

Understanding the Teenage Brain

Mental Health and Wellbeing



watch the video here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdywf2Z6GM>

This film is about the mental health and well-being of teenagers.

Here are the main topics covered:

Introduction

- The pressures faced by teenagers today
- Greater awareness of mental health
- The worries of parents
- What has changed in the last few years?

The needs of teenagers

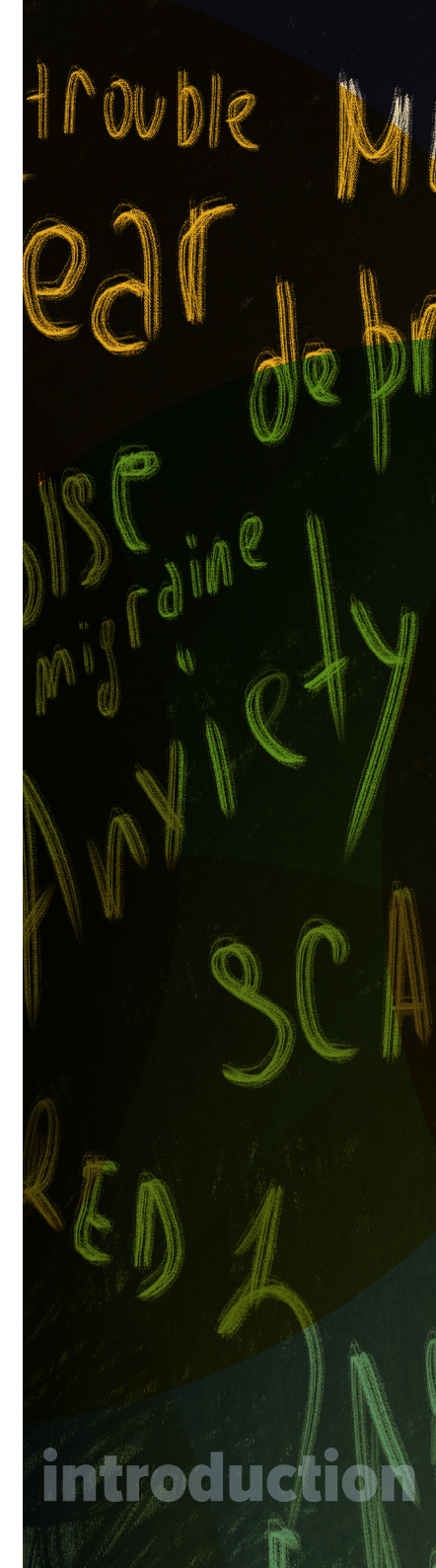
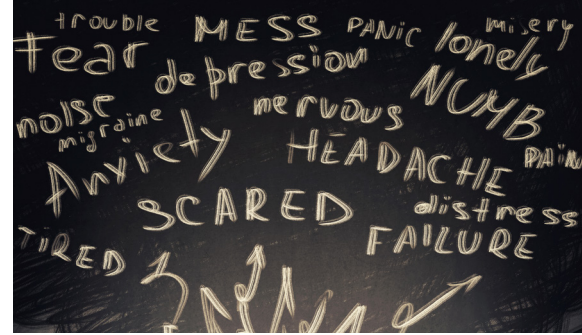
- The teenage brain
- Individual differences
- The transition from child to adult

How to manage emotions

- Emotion regulation
- Difficult emotions
- Stress and anxiety
- Strategies for well-being

What can parents and carers do?

- The role of adults
- Key support structures
- What is normal for teenagers?
- How to help, and knowing when to intervene



Introduction



There is a general view that young people today are more vulnerable than previous generations. There is no doubt that teenagers are facing many challenges that were not present in earlier times. In particular the pressures from school, the importance of exam results, and the worsening economic situation all create a sense of difficulty for this generation. In addition, the services that are available to support young people are under much more strain today than they were in the past. In particular youth work, school nursing, and mental health services have all been cut back, making it harder for teenagers to seek help.

In addition, there is a greater awareness of mental health issues today. This adds to the general feeling of anxiety about young people, and has a special impact on parents as they worry more about the mental health of their sons and daughters. In fact, the statistics do not show a dramatic increase in mental health problems over the last decade. There has been a modest increase in disorders, but this may be to do with the cut-back in services, rather than to any fundamental change in mental health. The pandemic has had some impact, especially for those who were vulnerable at the outset of the Covid crisis. It is too soon to see what the long-term effect of Covid will be on the mental health of young people.



The needs of teenagers



The teenage years are a time of huge change in all aspects of life. First, the changes that take place in the brain during these years. Until recently we did not know the extent of these changes, but due to the technology of scanning we now can see how profound these changes are. Most of the changes lead to positive growth and maturation. However, because the brain undergoes reorganization there will be times when young people experience confusion and uncertainty. Emotion regulation is also affected, and there will be more about this in the next section.

There are, of course, major differences between individuals. Not everyone goes through the changes in the same way, and some will be slower than others to reach full maturity. This period can also be seen as a major transition. The move from being a child to being a mature adult is a tricky one, and does not happen overnight! It may be helpful to imagine that inside every teenager is both a child and an adult. At times the child will be more in evidence, whilst at other times the grown up, responsible individual will be on show. Young people need understanding and patience from the adults around them. We now have a better sense of why teenagers behave in the way that they do. However there still remain many challenges for parents and carers to be able to meet the needs of their young people.



the needs of
teenagers



How to manage emotions



One of the elements of the changing brain has to do with the managing of emotions. All adults will be familiar with the flip-flop of emotions that is so common in the behaviour of young people. Teenagers themselves recognize that they can be moody and irritable, happy and sad in the same day. The centre in the brain that is responsible for processing emotions can, at times, be flooded with contradictory hormones, leading to the variation that is seen in behaviour.

Whilst adults have learnt how to manage difficult feelings, it is much harder to do that at a time when the brain is undergoing such change. There is a lot adults can do to help young people with this aspect of growing up. The more teenagers understand what is happening in the brain, the easier they will find it to manage their feelings. In addition, strategies for well-being, such as mindfulness, can also be of great help in emotion regulation. Learning about relaxation, the importance of breathing, taking exercise, and alternative coping strategies are all approaches that can be taught. Emotions can be managed. The teenage years are a good time for these ideas to be introduced.

A large, vertical, stylized image of a young person in a hoodie, overlaid with a colorful, abstract background. The image is partially obscured by a large, colorful, abstract graphic consisting of overlapping circles in shades of teal, orange, yellow, and purple. The text "how to manage emotions" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font in the bottom right corner of the image.

how to
manage
emotions



What parents and carers can do



Adults may well feel uncertain about how to help a young person who is troubled. The teenager may push the parent away, or refuse to cooperate with any offer of help. However, adults do have a role. The young person needs to know that there is someone who cares, someone who will be there no matter what happens. All teenagers need support structures around them. This support may come from the wider family, or from the peer group. In the end though, key adults will play a crucial role. The young person needs to know that there is someone who will stick with them, no matter what happens.

Parents and carers often ask how to distinguish between normal adolescence and genuine distress. There are some useful criteria which may help here. Has there been a marked change in personality? Is the behaviour interfering with health or school work? Is the behaviour having an effect on other members of the family? Finally, how long has this behaviour been in evidence? Anything that lasts longer than a fortnight needs to be taken seriously.

I would add that no parent should hesitate to ask for professional advice. If any adult has worries or concerns about a teenager, there is no harm in talking things over with a supportive friend or professional adult. A different perspective can offer a new way of looking at the problem. It may be hard to find the right way to help a distressed young person. However, the most important lesson is: never give up. Be persistent, be determined, and if one avenue appears to close, seek other sources of help. In the end, your young person needs you. Their future, and their mental health, will be affected by the support you can offer them, especially when they are in distress.



the role of
adults

TOP TIPS

**Be informed
about mental
health**

**Remember, positive
mental health is
associated with good
sleep, good nutrition
and exercise**

**If you are worried
about your teenager,
find someone to
talk to**

**Learn about well-being,
and about strategies
that could help your
young person in
dealing with stress**

**If your teenager
shows signs of distress,
make sure they know
you will be there for
them**



Where to find further information

Websites

Young Minds (www.youngminds.org.uk).
The leading mental health organization for children and young people. Lots of helpful advice and a telephone helpline.

Mental Health Foundation (www.mentalhealth.org.uk) Useful information about mental health, mainly for adults but some useful topics to do with children and young people.

Royal College of Psychiatrists (www.rcpsych.ac.uk) Look under mental health/young people for useful advice and information.

Further reading

“Parenting the new teen in the age of anxiety”.
Dr. John Duffy. Mango Media Publishers. (Dr Duffy also has blogs and videos on YouTube.)

“How to talk so your teen will listen and how to listen so your teen will talk”.
Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. Templar Publishing.

“Why won’t my teenager talk to me?”
John Coleman. Routledge.