

New school year offers chance to help teens manage stress

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Looming college applications. Developing a more nuanced sense of self. Earlier wake-up times. Comparing themselves to peers. Difficult classes. Time management. Striving for independence from parents.

The list of stresses teenagers face as they head back to [high school](#) is long, but there's plenty that caring parents and guardians, teachers and young people themselves can do to support teens' mental health, Cornell researchers say.

'Who do I want to be this year?'

Young people develop a more nuanced sense of self in adolescence. Caring adults can encourage that by asking questions such as, "What parts of yourself do you want to explore in this new year?" and "What value—like abandoning perfectionism—would you like to practice this year?" said Misha Inniss-Thompson '16, assistant professor in the Department of Psychology and in the College of Human Ecology (CHE). "If young folks wanted to do some journaling or some voice memo-ing or talking to friends about, 'Who am I?' 'Who do I want to be this year?' that would be helpful as they prepare for school."

'Who are my people?'

It's important for teenagers to find spaces, such as after-school programs or a library club, where they are excited to be, said Inniss-Thompson, a developmental and community psychologist who specializes in adolescence and Black girlhood. And if that space doesn't exist, encourage them to think about how they could create it. "Can they get together a couple of friends, or friends of friends, to do things they enjoy together?" she said. "Empower young folks to create spaces that feel exciting and welcoming for each other and, ultimately, that will benefit themselves."

Talk regularly, listen actively

One of the most important things parents and guardians can do is

explicitly ask teens about their well-being, to show them it is safe to talk about their feelings and mental health. "You need to come out and just say, 'Hey, I want to check in and see how you're doing. How are you feeling now?'" said Adam Hoffman, assistant professor in the Department of Psychology and (CHE). "That's all we need to do. It's all about creating a space that feels comfortable."

Establish routines

Set routines for sleep schedules, meals and study times as early as possible before school starts. That helps create predictability and can provide comfort, Hoffman said. "That reduces some of the anxiety that teenagers may be experiencing when they don't necessarily know what's happening next."

Support social connections

Before school starts, encourage your teenager to reconnect with the friends they had the year before. "That way they have that person once they get there," Hoffman said.

And encourage teens to make new friends—which is important for their development—by joining clubs and doing other activities that align with their interests, so they make best friends, very close friends and acquaintances. "That's very normative when they're in high school," he said.

Avoid overloading

As teenagers start to add more extracurriculars like sports and artistic activities, explicitly help them set priorities and manage their time. Talk to them about what priorities are, how to set them and how to balance

academics, extracurriculars and rest and relaxation.

"We want to make sure that they're being selective and thoughtful in what they're engaging in and these are actually truly things they want to be doing," Hoffman said, "and not just saying yes to everything."

Normalize stress and emotions

Remind your teenager it is OK to feel anxious about returning to school or going to a new school, and encourage them to practice self-compassion, Hoffman said. "You can let them know they may not get everything right or perfect the first time they're in a new place and new social context, and that's OK," Hoffman said. "Just having those explicit conversations actually makes a huge difference."

Model healthy coping strategies

Parents and guardians always will be among the greatest role models for their teenagers. Show them healthy ways of handling stress, such as talking with friends, exercising and journaling. "They're watching you, and that's how they will also engage in managing the difficulties that they may encounter with this transition," Hoffman said.

Foster independence

Parents should stay involved in their teenager's academic life—but also allow them to manage their responsibilities independently. "You do need to offer them more autonomy and space to grow and flourish, to become the person they want to be," Hoffman said, "while also keeping a watchful eye."

Leverage affirmations

Encourage young people to write affirmations for themselves or others. Caring adults can affirm their teens, as well. "Maybe there's a safe, supportive adult who feels, 'I want my young person to know that I love them. And here's a great thing I can share about them,' whether it's every day, every week, every month," Inniss-Thompson said.

Encourage reading books

Literature can be a great way for young people to understand themselves and the world around them. Inniss-Thompson has students in her Black Girlhood Studies class read books with Black girl protagonists, and read them with Black middle schoolers. "We ask them, 'How does this shape how you see yourself in the world?' she said.

"I think of books as a portal through which young folks see themselves, and encouraging them to read culturally diverse and age-appropriate texts, especially about experiences that they don't otherwise know about, can really push them as they're exploring who they are, who they want to be and how they want to show up."

Validate the stress

Young people may be feeling stress because of [climate change](#), the implications of artificial intelligence, the threat of global wars and a host of other large-scale, anxiety-provoking societal challenges. "I don't feel like adults do them a service by pretending it's a one-off event like COVID and it's all going to be fine," said Janis Whitlock, director of the Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery. "Please acknowledge that they live in really unusual times, and that's the reality."

Encourage undistracted rest

This can help offset the fatigue and short tempers that are common during the first few weeks of school as teenagers get acclimated to new routines, Whitlock said. "Distraction techniques like scrolling on a phone can help you come into some sort of equilibrium, but it doesn't calm you."

Help them with self-awareness

One of the most important things parents can do is help teens recognize when they're starting to feel overwhelmed, "scroll burnout" from phone overuse, or a spiral of negative emotions. "Ask them, 'Can you tell when you're starting to feel that?'" Whitlock said.

Encourage them to stay present and mindful by spending time in nature, listening to calming music, pet the family dog or cat, or do something artistic. "Having personal awareness of how our thoughts, emotions and behaviors work, I'm pretty convinced, is a foundational requirement for all of us at this juncture of human development," Whitlock said.

Provided by Cornell University

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