

# Teens Are Struggling Right Now. What Can Parents Do?

The psychologist Lisa Damour shares advice on how to connect, what healthy emotions look like and when to step in.

By [Melinda Wenner Moyer](#)

The New York Times

Feb. 21, 2023

For over 25 years, the psychologist Lisa Damour has been helping teens and their families navigate adolescence in her clinical practice, in her research and in best-selling books like “Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions Into Adulthood.”

This moment in time, she says, is like no other.



Adali Schell

According to a [report](#) released last week by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 42 percent of U.S. high schoolers experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2021, while 22 percent seriously considered attempting suicide. Adolescent [girls](#), as well as lesbian, gay and bisexual youth, are struggling the most, but boys and teens in every racial and ethnic group also reported worsening symptoms.

“I am deeply concerned about the suffering teens experienced during the pandemic and the current crisis in adolescent mental health,” Dr. Damour said.

In her new book, “The Emotional Lives of Teenagers,” Dr. Damour aims to demystify adolescence and to reset the very definition of mental health: “Too often, ‘mental health’ is equated with feeling good, happy, calm or relaxed,” she said. But it’s “about having feelings that fit the moment — even if those feelings are unwanted or painful — and managing them in effective ways.” She thinks this characterization is “far more accurate,” and, she hopes, reassuring.

Here’s what Dr. Damour had to say about communicating with teens, distinguishing healthy emotions from mental illness and when to step in to help.

Teenagers feel their emotions more intensely than children do and more intensely than adults do. So there will be plenty of days where they experience distress, maybe multiple times a day.

Most of that distress will probably be appropriate to their circumstances. If a teenager failed a test, we expect they'll be upset about that. If somebody breaks up with them, we expect they will be very sad. What we're interested in is how the teenager then goes on to manage their feelings. What we want to see is that they use strategies that bring relief and do no harm, such as talking to people who care about them, finding brief distractions or solving the problem.

What we don't want to see — and where we become alert to the possibility of a mental health concern — is one of two things. One, teenagers are using strategies to bring relief that actually come at a cost: So a teenager who's very distressed and then smokes a lot of marijuana, or a teenager who's having a hard time with a friend and then goes after that peer on social media.

The other thing we don't want to see is feelings “running the show” — when they get in the way of a young person's ability to do the things they need to do, such as go to school or spend time with peers.

### **If a teen comes home from school and seems sad or angry, what's the best way for an adult to respond?**

Usually, all they need from us are two things. One is curiosity — to take an interest in what they're sharing, to ask questions. The other is empathy — letting them know that we're sorry that they feel that way.

We have excellent [scientific evidence](#) that the mere act of putting an unwanted feeling into words reduces the sting of that emotion. So when it's 9 p.m. at night and your teenager is standing in front of you suddenly describing that they are feeling very anxious, or unhappy, or frustrated, the most essential thing to remember is that they are already on their way to feeling better because they put those emotions into words.

Image

The exercise I use in my own home is that I imagine that my teenager is a reporter, and I am an editor. My teenager is reading me her latest article. My job is to listen so intently that when she comes to the end of the draft, I can produce a headline — the headline being a distilled, accurate summary of what she said that doesn't introduce any new ideas. That shows them that you're listening, and validates their feelings.

### **What if your teen says something cruel to you?**

It is perfectly fine for kids to be angry. We should expect that and plan for it. What we do put parameters around is the expression of that anger.

When teenagers use hurtful language, it can be useful to respond in a way that uncouples the feeling from how it was expressed. We can say things along the lines of, “You may be very angry with me. And you probably have a point. But we don't speak to each other that way, so take a

minute and bring it back to me in a more civil way.” Even if a teen rolls her eyes, she’ll get the message and, hopefully, try again when she’s cooled off.

**Let’s say a teen gets really upset and doesn’t want to talk about it — and then 20 minutes later seems perfectly fine. Should you try to broach a conversation then?**

If a kid is in a bad mood, and has found their way to a good mood, I would leave it.

Time works differently for teenagers than it does for adults. It’s very common that a teenager who was deeply distressed about something at 4 p.m. can be gleeful by 6 p.m. They can be very, very upset about something, but then if a piece of good news comes their way, it can boost their spirits tremendously.

**In your book, you discuss the value of letting kids talk to parents on their own terms. What does that mean?**

Many parents find that they ask brilliant questions over dinner and come up empty-handed — they get one-word answers if they’re lucky. Later in the evening, their teenager is as chatty as can be.

Teenagers are organized around the drive toward autonomy. They’d rather not be subjected to an adult’s agenda. When we ask them questions at times that work well for us, we’re asking them to cooperate with our agenda. We need to be open to the possibility that a teenager may be most forthcoming when they are the ones who initiate the conversation.

That may mean that they want to talk to us at times that we are not expecting or even find inconvenient. And they want to talk about things that may not be at the center of our attention. But if we want to cultivate and protect our connections with our teenagers, an important element of that is being willing to work with their terms of engagement.

**Should parents try to protect teens from difficult situations or feelings?**

We don’t want our kids to experience emotional pain, but we do need to appreciate that it is not only unavoidable, but often of value. Psychological discomfort provides important feedback about how things are going. If a teenager cheats on a test and gets caught and has to deal with the real discomfort of working through the problem at school and at home, it will likely keep that teenager from making a similar decision again.

The question we want to be asking is this: Is what they’re contending with uncomfortable, or unmanageable? We can’t always know. But in general, if they are contending with something uncomfortable, we want to treat that as an opportunity for them to develop healthy skills — to process painful or uncomfortable emotions.

If we have any reason to think that they are facing or might face a situation that would be unmanageable or overwhelming, it’s probably a good time to step in. We might say, “You are up against more than you can be expected to manage on your own. You deserve additional support. Let’s figure out what that help should look like.”