

How Parents can Manage Their Teenager's Mental Health During the COVID-19 Outbreak

Tips by stem4 CEO Dr Nihara Krause, Consultant Clinical Psychologist

MARCH 2020: Feeling safe is essential in the effective management of anxiety. The current, ever-changing global health situation can therefore contribute to increasing anxiety symptoms in all of the family. The teen years in particular, need special focus since adolescence can be a time when emotions are experienced intensely. Dr Nihara Krause (CEO of teenage mental health charity stem4), encourages the use of the following tips for parents and carers amidst the pandemic.

1. Explain the nature of anxiety to your teen. Anxiety is an essential emotion we all feel in response to threat. It will bring about a response which affects all parts of our body, our thinking and our behaviour. When anxiety is managed it can be helpful - allowing us to harness it's protective nature to spur us into positive health management.
2. Help them to develop positive self-care behaviours to maintain health and hygiene. This will build their confidence in their ability to protect themselves and learn to take responsible action.
3. Help them to challenge negative thoughts that may make them overestimate dangers, leading to difficulties such as over thinking and over worrying. This means providing them with facts to minimise fear. Make sure these facts are from a trusted, scientific source.
4. Help them regulate the amount of information they have access to through the news, social media and online. Misinformation spreads fast and an 'infodemic' is as unhealthy to the mind as a pandemic may be to a nation.
5. Practicing social distancing does not come easily to teenagers. Risking becoming what may be perceived as 'left out' is probably one of the biggest punishments a teen may feel. Provide a benefit to social distancing such as, for example, being able to do a task they highly value. This will provide an incentive to follow through with distancing rather than make it a punishment to try and avoid.
6. Social media can provide a safe alternative to keeping up with friends, despite it not always helping a young person's mental health. Help your child or young person to place boundaries on their use and keep communication open as to what discussions might be happening on line.
7. Shift the focus to helping others. Providing social support not only increases empathy and helps avoid negative or stereotypic attributions but also helps build confidence in their ability to face difficulties.
8. Challenge compulsive behaviour. Constant checking, contrary to belief, does not help reduce anxiety, instead it fans it. Suggest they scale back on checking phones and the internet for information updates since they can become digital intrusions. Suggest instead that they limit screen time, trusting the adults in their lives to share significant information instead.



9. Encourage searching for positive bits of news and provide feedback on what's going right rather than fixating on what may be wrong. Enhance the development of a balanced perspective.
10. A frightened captain will make a frightened crew so anxious adults should take steps to manage their own tense thoughts and behaviours and counterbalance negative ideas and actions with positive, uplifting ones.

stem4 also provides clinically developed mental health apps that can be accessed anywhere for free. Clear Fear has a range of techniques to help teens manage anxiety whilst Combined Minds helps parents and friends support someone who is anxious. They are based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and a Strengths-Based Approach respectively and are available to download now from both Google Play and the App Store.

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About stem4: stem4 is a Wimbledon based, award winning charity that supports teenage mental health. In order to foster positive teenage mental health, it provides evidence-based education, builds resilience, enhances motivation to change, and signposts to ensure early intervention and action. stem4 focuses on commonly occurring mental health issues in teenagers including eating disorders, anxiety, depression, self-harm and addiction. stem4's work is primarily provided digitally through their innovative education programme, pioneering mental health apps and clinically-informed website. They also host mental health conferences that contribute to helping young people and those around them flourish. stem4 targets and supports families, schools, health professionals and communities as well as the teenagers themselves.

Website: Please see website for more information www.stem4.org.uk

Contact: For further enquiry please contact Juliette Hellman PR at juliettehellmanpr@googlemail.com or Anna, stem4 communications coordinator at anna@stem4.org.uk / 07874350339.