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Helping Teens Survive Lockdown

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Most teenagers dream of going to university, of improving themselves and their life prospects. There, they will meet new friends and push boundaries as they complete their journey from adolescence to adulthood.

But Covid-19 means that most have had their freedoms curtailed – ordered into what amounts to solitary confinement, one day merging into the next with only their laptop for company. Many admit to loneliness – in extreme cases some will inevitably feel depressed. Most frustrating is that they know they are highly unlikely to fall seriously ill with the virus, and that their sacrifice is to protect others, particularly those much older than themselves.

Hundreds of thousands of teenagers are not returning to school in January and many are worried about their GCSEs and future job prospects in a post-pandemic economy. Many will also be concerned about friendships interrupted. We have all had our lives interrupted and been forced to adapt to lockdown, but for teenagers, lockdown can be more difficult. Quarantined, many have lost their sense of purpose.

Some have pointed out that previous generations had to live through the real trauma of years of war, surviving in inhospitable and filthy conditions, whereas all today's teenagers are being asked to do is stay at home and watch movies for six months. But unlike our grandfathers, who risked their lives on deadly battlefields, today's teenagers do not have the benefit of the kind of comradeship that kept their grandfathers going against infinitely more dangerous odds. This 21st century battle is taking place in the loneliness of teenager's bedrooms, where they stare at computer screens, their lives temporarily on hold. According to the University College London Institute of Education, the older they are, the more they feel it, with 19-year-olds suffering the highest levels of loneliness, anxiety and depression.

Some teenagers have also had to deal with the loss of older family members. Some will struggle to come to terms with loss of income in their family. For those who may already struggle with anxiety or depression, the pandemic will have likely disrupted treatment. In early January 2021, the Royal College of Psychiatrists noted record numbers of referrals for child and adolescent mental health problems, and increase of nearly 20%. There are serious concerns that lockdown might result in too many of this new generation falling victim to lifelong mental illness.

Believe it or not, teenagers thrive on predictability and routine – as they grow emotionally, they need constant reassurance that things will eventually return to normal.

For many teens, not being able to take part in group activities, such as playing in a musical group or in a sports team, may not sound important, but these activities were an integral part of their lives, providing structure and friendship. Many teenagers, aware they are the least likely to fall ill, worry they could be the 'Trojan horse' that brings the virus home to more vulnerable members of the family.

Parents in particular should remember that the impact on teenagers is real. Teens are normally social creatures who deal with the confusions of adolescence on a daily basis – they will be understandably frustrated when forced to miss out on social activities, even if it's just hanging out with best friends. For those teenagers that have just started to date or

drive a car, lockdown will be particularly hard. Lockdown can cause teenagers' mood to follow from boredom to frustration to anger.

The most important thing is to reassure your teenager that they *can* cope with lockdown, and that it is only temporary! In fact it's good to have practice with change, after all, everyone faces changes throughout their lives – those who handle it best, the ones that can 'go with the flow' will often save themselves a lot of unhappiness and heartache. There is no point spending time worrying about things we cannot change. Of course, as adults, we already know this, but teenagers will really struggle with this concept. Instead, they want to jump off the repetitive loop that's going round and round in their heads; they need to distract themselves, to find constructive things to occupy their minds. Other than in general terms, no one can accurately predict the future, and if teenagers try, they will almost certainly imagine a negative one that will serve only to feed their worries.

Teenage brains work differently from those of adults – teenage brains work more on impulse than on logic. Developing independence and freedom is one of the crucial parts of being a teenager – they're more focussed on living for today, having fun, testing boundaries and exploring their identity than following rules, and it explains why they find lockdown so difficult. If you're struggling to keep your teenager in the house and sticking to lockdown rules, you can feel secure in the knowledge that you're not alone!

Teenagers miss social contact, a major part of the growing up process. Imagine seeing your friends every day, and then suddenly not being able to see them at all. Young people are also more likely to talk about their problems with their own peer group, so it's also natural that they might feel their support network has been taken away. Teenagers with younger siblings might also feel they don't have enough space. Or they might feel put upon if they're asked to take care of younger brothers and sisters.

The stress of lockdown is equally tough on parents, who may be feeling more stressed and be arguing more. It's important for both parents and teenagers to understand that *everyone's* mental health is going to be affected by changes in routine, sleep, exercise, eating patterns and more. Teenagers – feeling anxious and stressed – may be leaving the house to stop themselves lashing out or getting upset.

Many teenagers will feel secure in the knowledge that COVID-19 isn't going to affect them, let alone kill them – after all, they're young and healthy, and the media has been telling them they'll be OK, so it's hard for them to grasp the wider impacts that breaking lockdown rules might have. Parents might want to sit down with them and have that talk.

All the things that make school enjoyable and engaging have been taken away – being schooled online just isn't the same. The ability to run around, be creative, and laugh and joke with their friends has been removed. It's also hard for teenagers to comply if they see other young people breaking lockdown rules and meeting up. Summer was the freedom they were waiting for, and having it cancelled and nothing to replace it with was for most, difficult to accept.

To a teenager, relationships can be intense, the most important thing in the world. They can also feel fragile. Relationships can be like being on a rollercoaster – another reason for them to feel they need to escape the house.

The first thing to do is to have an open conversation, but whatever happens, don't get angry with them! Talk to them about why they're struggling to stay indoors – that way you can both try to work out solutions. Always remember – making a huge issue out of things never helps the situation! Threats never work, and will only alienate and anger.

Teenagers often find it easier to talk to other adults rather than their parents. It could be a grandparent or family friend, a teacher or another adult that they respect, in which case, let them talk to that person, because that might be the best way for them to get the help they need.

If there are problems, threatening to call the police will only make teenagers feel like you don't care about how they feel or how hard it is for them and telling them they they will get fined or arrested will only increase their anxiety. Telling them that the neighbours will get angry will only make them feel alienated in their own home.

Likewise, threatening to take their phones and laptops or computer games away will only serve to increase their feelings of isolation. These things may be their main coping strategy during lockdown and their only way of connecting to others. Taking them away will only serve to increase their feelings of isolation and threatening to ground them after lockdown won't work either – because feeling trapped is the cause of the issue in the first place!

Anything that might result in communication breakdown between you and your teen will increase conflict and make teenagers want to get out of the house even more.

Whatever happens, try to avoid criticising them! To a teen feeling low, what sounds to you like a helpful suggestion is more likely to be interpreted by them by them as fault-finding.

It is of paramount importance that you pay real attention to the things your teen is struggling with the most, especially things within the home that could be adapted or changed.

So much for the causes and dangers... now it's time to look at some of the things parents can do to help their teens survive Covid War.

The most important thing is to communicate and whatever else happens, keep all lines of communication permanently open. Always give your children space, making sure they get some privacy at home, away from siblings or older family members. Teens do need their own private space!

1. Talk to them about how they can prepare themselves for their future rather than worry about it. This could include starting to read books relevant to their GCSEs or 'A' Levels, learning new things that will enhance their CVs, and keeping themselves healthy through exercise. You could discuss the things employers might look for in addition to academic grades, such as the ability to work as a team, communication skills, and being aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Try to teach them how they can demonstrate those qualities to prospective employers. Extra study won't do any harm because, the more they know, the more likely it is they'll get the job!
2. Try to understand their frustration over not seeing their friends and talk to them about it. Even though they can't physically meet their friends during lockdown, they can regain some control by arranging regular video calls with them. Having conversations and discussions in groups, which is now possible with online platforms such as Zoom, are better. The more people joining in, the greater the variety of subjects up for discussion. Texting back and forth is a definite no-no! Not only is it time consuming, it creates more feelings of isolation. Words are only part of communication – youngsters also need to see body language and facial expression. You can also help them

organise closed social groups for people your teen is closest to, but let them do it... don't do it for them!

3. Young people have lots of things in common with their friends. They might be doing the same 'A' Levels, or they might both enjoy certain kinds of music. They can take part in these activities online together. If they are bored, they could discuss a new skill they could learn together, for example, sign language. Taking part in activities together leads to enjoyment and laughter! This will also help with those all-important social skills.
4. Playing endless video games is not at all beneficial – they do nothing to stimulate your child's mind. In any case, it's not healthy to allow teens to stay in their room for hours on end – a better, more constructive and stimulating idea would be to encourage them to do something with other members of the family. Healthy eating and exercise is still important, so maybe look for something online that will encourage healthy habits? What about learning to cook, or taking an online course together as a group?
5. If you are worried about what your teenage son or daughter is looking at online, try to shift the emphasis from 'what are you doing online?' to 'what are we all doing online?' It's also important to be able to talk together as a family about the ways online life is supporting them at this time. You should also use take the opportunity to talk about challenging topics such as unwanted contact, online grooming, sexting, or pornography. It's OK to remind teenagers of the basics of internet safety. Staying connected with friends is vital, especially if it includes access to content that helps them exercise, relax or makes them laugh. Concentrating on too many negative news stories, negative posts and fake news will only cause anxiety, making them fearful. It is important they know how to set personal boundaries re the amount of contact they have with others, especially if that contact makes them feel stressed. Spending too much time online may mean they're not getting enough sleep or fresh air. Where there is a problem, intervening early is important – it's much harder to take action if things get too stressful.
6. Spending too much time on social media can also be a problem and too often causes teenagers to start feeling self-critical. Social media is not the real world! Some tell-tale signs include anxiety about their looks, leading to depression and eating disorders. Suggest that if they're starting to feel self-critical, they should switch to another activity. Encourage them to develop different coping strategies – talk to them about the things they find relaxing and encourage them to take part in them.
7. The online world must also work for you as a family – not the other way round! Families, especially single parent families, should schedule time offline together – perhaps preparing a meal, watching a film or playing board games.
8. Unfortunately, teens don't think logically, and their minds work more on imagination rather than on fact. If your child seems overwhelmed with worries about their future, they are likely to be thinking emotionally, which makes them believe these fears must be based on fact. Feeling unhappy in these uncertain times does not mean there's something wrong with them, so it might be a good idea to explain this. Try to understand that their worries are a natural, self-protective response which is linked to the human survival strategy. Imagining the worst makes the mind look for an escape route – a plan 'B'. Life is full of uncertainties and we have no power over big events and even less over a pandemic. So instead of worrying, get your teen to make a list of the things they can't control and come up with positive alternatives they *can* control.

9. Emotions run high in uncertain times, especially during times of anxiety. Try to be aware of mood changes. It's important not to let your teen's mood drive them to make wrong decisions. If teens can learn how to control their thinking when they're in an unstable mood, they will be more likely to make healthy decisions when this is over. Worry can quickly turn to anxiety when teens start to believe they can't cope. At a neutral time, when they're not upset, talk through times when they've overcome tough obstacles. Teens have got a long life to live yet, and they should know that they will have opportunities to make up for this lost time.
10. One solution is to talk to them and get them to understand that lockdown is not a life sentence and that things will return to normal eventually. Now vaccinations are a reality, we have already started on the home run! Your child will get their degree, it will just take a little longer... and everyone is in the same boat, so you're not really at a disadvantage. Remember... the boat isn't sinking, it's just becalmed for a while – soon the wind will start to blow and we'll be sailing on again.
11. The biggest battle for young people is loneliness. Prolonged isolation makes adolescents more vulnerable to self-critical thought. Urgent referrals for young people with eating disorders have hit an all time high. Social media algorithms can flood teenager's phones with more dieting tips and worse! They reinforce unrealistic and unhealthy ideas. If you're talking about COVID, explain the dangers calmly, without sensationalising it.
12. Battling negative emotions during lockdown can make teens feel unstable. No matter what the circumstances, lockdown or not, thoughts, feelings and emotions are always unpredictable, so don't beat yourself up by trying to outthink them. If your teen starts to feel angry or negative about the sacrifices we're all having to make, there is often temptation to look for a quick fix, and this can sometimes lead to making poor choices. If you sense they're feeling scared or unsettled, try to talk to them about the way they feel and offer support. If they can face their fears, negative thoughts will lose their influence. It's all about giving them the confidence to make better decisions... the right decisions. Get them to write a list of things that worry them and then, encourage them to concentrate on the things they like – reading, playing music, indoor or garden exercise, playing board games – anything that involves interaction with others.
13. Achieving small daily goals helps beat lockdown blues and creates a sense of achievement and progress. Even achieving small goals help teenagers feel better. It helps to make a list of goals they would like to accomplish every day and tick them off as you work through them to get that sense of achievement. Get them to focus on the important issues and try and manage those!
14. Try to create a comfortable and familiar routine. This would include regular times for sleep, food, exercise, school work, and free time for family. Healthy eating and regular sleep are important for overall physical and mental health, even in normal times!
15. It is difficult of course to get outdoors, but if there's a chance they can get outside with a friend without breaking lockdown rules, they should take the opportunity – a quick run across the park, or kicking a ball around. So talk to them about the importance of getting out of the house for some exercise. And while they're out, just saying "hello" to a stranger when out, although a small thing in itself, helps prevent total avoidance of social contact, and will help reduce anxiety. Even better, go for a walk together... Getting out of the house together is a good way to connect with your

teen. Even quietly walking together is therapeutic, especially if you go outdoors together as a family.

16. While everyone has their responsibilities within the family, try not to over rely on them looking after younger brothers or sisters. If they do look after them, a small reward wouldn't go amiss!
17. Reward your teen for complying with the rules, for honesty, and for trying! One way would be to plan something big, like a party or celebration, or time away from home when finally we get out of lockdown.
18. If possible, you could increase your teen's trusted circle of friends, extended family or other trusted adults. Who does your child go to with their issues and problems? Someone who cares about your child's health and safety, someone who will offer good advice, and who can help them find good solutions. In addition, make sure they know there is someone they can talk to. Childline offers excellent counselling services but it's important to let your teen know you would be happy if they want to talk to them and not you!
19. Above all, catching up with and staying connected with friends is the best of all the strategies, but it's also important to talk to teenagers about their safety online. Reassure them they can talk to you if they are worried about anything online.
20. Sometimes teenagers and young people will break the rules, but that's not the end of the world. Lots of us will at some stage bend the rules, and teenagers are no different. If they are going out then help them to do it safely! So talk to them about their safety and what to do if adults become confrontational about them being out of the house. Teach them of ways of managing these situations, and remind them to keep their phones charged! Remind them there are less safe adults about, and help them think about how they might get help in an emergency.
21. Talk about how they might see their friends while still socially distancing from them. Explain that they might be worried about their own health. While your teenagers may not be concerned about their own health, remind them that others will be – and they should respect that.
22. If your teenager has gone out without telling you, DON'T overreact or bombard them with questions when they do come home. Just be happy they are home but wash their clothes and make sure they shower before they come into contact with the members of the household. Remember, you are not failing as a parent if your child is still going out. It doesn't mean your child is failing either. This is a difficult time for everyone, and there will be many other parents finding it difficult. If you think your child is being pressured to go out by friends or by people who are threatening them, you can call the NSPCC helpline for parents. They will give you advice on how to keep your child safe.

Lockdown has forced *everyone* to look at life differently, so it's important to encourage teenagers to use the time to consider the things that are really important. When life picks up again, they will have time to think about what they've learned and how they can incorporate this knowledge into their future. Professional athletes do this – they learn to identify the behaviours that support them and those that do not, and then they behave accordingly. The big changes lockdown has brought can be used to keep values at the forefront and help them seek healthy and fulfilling activities in the future.

In spite of all this, there are young people who feel that if they can survive this, they can survive anything. Some even view the experience as being character-building, even though many of them will still have to pay back their £9,000 tuition fees – perhaps not the university experience they were expecting.

While most students expect that things will get better and are still optimistic, news of new virus mutations can cause emotional set-backs, even though most have faith in scientists' ability to get us through it in the end. The school prom isn't cancelled, it's just postponed! And your birthday party can still go ahead, you're just going to have it in the summer, when the weather is warmer and it will be more fun!

Remember... it's not going to last forever and we will get through this. On the other side of lockdown, the new normal is bound to be a challenge at first. But young people are good at challenges – even the ones who don't think they are. Change is difficult for everyone, but your teen will not be doing it alone because you – and all those around them and all those who love them will be there to get used to it with them.

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