

## Parents and teenagers at a time of Coronavirus

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### Contents

1. Making sense of teenagers' emotions
2. A brief guide for parents
3. Tips for parents about communication
4. Tips for teenagers about communication
5. A quiz for teenagers to complete

#### **1. Making sense of teenagers' emotions**

It is clear that this is going to be a tough time for many teenagers. Most young people will have lost all the usual structures and are now physically separated from their friends and in constant close proximity with their family. This experience is difficult for them. Their expectations of what would be happening this spring and summer have been blown out of the water.

#### Feeling cheated

- Although it may seem strange to some adults, it will be common for young people to feel that they have been cheated out of important experiences that they were owed. They may be missing the last term at school, or even the last part of their university education. They have also been separated from face-to-face experiences with their friendship groups. If you are young, these experiences loom very large in your world.

#### Feeling angry

- Because of this, many will feel angry. Even if they recognize that it is no one's fault, angry feelings can be over-whelming for teenagers. It can feel extremely unfair for this to have happened to them and their friends. It may be easier for adults to see the larger picture. Adults can recognize that this will be over at some time in the future. For teenagers, however, this will seem like the whole of their life that has been taken away from them.

#### Feeling anxious

- There is also the question of worry and anxiety. Will my parents stay safe? What about my grandparents? Am I safe from the virus? Of course, adults will have these feelings too and teenagers will pick up on their anxiety. Adults will worry about elderly parents, or have fears for their own health. However, the emotions of young people may be harder for them to cope with.

## Teenagers and emotion

- Why is it harder for teenagers to manage their emotions? One reason is that at this age the structures in the brain that process and manage emotions are still changing and developing. These structures are not yet completely mature so it's harder for teenagers to manage emotional outbursts or to see the bigger picture. For some teenagers it's also hard for them to empathise or see the adults' point of view. Hormones also play a part in helping us manage our feelings and the hormone balance for teenagers is more variable than it is for adults.
- It is also important to recognise that young people will have experienced a real loss at this time. This is part of their life that they will never get back. It is very tough, especially at a time when they are changing and maturing. Adults will also struggle with many challenges at this time, it is just important to recognize that the challenges for teenagers may not be quite the same as those for adults.

## **2. A brief guide for parents**

Being stuck at home for weeks on end will be a huge test for all families. Even if parents and young people get on reasonably well, there will be many problems that arise because of being in the house or flat day after day.

### Space

- However small or cramped your home, try and find a space for a young person to feel that they can own and have some control over. If they have their own bedroom, allow them more freedom than might be the case in normal circumstances.

### Time – routines

- One way to manage anxiety is to create daily routines. This is true for us all, but especially for teenagers. Do think through with your teenager how a daily routine can be created. This also applies to night-times of course, thinking about bed time routines, when to get up and reducing or stopping the use of electronic devices.

### A structure to the day

- It is sometimes assumed that teenagers do not need structure. This is incorrect, in fact, a structure set by adults makes young people feel safe and cared for. Teenagers may argue against it, they may even say they hate it. But a major role for parents is to create boundaries and structure for teenagers, they need it.

### Autonomy



- As well as structure, of course, teenagers do need some sense of autonomy. This needs to be appropriate to their age. However, finding ways of allowing young people to make some decisions, and helping them to recognise that they do have a role in the family will really help. This is especially important when so many day to day choices have been taken away from them. As well as being a potentially stressful time it is also an opportunity for your teenager to get creative, develop an interest or learn a new skill – they may be able to teach you or a member of the family.

#### Individual differences

- Not all teenagers are the same. This may seem an obvious thing to say, but there will be huge differences between individuals in how they experience the current situation. This will be influenced by their personality traits, gender, age, interests, and underlying mental and emotional health. If parents can keep in mind the varying and individual needs of their teenagers, that will help everyone manage relationships at this time.

#### Screen time

- The simplest thing to say about this is – do not worry too much about screen time in these circumstances. We are all living through the on-line world. Teenagers need all the contact they can get with their friendship network and of course school work is now being delivered on-line. The digital world is a life-line.

#### Social media

- The same goes for social media. What we say in normal times is true now, do talk with your teenager about what they are doing on-line. Open communication is important. If you are worried about how much they are gaming, for example, do discuss this with them. Parents should keep an eye open, but also allow more freedom than would be the case in normal times.

#### Eating and sleeping

- Things like eating and sleeping are often markers of how young people are coping. It is good for parents to be alert to how these might have changed, is this due to changes in routines or is it an indicator of emotional difficulties for your teenager. Where possible keeping familiar routines is helpful. Don't be afraid to discuss emotional or health worries with your teenager, talking about such matters shows the young person that you care about them and their welfare.

#### Looking after your own emotional health

- This is a potentially stressful time for everyone in the family, and it may also be providing some new opportunities. It's important for the adults in the family to find ways to look after their own needs, whether these are physical, social, creative or intellectual. Finding small ways

to meet these needs during the day will increase your capacity to manage day to day life and your relationship with your teenager and will also provide a good role model for them. Making the most of any opportunities to have some fun together is so important for everyone. And when the emotional temperature is running high, finding a way to step away and enable everyone to take time to calm down will be crucial.

**3. Tips for parents about communication**

- Talking is important but.....
- Teenagers do not want to be lectured or to be interrogated
- Connect first – showing empathy for your teenager’s feelings will help
- Teenagers like to talk at times that feel good for them
- Teenagers like to know that they are being listened to
- Teenagers do need to hold some things back till they feel safe to open up.

**4. Tips for teenagers about communication**

- Talking is important, but .....
- Parents want to listen, but they may sometimes find it hard to really listen
- Let them know you want to talk, but when it feels right for you
- Encourage them to talk about themselves, not just to focus on you
- Let them know what you need from them. It is ok for you to let them know that
- If you feel uncomfortable talking to your parents, try and find someone you trust. Sharing your fears and worries at this time is SO IMPORTANT.

**5. What can you do?**

As a start, teenagers can use the quiz provided here. This should be a way of starting to talk about some of the feelings they may have at this time. It should also lead to a discussion of anything that could be improved to make things a bit more manageable in the family.

# QUIZ (a tool to get you talking)

For teenagers - complete this by circling a number that represents your feelings. Share the reasons for your answers with someone in the family who you are able to talk to. Maybe ask them to complete it too and share your answers to see where they're similar and where they're different.

I FEEL SCARED ABOUT THE VIRUS (1 = I feel very scared, 5 = not scared at all)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

I HAVE LOTS TO DO NOW I AM AT HOME (1 = I have lots to do, 5 = nothing to do)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

I FEEL ANGRY ABOUT WHAT HAS HAPPENED (1 = I feel very angry, 5 = not angry at all)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

I THINK THERE IS MORE I COULD DO TO HELP MY FAMILY (1 = there is more that I could do, 5 = I am doing all I can)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

I FEEL CHEATED BECAUSE OF THE VIRUS (1 = I feel cheated, 5 = not cheated)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

I FEEL CLOSER TO MY FRIENDS NOW (1 = I feel closer to my friends, 5 = not as close to my friends)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

I WORRY ABOUT MY FAMILY BECAUSE OF THE VIRUS (1 = I worry a lot, 5 = I do not worry about my family)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

I FEEL LONELY NOW THAT I HAVE TO BE AT HOME (1 = I am lonely, 5 = I am not at all lonely)



1                      2                      3                      4                      5

I AM ANXIOUS ABOUT WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS FOR ME AFTER THIS VIRUS IS OVER (1 = I am really anxious about the future, 5 = I am not at all anxious)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5