with troubled teens describe the feeling of being at home as "walking on eggshells," never knowing when something is going to crack. So, in order to save the chickens and help you navigate through the craziness of it all, here are some of my favorite, most simple tips for helping your struggling teen.

- **Allow your teen space to talk to you without judgement.**

This seems like a pretty easy one. However, parents tend to have trouble taking a 15-minute break from parenting or giving advice. Many of my teen clients say things to me like, "all she ever does is tell me what to do, and I just want her to listen," or "he just tells me what it was like for him growing up. He doesn't understand." Just like everyone, teens want to be heard. They want to feel like you understand what they are going through, without being given advice or being judged. Simply put, let your teen talk. Tap into your empathy skills and use reflection statements to paraphrase what they have told you, so they know that you are



listening and understand. For example, saying “so what you’re telling me is (insert here)...that must have been really stressful for you” can move mountains with your teen. Don’t worry, I’m not telling you that you can never give advice or parent ever again, but taking a break for 15 minutes can lead to a much different conversation than you are used to with your teen. Trust me, there will be plenty of other opportunities for you to use your parenting skills.

- **Spend one-on-one time with them doing something that they enjoy (even if you don’t love it).**

This is your home base, the foundation of your wheelhouse. When all else fails, come back to this tip. Allow your teen to pick something they would like to do (e.g., video games, shopping, watching YouTube, sports) and actively join them in that activity. A lot of times, we force things onto our kids because WE think it’s fun or good for them, and sometimes, that’s ok. However, doing something that your child picks out and really enjoys (even if you dislike it) allows for them to feel like you are a part of their world, and in relation to the tip above, they feel like you understand them better. Take 15 minutes, put parenting aside, find your inner teen, and hang out with them. This is bonding at its finest.

- **Don’t bother to discuss a topic when your teen (or you) are angry or emotional.**

Cue the laughter as you tell me, “But Jaclyn, isn’t this all the time?” I totally get that your teen is always irritated about something, but we all can tell the difference between being annoyed and seeing red. If your teen is screaming at you, crying, or talking total nonsense, do not use this as an opportunity to teach them a lesson, provide a punishment, or get your point across. Now, I know it can be tempting in the heat of the conversation, but research has shown us that once a child’s heart rate gets over 180 beats per minute, they actually have a hard time hearing us. The logical systems of their brain physically shut down, and they are only thinking with the emotional parts. If this starts to happen, disengage, allow yourself and your teen time to cool down, and re-convene the conversation when everyone is a little more level-headed. This prevents both you and your teen from escalating the situation, saying things neither of you mean, and/or handing out punishments that are difficult for you to follow through with. No lessons can be learned from these types of interactions.

- **Know the difference between normal “moody” teen behaviors, and more concerning ones.**

This is one of the hardest things to decipher. What is normal, moody, teen behavior and when should a parent be more concerned? The biggest sign a parent can look for is a *big change in your teen’s behavior*. If your child spends 60% of their time in their room, and this has always been the case, there is only a small cause for concern. If your child is generally fairly active with the family, and *suddenly shifts* to spending 60% of their time in their room; something is



happening. Additionally, if they jump from 60 to 90%, I would also be somewhat worried about this. Whenever you see a big change in behavior, *it's a nonverbal sign that something is going on*. Also, your teen (most likely) doesn't want to talk with you about things going on in their lives. This is a normal, although frustrating and hurtful behavior (review tip 1 with the hopes of opening up the door for more conversations). However, your teen **SHOULD** be wanting to talk to someone; friends, siblings etc. If they are not talking to anyone, then there is cause for concern.

- **Don't hesitate to seek help.**

Whether it's professional help, a parenting book, a support group, or even just a venting session with a trusted friend, seek help as often and as necessary as needed. As a parent, you need all the support you can get, and your teen may need some additional support, too. Don't hesitate to make an appointment with a psychologist or therapist if your gut tells you something is off. Additionally, if your teen makes any comments about wanting to "talk to someone," or if they mention feeling depressed, anxious or suicidal, seek professional help immediately. Teens often struggle to communicate, so when they do (even in the slightest), it's important to listen.

At McCaskill Family Services, we offer a variety of services to support both you and your struggling teen. Our skilled psychologists can provide individual parent coaching, family therapy and individual therapy for your teen. Additionally, we run a 5 week-long parent support group variably throughout the year for parents who are facing similar challenges. Please visit our website for more information on our services and group dates.

Happy Parenting. You've got this.