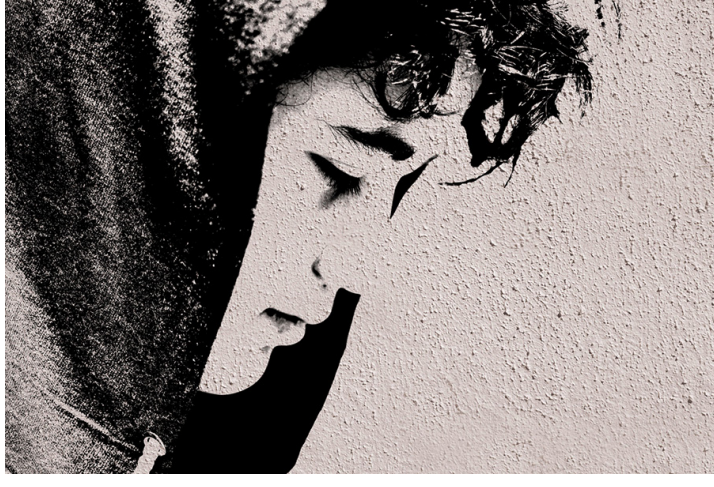




Parenting Your Flailing Teen



These days, there is much discussion about the compounding mental health challenges brought on by the pandemic. Perhaps teens have been hit the hardest. At a very social period of their lives, they've been cut off. Now as the Omicron variant looms, struggling students can once again be triggered by despair and withdrawal. Tuning in to these young people is vital.

"But how do I balance my teen's mental health needs with academic achievement?" you might ask. This situation is especially hard for teens whose grades tanked last year under the pressures of distance learning. Getting them back to pre-pandemic activity might be hard. Underneath their resistance to school might be guilt, shame, loss of opportunities, disconnection from friends, loss of status, and the feeling that they are too far behind to catch up. These complicated and debilitating feelings require a great deal of understanding, affirmation, and support from adults. Teenagers should not be expected to snap out of it on their own.

1. Remember, your teen's anger and resistance come from a place of fear of failure. Try not to take it personally. They are scared and ashamed.
2. Deal with what is beneath your anger first. What are you afraid of? Look at your own shame and guilt around the situation.
3. Approach your teen with respect and a sincere desire to help. If the relationship has been damaged, work on it. Get help from a therapist if necessary. It is important to re-establish trust.
4. Do your best to step into your teen's world, their mind, their feelings.
5. Look past the excuses, BS, and outright lies they may tell you. Recovery will take support, counseling, deep listening on the part of the parent, and a plan that your teen helps develop.

How to recognize damage in your parenting relationship

1. Each argument, each message of disappointment, each veiled threat, puts a little wall between you and your teen. Eventually that wall becomes impenetrable.
2. You frequently hear, "You just don't understand."
3. Your teen won't talk about it anymore.
4. Your teen avoids all contact with you by staying in their room or staying away from home as much as possible.
5. Your teen is either angry all the time or withdrawn all the time.
6. You feel anxiety in the pit of your stomach whenever you interact with your teen.
7. The laughter and fun you once shared is gone.
8. You quickly lose your temper when your teen doesn't respond to you.

"When it gets hard to love, let's love harder."
Van Jones

Rupture and repair

When our relationship with our child is ruptured, how do we begin to repair it? Everything starts with the parent. No matter what happens, or how you and your teen got to this stage, it is the parent's responsibility to begin repairing that thread of connection. If there is a rupture in your relationship with your child, repair it quickly. If there have been many ruptures over time, the repair gets harder.

"The more un-repaired ruptures, the more distance grows between two people," writes Hilary Jacobs Hendel, LCSW, in her blog *The Change Triangle*. "Eventually we cannot make contact with one another because our protective walls are too thick and tall. We eventually forget that we even liked or loved each other. We get more anxious, irritable and depressed."

Hendel continues, "According to author bell hooks in her book *All About Love*, love is an action whereby we strive to nourish our loved one's souls. Attacking or abandoning our loved ones when they make mistakes is not love."

Repairing a ruptured relationship

1. As the parent, you must take 100% of the responsibility for repairing the relationship. A teenager who is experiencing emotional issues has neither the tools nor the desire to initiate the repair process. Your teen needs you to lead the conversation. But that doesn't mean you control the conversation or the outcome.
2. Start with an apology. Admit your mistakes and acknowledge your part in the conflict.
3. Be sincere and real in your desire to renew the relationship. The rebuilding of your relationship can start with just a thread of connection and then grow over time.
4. Your child will not talk to you unless you make it safe for them to do that. (See next section.)
5. It's ok to say that you don't have the answers, but you'll work on it together.
6. Commit to whatever it takes, no matter how long it takes. Don't rush them.
7. Listen. Listen. Listen.

How to have a safe conversation

1. First, settle your own emotions. Commit to being calm, open, and non-judgmental. If you need to deal with your own hurt and disappointment, talk to a counselor.
2. Check your intentions at the door. Your child will know immediately if you are not sincere or genuine in your desire to renew your relationship.
3. Let go of your preconceived theories about what is going on and how things should be resolved. Your child is the only one who has those answers. You can make suggestions or give advice down the line when your teen asks for it, but not until your connection is well established.
4. Be vulnerable about your own fears and concerns about the rupture in your relationship.
5. Be willing to hear how angry they are with you. Say something like, "I can tell you are really angry at me right now." Remember the anger comes out of fear.
6. Use words of affirmation and connection:
 - "You were really hurt when I said that."
 - "You must have felt really alone."
 - "That must be a scary situation to be in."
7. Agree to find a way through the child's challenges with school—together.

"Attacking or abandoning our loved ones when they make mistakes is not love."

Repairing a ruptured relationship takes a great deal of courage and honesty. But it can be the most satisfying and rewarding action of your life—especially if it saves your child's emotional and mental health and gets them fully engaged and back on track.