

WHEN LIFE SUCKS

IDEAS AND TACTICS FOR TEENS IN TOUGH TIMES

Break ups, school problems, procrastination, fights, sexuality, alcohol, bitchiness, eating problems, can't sleep, no motivation, not allowed to do stuff, being on the outer. As well as 34 other common situations that every day Australian teens face

**KIRRIE SMOUT, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST,
SPECIALISING IN WORKING WITH TEENS**

CONTENTS

FRIENDSHIPS

My other two (or three or four) friends seem to like each other more than me
My friends are bitching about a friend of mine and it's really awkward
People at my school are horrible to me
I have hardly any friends
My friend is really depressed and I don't know what to do

RELATIONSHIPS AND SEX

I hate being single
I think I'm gay/bisexual: I feel stressed and worried about this. How do I know for sure?
My boyfriend/girlfriend broke up with me and I'm devastated
I want to break up with my boyfriend/girlfriend but I don't want to hurt them
This guy/girl and I are having phone/cybersex (or sending naked pics of ourselves to each other), is this wrong?
I cheated on my boyfriend/girlfriend and I feel guilty
My boyfriend/girlfriend cheated on me
I'm having sex (or sexual experiences) with someone and I don't like it

PARENTS AND/OR GUARDIANS

My parents are ALWAYS nagging me to do stuff I don't want to do
My parents don't let me do anything or if I'm allowed it has to be this big drama
I've had a massive fight with my parents (again) and feel totally furious with them
My parents and I just don't have anything in common, we hardly ever talk

SCHOOL

I've really got to do homework but I have zero motivation
I really can't stand my school and want to move but my parents won't let me
I'm seriously behind, have way too much to do and I'm not going to get it all done.
This assignment/work at school/course is just too complicated, I'm not smart enough

DRUG AND ALCOHOL

I drank way too much last night and probably last weekend as well (and the weekend before that)

I need to stop smoking weed/taking pills/using drugs

HEALTH AND SELF

I hate the way I look

I'm skipping meals/vomitting: I feel guilty because I'm lying about it but I need to lose weight

When I get stressed, I cut myself and it makes me feel better. But then I feel guilty.

I think about awful things - I could never tell anyone about them

Sometimes I feel so angry, I feel out of control

I just feel awful and down, and I don't even know why

CONCLUSION

THERE ARE TWO CHAPTERS ONLY IN THIS SAMPLE – READ ON!

I'VE HAD A MASSIVE FIGHT WITH MY PARENTS AND FEEL TOTALLY FURIOUS WITH THEM

Big fights with parents can be traumatic. Whatever the reason for the fight, whether it be because they are nagging you, because they don't want you to do something, or for some other reason, some discussions with parents can turn into a very nasty fight.

Georgia, 14, told me that she had a huge fight with her mum the night before our appointment. It started over something minor, but before long it had turned into a horrible, massive argument. She told her mum that she felt she didn't understand her, or care about her at all. Her mum told her she was a selfish, lazy human being. Georgia said she was going to move out as soon as possible. Her Mum said the sooner the better and that she made the whole family's life miserable. Georgia spent the rest of the night in her room crying. They hadn't spoken since. When I asked her, Georgia said they had these fights before, and eventually they got over it, but she still remembered some of the things that her mum had said and they still hurt. When I spoke to Georgia's mum, she said she too had spent some of the night in her room crying. She said she felt totally at a loss to know what to do. She wondered whether she was doing the wrong thing, and even though she didn't want this to happen – perhaps it would be better if Georgia went to live with her Dad instead. This made her start crying again.

Unfortunately almost every teenager has a big fight with their parents at some point. Living with others and trying to get along with people is really, really hard. Eventually things blow

up, even in the most reasonable and calm families. All kinds of people, from all kinds of backgrounds do and say things they regret.

Knowing it is normal, doesn't make it much easier at the time. If you have a huge fight with your parents, you will often think and feel these kinds of things.

First, no surprises here, you feel **angry**. You feel like the way you have been treated is unfair and mean.

Second, you might feel a strong sense of **being helpless**. In other words, you feel like you have no control over the situation at all. You might feel like you are completely at the mercy of your parents. You will really want to take back control.

Third, you might feel **really hurt**. Sometimes this feeling takes a while to notice. The anger often comes first, and then the sense of being hurt comes later. You might feel not cared about, or rejected or saddened.

Fourth, you might feel **worried about the future**. You might not know what to do, or feel like things are going to be bad for a long time. You might feel like things are going to get worse in some way.

Physically, you might feel sick, feel extremely tense, feel like pacing, feel like crying and screaming, notice your heart racing, or be breathing quickly.

If you are feeling some or all of these things, it is important to take a moment to really understand what is happening for you.

WHY DO WE FEEL SO AWFUL IN A FIGHT?

To understand what is going on in our bodies/minds in the midst of a fight, we have to remember that our brains developed in prehistoric times. This means our brains do things which helped humans who lived in prehistoric times. When we are in conflict with someone, part of our brain is still operating on that primitive level and it thinks we are facing a tiger or an angry opposing tribe member.

This means that this part of our brain will activate the parts of our body which help us fight or run. For example, it will make our muscles tense ready for action, it will make our hearts beat fast and make us feel agitated. It also means that the parts of our brain which create emotions like anger, hurt and fear are extremely active. There is lots of blood flow and electrical energy to those parts of the brain.

While this would have helped us if we had to run away from a tiger or fight an attacking tribe member, these things don't really help us in a conflict with other people in this day and age. It means that the parts of our brain which help us think clearly, make logical plans and decisions are unable to activate – because the other parts of our brain have stolen all our available energy.

How to Cope

Before you try anything, it can help to try to calm yourself down by repeating these things to yourself:

Things to tell yourself

- *All families have these kinds of fights sometimes.*
- *Right now, even though things feel like they are making sense, I am not thinking as clearly as I will be next week about this.*
- *My brain has been taken over by a powerful physical process right at this moment*
- *I shouldn't make any long term decisions right now*
- *I will feel better later*
- *We can get through this.*

Things to Try

GIVE YOURSELF A CHANCE TO CALM DOWN

In order to think more logically and act in ways which are going to help us, we have to calm down. This will reactivate the parts of our brain which are good at logical thinking and deactivate the parts of our brain which are trying to make us fight and run away from the tiger. In order to calm down, we need to have some periods of time in which we are not thinking about the fight – at least a few minutes, and often a few hours.

To make this time happens, sometimes, we need to tell people we need this.

"I just need to have a break from talking about this for a few minutes so I can think"

"I'm not walking away for good here, but I need to calm down for a bit"

"Can we please talk about this again in an hour when I'm thinking more rationally?"

Once we are away from the source of the argument, we then need to actively distract ourselves from the fight. Otherwise, we might be away from the person, but still keep on thinking about it. We should force ourselves to do something else, just for a minute or two to start with, and then when we feel capable of it, for a bit longer.

Try to watch TV for a minute, or read a bit of a magazine. Warning: you won't want to do this. It will feel unimportant compared to the issue you are thinking about. Your brain is going to want you to focus on this issue, and try to problem solve it or describe how wrong/bad/awful it is. Resist the urge to keep thinking about it. If you are struggling, tell yourself you will come back to it in 5 minutes, but that you will just go on Facebook/read

this book/watch this YouTube thing for five minutes. Then try to stretch that out to 10 minutes or 20 minutes, or then an hour or so if possible.

TRY REALLY HARD TO FEEL A TINY BIT OF COMPASSION TO YOUR PARENTS

Once you have calmed down a bit, then try to create some compassion towards your parents. This means trying to see if you can make yourself care about them and the situation they are in.

This doesn't mean you have to agree with them. It doesn't mean you have to do exactly what they say or believe them. It does mean trying to try to find some positive aspects to what they are saying or thinking, or to find some care/love/empathy for some of the difficult emotions they might be feeling.

The reason I ask you to do this is not because your parents deserve it (even if this is true). The main reason I want you to find compassion is because it can make you feel much better.

Hugh, 16, came in to tell me that the strategy "create compassion" had helped him last week. He said that he had just had a big fight with his parents and was in his room, feeling furious about it, when he remembered that we had talked about this in an earlier session. He decided to try it, and made a list of all the difficult emotions he thought his parents might be experiencing at this point. He came up with worry, frustration and sadness. Hugh said that after he had done this, he noticed he felt a bit less angry. He still thought what they were saying was unfair, but because he felt calmer, he was able to talk about it and they found a compromise.

Creating compassion for someone you are angry with is an extremely hard task. It is possible however - even when you have been badly hurt or there is a great injustice. And if you succeed in creating compassion, not only are you more likely to be able to resolve the situation, you will probably feel much better and more peaceful yourself.

So how do you generate compassion for your parents? One effective technique is to deliberately bring to mind how they are feeling and the factors which make life difficult for them. Here are some questions to answer for yourself to try and help this happen:

- *Try to think about what difficult emotions they might be experiencing right now (Hurt? Sadness? Worry? Frustration? Guilt?)*
- *What are they trying to achieve in the long term by doing and saying what they are doing/saying? What else are they trying to achieve?*
- *Try to think about what pressures they might be experiencing, or any difficult situations that exist in their life?*
- *Try to think about the hardest things for them personally about being a parent.*
- *Try to think about what they learnt about parenting from their parents.*

Hopefully answering these questions might help you feel more compassionate. If it works, you are much more likely to feel better yourself and then get a better result from the fight.

ASK YOUR PARENTS QUESTIONS

Another important strategy to use when you are really angry at someone is to get more information about exactly what it is they are thinking, what is bothering them and what they want.

Most of the time in an argument, we assume that we know all of this information and don't need to ask. Unfortunately, most of the time we know *generally* what the other person is thinking, but not *specifically*.

The difference between this general information and specific information can be huge. Getting to know the specifics, can be really helpful to helping people calm down and getting to a compromise.

Consider, ask about a whole range of things: opinions, feelings, thoughts, worries, facts and ideas. In contrast to the questions above to help you create compassion, these questions are ones to actually ask your parents. Keep in mind you are going to want to ask these questions in a neutral tone. What this means, is by asking in a quiet, calm voice and not responding to their answers with "your thoughts". Instead, you want to keep asking questions for several minutes or longer, until you feel like there is nothing more you could possibly know about their thoughts about the situation. One final point about asking questions – if your parents aren't used to you doing this, you might need to explain what you are doing so they don't think you are being rude. For example, you could say something like, "okay, it seems like we are both upset about this, I've been reading this book which says it's a good idea to find out more about what is going on when we fight, so is it okay if I ask you some things?"

Here are some example questions you could try, depending of course on the situation:

- What do you think might happen if...
- What was the worst things about this
- What makes you feel most angry about this
- What else is upsetting about this situation
- What do you think would be the best thing to do here?
- What else would be good?
- What are you most worried about here
- What is most important to you about this?
- Why does this matter so much to you?
- What makes it hard if x happens/doesn't happen?
- What were you thinking when this happened?
- What did you want to happen before/after that?
- When I did X, were you upset then, or only when Y happened?

TELL THEM YOU HEARD WHAT THEY SAID

Once you have this information, it's important to let your parents know you understand what they are talking about by telling them you heard what they said. For example, you might say,

"Okay, so it seems like from your perspective, you are angry because I didn't unpack the dishwasher like I said, and you think that I don't do anything much at all to help around the house, and this is upsetting because you feel like you do all the work. Is that right?"

Getting all of this information, and being forced to explain it back to your parents will help you think more carefully about what you want to do next. You might find you think slightly differently about things. If not, your parents will probably feel a bit different – at least that you are trying to resolve the argument – and that might calm them down too.

APOLOGISE

At some point during an argument, we often realise we have been slightly unfair, unkind or we have misunderstood in some way.

Once we realise this, now at this point, if we can apologise rather than ignoring that fact, it is going to jump us fifty steps forward in the healing process. It is also going to make us feel much better.

So if you have been kind of rude, mean or demanding (if you're not sure, just think: did I speak to my parents about this issue in a way that I would probably not have spoken to my best friend? If "yes" it's possible that an apology is going to help).

- *Okay, maybe I was a bit out of line, sorry about that*
- *It's probably kind of true, I was a bit....*
- *Maybe I didn't really think that through...*
- *I probably shouldn't have said/done that....*
- *Looking back on it, that was not a great idea, I wish I hadn't done/said*
- *I'm sorry that I did/said that.*
- *I feel bad about this; it wasn't helpful to have said/done it...*

TELL THEM HOW YOU FEEL – BUT NOT JUST HOW ANGRY YOU ARE – OTHER STUFF TOO

It's usually helpful to let people know how you feel. But the important thing that most teens forget to do – is to share not just how angry you feel, but all of the other emotions and thoughts you are experiencing as well. Think about whether you feel a bit worried about something, kind of hurt, embarrassed, a bit guilty, disappointed – as well as angry and frustrated. If you feel any of these things, tell your parents these things too.

- *I feel kind of worried because.....*
- *When this happened, I was sad because....*
- *I know you know I'm mad, but I'm also.....because.....*

- *The thing that makes me nervous here is.....*

If you can't express yourself, tell them that. For example, say "I don't really know how to explain how I feel right now". Try telling them how you feel in an email, text or note. Take your time. Talk calmly. The benefits of being vulnerable and sharing things are often huge. Even if your parents don't respond any differently, or do anything else – you will get better at expressing yourself which will help you in lots of ways throughout your life.

CONSIDER "LETTING IT GO" OR JUST FORGETTING ABOUT IT

This is the possibility of choosing to not discuss any more about the issue that has caused the problem, backing down from what you want or choosing not to talk about what has been done that has hurt or frustrate you.

This strategy isn't always important, it isn't always possible (for example if it's mostly your parents who are mad at YOU) and sometimes it isn't helpful. But sometimes it is the very best and most helpful thing we can do in a fight.

By choosing to not go on about not being able to do something, or your parents embarrassing you, or them not letting you buy the thing you really really want, you do a few positive things.

1. *You make life easier for your parents.*
2. *You make a mature choice about picking your battles*
3. *You can save up the stress for the important things*

You might like to also read the sections in this book on:

I get so angry I feel out of control

I feel really sad and depressed

I'VE REALLY GOT TO DO HOMEWORK TONIGHT BUT I HAVE ZERO MOTIVATION

For most students struggling at school, understanding the school work itself isn't the biggest problem. The real killer is motivating themselves to actually start it – and finish it. In my experience, almost all students have good intentions. They start the year thinking, "Yeah this year I'm going to do some more work". They wake up some days thinking, "Okay, TODAY I'll get that assignment started". They lie in bed at night thinking, "tomorrow, definitely I'll revise for my test".

However when the crunch comes, they find it really hard to get started and the time slips away.

I saw Jamie last week – and he was feeling pretty despondent. He was in Year 12 and wasn't interested in his subjects, found his teachers boring and unfair. He was skipping a fair bit of school – especially when assignments were due – and handing things up extremely late or not at all. He knew he could do it, but it just seemed like it didn't matter that much. It was now the end of the year, he'd had a meeting with his parents and teachers and they had told him he had 4 weeks to hand in a whole lot of stuff or fail. That was 3 weeks ago and again, he was in my room saying, maybe I'll start tomorrow.

If you find motivation is a major issue for you, know that you are not alone. Most adults struggle with being motivated too. Your parents, teachers and relatives find it hard to make themselves do hard things – they put off going to the gym, delay making a phone call, avoid conversations they think will be difficult, and avoid doing the washing until they really have to and so on.

So it's not just you: procrastinating is part of being human. Part of this is about how our brains were formed and how they function. If you think about our ancestors living in caves and jungles, it made sense to avoid anything which might be painful or frightening. In those days, there probably wasn't much "good pain" - anything that was painful was also life

threatening. Now we live in a different world but our “pain avoiding instincts” are still strong. Homework is painful – and so our primitive brains tell us to avoid it.

The good news is just because our brains are designed to be procrastinators (i.e. pain avoiders) that don’t mean we are stuck being controlled by these automatic instincts. We can learn to do things that are hard, even though every fibre of our being says “NO!”

The even better news is this: the more we do painful but important stuff, the better we get at it. Motivation is like a muscle. When we push through boredom, pain and frustration, we teach our primitive brain that we won’t die, and that there are benefits from doing this. In addition, it becomes easier to do next time. There is quite a lot of research demonstrating this principle now – the more we push through, the easier it gets to do it next time.

How to Cope

Things to try

There are a number of motivation strategies you can use to get started on something you really don’t feel like doing. I have listed eleven of them below. Keep in mind that none of these strategies are going to make you absolutely love doing homework for the rest of the year. If you’re lucky, they might increase your motivation by just 10%, for just for 10 minutes. Often this slight, temporary increase in motivation is enough to get you started, and this is usually the hardest bit. Once you are motivated, you might find you will then be able to use momentum to keep it going. Yes, you will have to use another one of these strategies again, a bit later – but that’s okay. The more often you use these strategies, the more you will get done.

AS SOON AS YOU GET HOME (OR GET INTO YOUR FREE STUDY PERIOD), GET READY TO STUDY.

Get all your books out, open and ready so that they are easy to see and get started with. Even if you go and have a break before you actually start, make the first thing you do to get ready for study. The easier it is to start, the more likely you will start.

USE THE CLOCK TO HELP MOTIVATE YOURSELF TO STUDY IN SHORT BLOCKS.

For example, say to yourself, okay I will start this English essay and just do 10 minutes worth before I am allowed to stop. Put a timer on your phone/oven/computer. Coach yourself through it every time you get distracted – “okay, only 7 minutes to go and then I

can have a break....okay 5 minutes to go and then I can stop this stupid essay....come on three more minutes, keep going". If you are "on a roll" and want to keep going after the 10 minutes are up, by all means keep going, but make a deal that you must do at least 10 minutes on it. Set a timer if you need to.

START WITH SUBJECTS YOU DON'T LIKE:

If you are someone who does homework for the subjects you like, and never for the subjects you don't, then do this: Start with something OTHER than the subjects you like. Tell yourself you are going to do JUST five minutes of this other subject. Whatever happens, you will MAKE yourself do five minutes and then you can switch to the subject you like.

USE THE "ON/OFF" METHOD OF LISTENING TO THE MUSIC,

This means using using music as a reinforcer. In other words, listen to your iPod for 15 minutes and then turn it off for 15 minutes, and then back on etc. You can make a deal with yourself that you HAVE to do ten more minutes for example of physics before you can listen to the radio or something like that. Changing the atmosphere slightly like this will help increase motivation just a bit

HAVE "FOCUS" DAYS IN WHICH YOU REALLY WORK HARD ON ONE SUBJECT IN PARTICULAR.

Mondays might be physics, Tuesdays might be Chemistry etc. Or have some other kind of routine where you work from 5-6 before tea in the dining room, and then from 7-8 in the lounge. Even if you kind of do this already, making it more formal by writing it down or stating it to someone else – can help with motivation.

USE REWARDS.

Draw up a whole heap of counters and get a jar/container to put them in. Give yourself one counter after every half an hour of good solid work. Make it that once you have got X numbers of counters then you can get a CD. Even if you don' use a visual system like counters, make deals with yourself that you will do X/get Y/have Z as soon as you finish X/Y/Z. For example:

If I do 100 more words on this assignment I will have a break

If I do 3 more of these questions, I'll check Facebook

After I have finished these revision questions, I'll turn on my favourite playlist

I'll stop and watch TV for a bit provided I get to 1500 words in this essay

KEEP YOUR MEDIUM TERM GOALS IN SIGHT.

Set a goal for the grade you want to get for each subject this term. Write them up around your room and in your diary. Look at them often. Write out a fake report with the grades you want on it and stick it on your wall.

WORK WITH SHORT TERM "RESULT" GOALS.

Every time you have a test/essay/assignment to hand in, set yourself a specific goal for the grade you want to get for this individual test/essay/assignment. Write it down. Keep it around you to help motivate you.

WORK WITH SHORT TERM "TASK" GOALS.

Set a goal for how much you will complete in the next 15 minutes. Set yourself a goal to do a certain number of questions in the next 10 minutes. Tell yourself you will do two paragraphs before tea, or 3 items before getting a drink or whatever. Keep setting little goals all the time, rather than just one large goal only once.

SET YOUR OWN PUNISHMENTS.

Tell yourself you can't go on Facebook tonight if you don't do at least 3 of those maths problems. Tell your brother to come and take your phone if he hears you use it. Use writeordie.com which will sound alarms/delete your work if you don't get some words written.

THINK ABOUT HOW GOOD IT WILL FEEL IF YOU GET THIS DONE.

Stop for 30 seconds and try to vividly imagine the feeling of handing the assignment in, and being really proud of it. Alternatively, imagine how bad it will feel if it doesn't get done. Imagine waking up in two weeks and still not having this finished, or sitting in the test and not knowing any of the answers.

REMOVE DISTRACTIONS.

Instead of trying to use willpower to resist the things that distract you while you are doing homework (e.g. the internet, phone, food, temptation to sleep etc.) see if you can make those distractions a little bit harder to see, hear and get access to. For example, just put your phone over the other side of your bedroom, turn it face down or put it on silent. You don't need to give it up entirely, but instead make it slightly harder to look at. In the same way, think about sites on the net which distract you and instead of using willpower, use some method of making them a bit harder to get to. You might do this by actually closing programs instead of minimising them, changing your password so you have to log in each time or using programs such as selfcontrol.com which temporarily block you from a site – for the time period you choose (e.g. 15 minutes or 30 minutes).

WHERE TO START?

If you've just read all of this and don't know where to start, go back and look at this list and pick one thing. If you can't pick, close your eyes and stab your finger on the page. Pick the

thing closest to your finger and just start it. Do it for 10 minutes. The important thing is to do something to start with, and then try something else.

Things to tell yourself

- *I can do this*
- *It's worth doing this stuff because.....*
- *I can get better at motivating myself*
- I only have to motivate myself just for a few minutes, and I will be able to get started

You might be also interested in this section:

I feel really sad and depressed

For the full copy of When Life Sucks for Teens, go to www.developingminds.net.au

