



Supporting Families' Mental Health During COVID

Finding Balance in Uncertain Times Through Positive Family Communication

CHAC's Community Virtual Town Hall: August 30, 2020

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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Q: What are the main causes of stressors in teens?

A (Emily): When living in the Silicon Valley, there is always pressure from people around you—whether that may be peers, parents, or even yourself—to perform well academically. This can result in overloading your schedule with advanced classes and extracurricular activities. Although challenging yourself is a good thing and allows you to grow, I have found that there needs to be a line drawn as to how much you put on your plate. From my personal experience, teens from my high school (including myself) faced the most stress, anxiety, and burnout due to an overwhelming schedule. Although it was a difficult process, it was very helpful for me to reassess my priorities and choose the courses and activities that I wanted to do the most. I thought of it as putting things aside rather than giving them up completely, and once I created a better schedule for myself, I actually was able to add some things back! Additionally, social situations such as bullying and the pressure to fit in and personal family situations can also affect a teen negatively, so it is best to be mindful of what a teen is going through to adequately support them.

Q: What is the best way for adults to take care of a teen who is going through a difficult mental period?

A (Emily): The best thing to do is to encourage conversation regarding your teen's mental health. This can vary based on your parenting type, as no parenting style is the same and it is important to tailor these conversations in a way that is more natural for you. Gaining your teen's trust is the most vital thing you can do as a parent, which means that conversation should be encouraged and not forced.

Destigmatize mental health by asking about your teen's wellness and getting to know them as a person, which is a gradual but necessary process. If your child consents (or faces extreme mental distress and professional intervention is needed), you can seek additional support such as professional therapy, if needed. This is not a quick process and can take months to years to fully recover from a difficult mental period, but it will be much smoother if your teen knows they have someone to talk to (even if they don't show their affection all the time!).

Q: What do students believe is missing from their line of communication?

A (Abby): After extensive conversations in the Mental Health and Awareness club at Homestead High School, as well as the Teen Advisory Council at CHAC, I have deduced many students feel a lack of communication. Parents seem eager to ask about their school day, extracurricular, and job, however, forget to ask about their social life and personal pressures. Students cannot perform up to academic par with the stress nowadays of peer pressure. Although you cannot change the current school climate, allowing your child the chance to rant about personal dilemmas will help clear their mind and make it easier to perform better in class while improving their daily mood.

Q: How can parents openly discuss mental health with children at a young age without stigmatizing the topic?

A (Abby): Although mental health is stigmatized in our current society, it is easy to find ways to teach adolescents from a young age it is okay to not be okay. Parents should be aware when they use terms such as “crazy” and “insane” in a negative context. Students should feel comfortable to express their emotions, however—positive or negative—to their parents without repercussions, creating an open line of communication.

Q: My teenager spends so much time in their room. When they do come out, they either ignore me or say “no” to anything I ask.

A (Jay): Teenagers are going through an intense stage of development. In American and European societies, teenagers are discovering their own boundaries and working out how much their own ideas and emerging sense of identity fit with that of their parents, wider family, friends, and community. The difficulty is that they still need (and, actually, want) the security of the boundaries of their family and at the same time want to challenge them! Without sophisticated language of negotiation and compromise, and without the brain development in place yet to let them plan ahead and consider consequences, they tend to respond with outright challenges to parents—often in the form of “no,” “leave me alone,” “you have no idea,” etc.

During shelter in place, our daily lives have become smaller. For teenagers, this means they are not out with a variety of people with whom they would usually be exploring their emerging boundaries and identity as a young adult. Therefore, it is likely to end up showing all the more intensely in the home right now. Some suggestions:

- Giving them time to respond to your requests to do chores can be a helpful way of acknowledging their own decision-making abilities.
- Being curious about their interests—without asking them lots of questions—lets them know you value them as a person.
- Say “hi” and show you’re pleased to see them, without attaching a request to do a chore or a question about school or homework.

Q: So much has changed in the last few months, it feels overwhelming at times.

A (Jay): So much HAS changed. People are feeling an enormous sense of loss—loss of routine, movement, access to friends, and exercise or activities. The loss of control and predictability can affect people's sense of security that feels overwhelming.

- Try to find ways to increase predictability and control in your daily life. Find things to do that enable you to make choices and be involved in something, however small.
- It is worth remembering that children and teenagers might be struggling to know what to do with those feelings of having no choice and no involvement in their lives.
- As frustrating as it can be for parents to see their children immersing themselves in digital and online worlds, it can be helpful to think that it does at least provide them with some sense of control, feeling less isolated (even if it is through fantasy characters), and providing some distraction from the pandemic.

Q: How do I help my child manage their emotions with all the school/life changes?

A (Jillian):

- First, validate their emotions. Express support of their experiences and understanding for how they are feeling.
- Be honest; it is okay to tell the truth. Tell your children that there is a lot we do not know and that no one has experienced life like this and that everyone is struggling trying to find “normal”.
- Offer hope. Share facts about what is being done around the world. Share what you are doing as a family to stay safe.
- Re- stabilize and ground through family connection. Remember the medicine of togetherness and laughter.
- Work done, then fun. Plan time for some silliness and fun as a family. It’s easier to tackle the stuff we don’t want to do when we have things we want to do to look forward to.

Q: How do I get my kids to focus on school without the fighting/arguing, so I can get my work done too?

A (Jillian): Address feelings and behavior separately. All feelings are okay; all behavior is not. Take intentional time to discuss the feelings your child has.

- **Example: “How big is your mad? Tell me about it.”**
Validate that it’s understandable for them to feel this way. Explain that though they feel a hard feeling, it doesn’t mean they can behave inappropriately.
- **Example: “You can be mad, but you can’t be mean.”**
All feelings are important because they guide us, help us navigate our world, and fuel behavior. We cannot target behavior without targeting the feelings. We also cannot eliminate the hard-to-have feelings, though sometimes we wish we could. Instead, we must embrace the feelings and soothe them with nice-to-have feelings. Bring in the love, the brave, the hopeful, the kind, etc. so that there’s more to focus on and the hard-to-have feelings are not the biggest in the emotional basket.

Q: My child/teen seems like a completely different person ever since shelter in place began. What might be going on, and what can we do, especially if they don’t want to talk about what might be going on for them?

A (Jorje): This could be due to a number of things that might be going on in the life of your child/teen. It could be a part of their regular developmental process in which they are trying to find new ways to exert their sense of independence, which at times may entail spending their time away from family to be more focused on the goings-on of their personal and social world. Of course, this could also be their form of coping with the current circumstances whereby it might be too overwhelming right now to directly and verbally process these ongoing issues. In this case, it might be helpful to simply provide them the space they need or are looking for while lightly reminding them that you are a safe source of support should they want to talk about it. In this way, you are able to respect their growing sense of independence while providing them with the support and care they still need at this point in their life.

Q: My teenager really wants to see and do something in person with their friends again, how should I approach this?

A (Jorje): If you have not already, this could be an excellent opportunity to have a conversation with your teen about the pandemic and why "shelter in place" policies have been enacted by local governments. In this conversation, it will be essential to encourage questions and create a collaborative discussion as a means to avoid making them feel lectured. Additionally, it will also be important to process and recognize *why* it is that they feel the need to be around friends right now, as they might be feeling isolated or in need of new experiences again. There is likely to be ongoing pushback despite your best efforts, especially since they have had to adapt to so much so quickly, but persistence here will be key.

Q: I just cannot find time to have quality time with my kids.

A (Ann): Quality time doesn't have to be quantity time. Ten to 15 minutes once a day can work wonders for your child's emotional health and sense of connectedness. Make it a brief daily routine. Let your child choose the activity—something interactive is ideal—and just focus on being engaged without correcting, teaching or trying to change what they're doing. Be fully present—no distractions, tune into them, and offer comments that show you see, understand, and are delighted by them. The positive effects for your child can be profound!

Q: I'm anxious and overwhelmed and find myself irritable and short-tempered with my kids.

A (Ann): When our stress levels are high, and our internal and external resources are tapped out, it leaves us vulnerable to impulsivity, short tempers, and a sense of powerlessness. This is when it's time to declare "Time out!" and no, they're not just for kids! When you feel at the end of your rope, or before you've actually reached it, declare a moment of Me-time and head to a quiet space away from it all—a locked bathroom works wonders for this. Get away by yourself and practice some muscle relaxation and slow down your breathing and come back to center. A daily dose of self-care for just a few minutes is sometimes all it takes to bring your mind, body and spirit back into balance!