

Who Is That Teen Who Lives With You

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Imagine you are rock climbing without a safety rope and you slip. Your foot slips from the rocky ledge holding all of your weight. Your throat goes closed, your heart pounds out of your chest, your thoughts race furiously and you move into a state of complete panic, at least until you regain your balance and reestablish a footing on the mountainside.

This is what your teen may feel like when life unexpectedly disappoints or harms them. The pressure to do well, fit in, be loved, be accepted, and be noticed may be experienced like a life or death situation. The kicker is that these intense emotions come at the exact same biological time that they need to start to individuate and depend less on their parents. The need to find their own identity suddenly becomes as necessary and important as eating and sleeping.

Call it poor timing...but trying to navigate the world without the help of your parents coupled with an overwhelming need to fit in all the while figuring out your identity is one of the most challenging life-phases. No wonder there are many doors being slammed, music blaring and lots and lots of sleeping...it's no easy feat to embark upon adolescence!

As an adult, if a friend or a group of friends go out for lunch without inviting you...it may sting for a second or perhaps not even bother you much. If this happens to a teen it feels like a tidal wave has unexpectedly come up on them and knocked them down leaving them gasping for air, salt water stinging their eyes, nose and throat. Feelings are intensified and magnified 100% for a teen. The volume of life feels too loud and they have not yet figured out how to turn it down.

“An entire sea of water can't sink a ship unless it gets inside the ship. Similarly, the negativity of the world can't put you down unless you allow it to get inside you”



Countless moments put immense amounts of pressure on a teen, who may also be constantly overwhelmed with expectations to get good grades, be socially involved, be a good friend, look their best, etc. Picture each stressor: a quiz, basketball game, argument with a friend, pimple on their face as another 5lb sack of potatoes in their backpack they simply can never take out. The weight of this is inevitably going to make them feel overwhelmed, exhausted and anxious. This in turn may cause them to lash out in various inappropriate ways.

The worst possible thing to say to a teen is, “It may feel like a big deal now, but really it’s not, you’ll have much bigger things to worry about later in life.” Each individual’s perception is their reality and it does no good to over-generalize and diminish their experience. The best thing to do is to really listen: validate and try to empathize with their feelings. Once some time has passed and you have allowed them to vent or sit in the discomfort with you (or alone), try to help them see that emotions are transient. Explain that there is a flip side to feeling intense sadness, anger, frustration. Without these emotions the happy, joyful, exciting moments wouldn’t feel as good! A person can always take solace in the fact that even though they feel intense sadness one moment, it will not be that intense or last forever.

Because it is difficult to talk about certain things with a parent, finding a therapist to help navigate these feelings and issues can be the best option for your teen. Not only is a therapist an unbiased and nonjudgmental listener, they are also trained to help your teen feel more confident and in control of themselves and their emotions.

Have you noticed that many of us seem to remember negative things and to point out how things are going “wrong” or a person should be “working harder,” but pointing out little to no appreciation or recognition for what is done well? Instead of a parent saying: “You are doing a great job and you must be so proud to have a report card that reflects that!” they mistakenly focus on the negative: “What is up with this C in math, couldn’t you have done better than that?” I can’t tell you how many teens have expressed to me that they wish their parents would acknowledge their hard work! We need to focus more on the positives...it’s good for emotional/psychological development and morale both at home and at the school. We really should be building our children up, not unintentionally tearing them down.

The sooner we are able to accept that our teen is human and therefore flawed we will be able to build them up. We can help them learn from their mistakes; keep them living, learning and thriving. The more we can encourage, help nurture, guide and support them during this tumultuous time in their lives, the greater chance they will develop a sense of personal efficacy, or in other words, an ability to control the “volume” of their lives and ride the wave of their difficult experiences.

With the help of a qualified therapist, such as myself, your teen will have the consistent support, encouragement and positive feedback they need to build confidence. We will help them to eventually navigate life on their own terms and care less and less about what others think or do and more about what they need to do for themselves to be happy and healthy.

The greatest gift one person can give another is to sit with them in support during a difficult moment, empathize that they too have felt similarly and help them “ride the wave” of discomfort, at least until they come out the other end. Don’t try to fix or point out what they could have done differently. I suggest you say in the most genuine and supportive manner, “I know how hard this must be for you. I’m sorry you are in pain. I’m here for you if you need me.” Don’t underestimate the power of unconditional love, acceptance and support!