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Decoding Your Teen's Behavior During Isolation



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Reading Time: 5 minutes

As the weeks of social distancing continue, is your teen's behavior leaving you feeling annoyed, confused, or worried? If so, it's no surprise. This is a stressful and challenging time for everyone, and it may be particularly hard on adolescents.

Adults have more highly developed coping skills, while younger children aren't fully aware of what's going on. But teenagers understand what's happening, yet don't have the tools for navigating what they're feeling. Their ability to manage their emotions is limited, because key areas of the teen brain are **still developing** (<https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/mental-health/teen-brain-development/>). So they tend to express their fears and frustrations in ways that aren't easy for parents to understand or accept.

Furthermore, the **effects of isolation on mental health** (<https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/mental-health/effects-of-social-isolation-on-mental-health/>) can magnify everything that teens are experiencing.

Recognizing the Emotions Beneath Teenage Behavior

Adolescence is a time of tremendous emotional, mental, and physical growth. Teens' identity, friend groups, preferences, and behavior are all shifting rapidly—often from day to day. It's hard enough during normal times for teens to understand what they're going through. And it's even harder for them to find the words to express it with honesty and openness. Moreover, teens are often less willing to share what they're feeling if they know their parents are distracted and stressed.

As a result, teen behavior is often the only clue parents have for deciphering what their adolescent is thinking and feeling. And it's easy to misinterpret teenage behavior. Here are some of the reasons why parents fail to understand what a teen's actions are saying about their mood and state of mind:

Parents want to believe their teen is okay, so they minimize the significance of the behavior

Instead of seeing teen behavior as an expression of their child's pain, they take it personally, and react with anger or defensiveness

Their own stress prevents them from responding with patience and compassion

Remembering their own experience as a teenager, they incorrectly assume their child is feeling the same way they did

The parent lacks the communication skills, such as **asking open-ended questions** (<https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/empowering-teens/how-to-talk-to-teens/>), that encourage the teen to open up to them.

Consequently, a cycle of misunderstanding arises, driving teens and parents farther apart. To break that pattern, parents need to look beyond what their teens are doing—and even what they're saying—to recognize what they're really feeling.

How to Translate These Five Teen Behaviors

Here are five common behaviors parents might be noticing in their teenagers during this time of isolation at home, along with the underlying emotions and states of mind that may be prompting those behaviors.

1. If your teen is snapping at you and their siblings, they might be disappointed and angry about missing out on seeing their friends and engaging in their usual activities.

While teens understand rationally that there's no one to blame for the current situation, that doesn't make it any easier emotionally. And parents and siblings are usually the first to catch the brunt of teenage frustration. Ultimately, that's because teens trust their family to stick by them, no matter how difficult their behavior may be. Remembering that can sometimes help parents be more understanding when faced with an irritable teen.

2. If your teen is ignoring everything you ask them to do, they might be trying to maintain independence and a sense of autonomy when so many of their choices have been taken away.

Building independence is an enormous part of teenage development during this life stage. And social distancing effectively takes away a teen's sense of autonomy. They can no longer make choices about what to do and where to go; they may feel as if they're being treated like a child again. Hence, it's natural and understandable that this would provoke frustration and some degree of rebellion.

3. If your teen refuses to eat meals with the family, they might be experiencing anxiety that's manifesting as disordered eating.

There are lots of reasons why teens might not want to eat with the family: Refusing to come to the dinner table could be another form of the two behaviors listed above. But when teens repeatedly avoid mealtimes, it's important to investigate further. Research shows that **stress is associated with disordered eating** (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4214609/>). One recent study (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/erv.2714>) found that adolescent girls with anxiety disorders are at higher risk of developing restrictive eating issues, including **anorexia** (<https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/glossary/anorexia-nervosa/>).

4. If your teen is ignoring their alarm clock and sleeping late, it could be a symptom of situational depression.

While teens might be oversleeping because they're staying up late using their devices, parents shouldn't assume that's the reason. **Sleeping difficulties** (<https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/empowering-teens/adolescent-sleep-disorders/>)—whether insomnia or sleeping too much—are a sign of situational depression, a short-term form of depression brought on by a stressful or **traumatic event** (<https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/treatment/teen-trauma/>) or situation, or by significant changes in a person's life. Other symptoms of situational depression include listlessness and feelings of hopelessness, sadness, and anxiety.

5. If your teen spends all their time in their room on their phone, they might be working hard to maintain connections with peers.

Rather than interpreting your teen's behavior as withdrawal or rejection of parents or siblings, recognize that teens are wired to prioritize peer relationships. Creating connections outside the family is an essential step in teenage development. Furthermore, research shows that friendships can **help teens weather stress better**

(https://www.researchgate.net/publication/293969622_Disadvantaged_youth_report_less_negative_emotion_to_mi) with less negative emotion. However, balancing screen time with other activities is essential for maintaining mental and physical health.

How to Support Teens with Compassion

If you're a parent who's observing some of the above in your teen's behavior, remember that your teen isn't acting this way because they want to upset you. Rather, they're expressing their own pain and confusion in the only way they know how to right now. While allowing these behaviors isn't helpful for anyone in the family, responding with anger or punishment, enforcing rules without discussion, or giving teens the cold shoulder won't help either.

What teens need during this time—and at any time—is to be seen and heard with compassion and acceptance. Here are a few ways to help:

Let them know that you want to hear how they're really feeling, even if it's not positive or hopeful.

Acknowledge and validate their experience and assure them of your unconditional love and support.

Help them find healthy ways to manage stress and regulate their emotions—such as exercise, time outdoors, yoga, and journaling.

Build family time into each day, and let teens choose the activities—movies, puzzles, board games, etc.

Support teens in creating a regular schedule of online school, physical activity, virtual social connection, etc., to encourage structure and focus in their days.

When to Seek Professional Help for Your Teen's Behavior

In conclusion, this is an important time to **tune into teenage mental health** (<https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/restoring-families/supporting-teens/>) and well-being. That means asking good questions and watching for behavior that might indicate that an adolescent is dealing with depression, anxiety, or co-occurring disorders. Some of the typical signs of these issues, such as the teenage behavior detailed above, are understandable and to be expected right now. However, a high intensity and consistency of these symptoms over time can indicate that the current stressors may have triggered or exacerbated an underlying teenage mental health condition.

If you think your teen may need additional support, reach out to a healthcare professional. Many therapists and treatment centers are offering online assessments and therapy during this time. If you're having trouble accessing help, contact us. The experts at Newport Academy can help you locate the resources your family needs during this challenging time.

Sources:

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