

TAMING THE STRESS MONSTER IN ADOLESCENCE

Why we are concerned about today's adolescents?

- z Suicide is still leading cause of death among 15-24-year-olds (35%). Also land transport accidents (22%), followed by accidental poisoning including overdoses (4.9%) and assault (2.4%). Of total adolescent deaths, 71% males. (Source: AIHW).
- z The Mission Australia Youth Survey 2019 demonstrates three issues of personal concern for 15-19s were coping with stress (45%), school or study problems (34%) and mental health (33%).
- z ARACY (2018) notes 22.8% of 15-19-year-olds have a probable serious mental illness.
- z Several studies show adolescent girls are experiencing greater levels of emotional distress or internalising problems – including a UK study of young adolescents that found the number of girls experiencing emotional problems jumped 55% between 2009 and 2014. Source: Journal of Adolescent Health
- z Nearly 1 in 5 teen girls (16-17) surveyed would meet clinical criteria for depression and anxiety. Source: The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents report 2015
- z The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents report 2015 reports that 25% of 16-17 year olds in the past year. Around one quarter of teenage girls in the 16-17 year age range reported deliberately injuring themselves at some point in their lives. (Source: The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents report 2015)
- z In good news, according to the Australian Secondary Students' Alcohol and Drug Survey (ASSAD), after an overall increase in the prevalence of substance use among secondary students during the 1990s, trends in substance use in ASSAD survey data collected between 2002 and 2017 show a substantial improvement in the prevalence of smoking, drinking (including drinking at risky levels), and cannabis use in the adolescent population.
- z However, alcohol remains a key risk factor for injury among young people, with one in five young people reporting a sexual experience linked to their drinking. (Source: ASSAD via Paul Dillon, Generation Next 2019)
- z MDMA/Ecstasy use is increasing in popularity with 1 in 20 Year 10s having tried it. And 1 in 6 Australian males and 1 in 10 females aged 16 have tried it. (Source: ASSAD via Paul Dillon, Generation Next 2019).
- z ARACY (2018) reports that 22.8% of 15-19 year olds have a probable serious mental illness.
- z In 2018-19, 43,000 young people aged 15-24 presented alone to specialist homelessness agencies. Domestic violence or unstable housing are the two most common reasons given. (Source: Australian Institute of Health & Welfare)
- z 93% of boys and over 60% of girls have viewed pornography by 18 (mostly between 14-17) (Source: The Alannah and Madeline Foundation, 2016.)
- z The Australian Medical Association pointed in a government submission to their concern about the impact of pornography on young people. (Source: Foundation for Young Australians)
- z The Youth Unemployment Rate in Australia remains stubbornly high at just over 11% (compared to the national rate of 5.3%). There are also new challenges to further study. (Source: Foundation for Young Australians)
- z About 73% of university graduates were employed four months after graduation in 2018 — the best result since 2014. But 10 years ago, that number was 85%. And only 57% felt

“Adolescents experience more intense urges than children and adults and the mental controls to stop them are in short supply.”

— Sheryl Feinstein, *Parenting the Teenage Brain* (2007).

Main drivers in adolescence

- z Seeking autonomy
- z Identity searching
- z Needing to belong
- z Immature brain driving a mature looking body
- z Separation from parents
- z Forming relationships.

There has always been a generation gap between parents and their adolescents, however, since the new millennium it has become even more of a chasm! Adolescents are still at risk of their immature brain structure until the early-mid 20s.

What's going on up there in the adolescent brain?

- z Overproduction of dendrites and synaptic connections.
- z Pruning — use it or lose it!
- z Myelination — the process of insulating the neurons and synaptic connections.
- z Adolescents are relying on their amygdala rather than the pre-frontal lobe — $f_{KIJV} \text{HTGG} \setminus G \text{QT}$, IJV responses are more likely.
- z Emotional illiteracy is the norm for many, including intense mood swings and confusion.
- z Window of sensitivity.
- z Hot cognition.

Danger signs of teens at risk

- z Isolation from family and friends.
- z Sudden changes in schoolwork, job performance or athletic activities.
- z Drastic mood swings.
- z Lack of interest in outside school activities.
- z Living in a community with high crime and easy availability of alcohol and drugs.
- z Delinquent friends.
- z Academic failure.
- z Change in eating and sleeping habits.
- z Cutting or hurting themselves.

All adolescents need lots of support and encouragement to navigate the bumpy road — make it to the end of the journey — healthy and on track to realise their full potential.

“People who have had a strong connection with a strong positive role model during adolescence are much more resilient throughout their life.”
— Nan Bahr and Diane Pendergast, *The Millennial Adolescent* (2007).

Parents can support adolescents by using caring, empowering communication

- z Use words of suggestion not direction
- z Avoid shame-based language
- z Encourage thinking and making choices
- z Lighten up!
- z Remember they are temporarily brain impaired
- z Choose right time to talk and use door openers
- z Ensure they are listening
- z Never argue with an adolescent
- z Co-parent your teen's friends and vice versa

Keep in mind the emotional barometer – especially the tipping point!

one of the most important protective factors for all children, especially our vulnerable adolescents.

Respectful parent messages that can help

1. Now that's interesting!
2. Have you given that much thought?
3. Why don't you sleep on it?
4. Tell me 'what if'?
5. May I offer a suggestion?
6. How can I support you?

WHAT HELPS THE BRAIN WORK BEST:

1. Oxygen
2. Water
3. Glucose
4. Rest
5. Good quality food
6. Omega 3 fatty-acids
7. Movement
8. Feel good brain chemicals

Doing things you enjoy, which are respectful of yourself and others, creates positive brain chemicals – ie empties the emotional barometer.

Here are some that work:

Athletic success & sport — team and individual

Artistic & creative expression — drama, dance, music, art

Deep relaxation & stillness — calming audios, quiet time at beach

Pets that love unconditionally!

Safe, honest human connection — deep human connectedness, family, friendship

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Acts of service — helping others

Discovering new purpose & meaning — starting something new such as gratitude

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