



To Parents of Teens

Something is different. He/she is not the same. Whether it be the clothing, the typical teenage “attitude,” the “later” that never comes when you ask them to pick up their room, or something darker—withdrawal, angry outbursts, long sleeves that are hiding cuts or scratches, blood shot eyes on a Saturday night, or that “earthy” smell sticking to their clothing and hair that you remember from decades ago. Whether it be the recent plunge in grades, missed school, the new peer group that you would hate to run up against in a dark alley, the older, slicker looking boyfriend (“But I love him”) that you don’t approve of...something has changed.

For some parents, therapy comes down to seeking coaching for parenting skills—house rules, consequences, curfews. Many parents struggle with maintaining a “balance” of limits and creating a milieu for open dialogue with their teens. Parents of this generation often want their kids’ material, despite the cringe factor (sex, alcohol, drugs) so they can guide their teens and help them develop coping skills with their peers to “prevent” high risk behaviors. Therapy helps facilitate the balance between safety limits and keeping that open door dialogue.

And there is therapy for the darker side—teens spiking depressions, cutting, teens with mood disorders, substance abuse, panic, social anxiety, etc. Therapy can facilitate a combination of psychological testing (to tease out symptoms, learning disorders, ADHD, etc.) individual therapy for the teen, family therapy for all concerned, and medication (“if” needed). Therapy can provide guidance to parents regarding how to monitor for binge drinking, weed, how to guide daughters and sons with sexuality issues, how to tell the difference between a clinical depression and typical teenage angst, and how to assist the ADHD adolescent to develop time management and organizational skills.

Individual therapy for teens can help them say “no” to high risk behaviors in their culture and create “boundaries.” A number of concrete boundary skills can soften the emotional blows from bullies. Teens can learn “when” to report bullying, “when” to be assertive, “when” to blow off annoyances, and “how” to know the difference. They can learn how “not” to appear like a “gratifying” victim—one who looks scared, hurt, or angry following peer harassment. Gratifying victims continue to be bullied. And therapy can help teens from “breaking bad”: responding with aggression after being broken down by repeated victimizations.

For the “cutters” and those teens flirting with the other side, therapy can quickly address some maladaptive patterns—a tendency to ignore and block stressors and feelings until they overwhelm and flood the teen, resulting in a desire for quick relief and numbing. Therapy highlights the need to label stressors, to break down feelings into manageable chunks that can be metabolized, and to develop coping skills. Therapy can assist in developing anxiety management, problem solving, assertiveness, and relaxation skills.

Something is different. You may not even know what it is. You can feel it in your gut. You catch glimpses of it on Facebook or in texts as you enter their bedrooms. Something is different. Therapy can help define what that “different” is—whether it be within the norms of adolescent development or something riskier. And therapy can help parents take action to do “something” about that “something.”

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