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5 WAYS TO HELP TEENS DEAL WITH LIFE WHEN THEY FEEL STUCK

By Dr. Chinwe Williams

We've all been there. We all have encountered struggles that felt bigger than us. And we all develop our own ways of managing emotional pain, shame, and regret. When faced with difficult circumstances, it is very normal to look for ways to cope.

Over the years, parents have verbalized their uncertainty with how best to assist their teen with effectively manage the ups and downs of life. There's no simple response. Quite frankly, as a therapist who frequently works with adolescents, I get it. Being a teen today is tough. Teens face increasing expectations: managing multiple schedules, demanding academic loads, and competitive extracurricular activities. And above all, discovering who they are and how they fit in with their peer group and the larger world. All of which can and do cause internal pressure.

Some teens are able to successfully navigate these waters. Others may flail or buckle under the pressure. It is a normal human experience to want to escape reality. It's actually a great idea to take a break, decompress for a few hours in order to allow your brain to reboot and refocus. Attending a concert with friends, listening to music, going for a hike, laughing at a hilarious comedy are examples of healthy ways to take your mind off a stressful day. However, what happens when distraction morphs into something that is not so healthy? And perhaps even destructive? Harmless distraction can often lead to prolonged engagement in activities such as video gaming, internet shopping, hours on Instagram or Snapchat, and let's not forget the widely popular Netflix binge-watching sessions—which wouldn't be so bad if it didn't coincide with finals week. And then there are the extreme more dangerous situations when a teen begins experimenting with drugs, alcohol, and sex to numb complicated feelings.

When any of these behaviors become a way to DISTRACT, NUMB or AVOID facing hard circumstances or allowing people to see our real selves, it can lead to feeling stuck and disconnected, causing one to spiral into more destructive behavior. What is the remedy for stuck-ness and disconnection? Engagement. As a therapist, I love introducing my teenage clients to creative strategies to address problems that appear insurmountable. Yes, that sometimes means embracing a new challenge or even doing something they dislike— like confronting the real issues. The more we can teach our children to deal with (and not run away from) life's challenges, the better they can realize their own unique capabilities which fosters resilience and a sense of autonomy.

Parents' task in helping avoidant teens is complicated by the contradictory impulses of teens. They want us around, and at the same time, want us to go far away. The research is, however, clear. Parents are powerful pillars of influence in their teens' lives! Below are 5 ways that can help you recognize when your teen may be feeling stuck and ways you can help them pull the plug and get un-stuck.



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1. Watch for warning signs

Some “stuck” teens will display difficulty concentrating and low motivation. They may be irritable, negative, easily frustrated or prone to outbursts. Some overachieving “stuck” teens may be highly sensitive to criticism and begin to withdraw from family and friends. Since some of these signs are a part of normal adolescent development, it is important to note what appears to be a change from your teen’s typical pattern of behavior.

2. Initiate the conversation: Demonstrate casual interest by asking questions and reflecting back on what you’ve heard. Teens can tell the difference between questions that show interest and ones that simply appear nosy. Be present but not intrusive. One conversation starter may be: “It’s normal to feel overwhelmed. I know that you want to do well (in school/sports/making friends) so I am sure that you might feel some pressure sometimes. You are not alone. I’m open if you ever want to talk about it.” Your teen may not open up initially. The key is making yourself available for when they’re ready.

3. Be open. Sharing your struggles with distraction, numbing, and avoidance may help your teen better cope with their own experience. For many parents the thought of disclosing their own teenage antics is a nightmarish proposition. However, research suggests that parents who have an open, warm, and nurturing relationship with their children can help them to buffer stresses that can otherwise be destructive. Your teen may not show deep interest or ask many questions. Don’t worry, they are listening.

4. Stay tuned in. As a therapist, I can’t emphasize how important it is to plug in to your teen. What does that mean? Get to know their musical taste, favorite artists, even purchases. Know the names of their friends and even their enemies. Regarding social media, I am an advocate of intermittent parental monitoring. This one is tricky; teens also need some degree of privacy. But it is a parent’s responsibility to know what is going on. The content you discover may clue you into ways to better connect with your child. Or, alert you to signs of stress. As parents, we must plug-in to this important aspect of teen social life. Don’t tell my teens I said that.

5. Seek Professional help - Part of our job as parents is to help our children find resources to be successful. That can include a school counselor, therapist, or trusted church leader. Remember that there are many avoidant behaviors that are simply a part of adolescence. It is helpful to consult with a professional who can assess the severity and offer assistance. One technique that I like to teach is Mindfulness. Mindfulness is ideal for decreasing distressful thoughts. The ability to disrupt a cycle of negative thinking is crucial for optimal mental health and can help teens to “plug-in” in order to get “unstuck”.



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Whether or not they tell you or show you, your teen values your engagement. What are some ways that you can plug in to your teen this week?

TRY THIS

Whether your teenager is facing a challenge right now or whether you just know they will in the future, one thing we can all do to help our students cope with challenges is to model the way. We can show them what it looks like to face a challenge instead of avoiding it.

Think about one area where you're tempted to avoid or escape instead of "dealing" with it. Maybe you'd rather shop online than think about work. Or maybe work is the escape for a complicated situation at home. Maybe it's easier to scroll through the news reports than to look at the budget .

It doesn't have to be something serious or dangerous—just one way you are tempted to put off dealing with real life. This week, share that with your teenager.

Maybe in the car you say...

- Hey, you're not going to believe this, but I just deleted the Facebook app from my phone. I would catch myself scrolling every time I was mad just to avoid having a conversation.
- Hey, I know this probably sounds crazy to you, but I just realized I've been staying late at work because it means I won't have time to go to the gym. Today I'm setting an alarm to leave on time so I can work out.
- Hey, I don't know if you have noticed, but I have a bad habit of _____ to avoid dealing with _____. So I'd decided to start working on that by setting up an appointment with a mentor/counselor/doctor/coach.

It may feel a little awkward to admit feeling stuck in front of your teenager, but when you do, you are giving them the tools and the courage to move forward in whatever they're facing.

Dr. Chinwé Williams is a licensed counselor in Roswell, GA. For more from Dr. Williams and other resources for parents of teenagers, check out www.TheParentCue.org