

Taming the Stress Monster in Adolescence

Why we are concerned about our adolescents?

- The suicide rate is decreasing but still the leading cause of death among 15-24-year olds (26%). Next are land transport accidents (25%), accidental poisoning including overdoses (5%) and assault (3%). 28% of victims of fatal assault were female. Of all adolescent deaths, 68% were males. (Source: [AIHW](#)).
- Mental illness is increasing among teens with anxiety disorders most common (affecting 1 in 5 females and 1 in 10 males aged 16-24). (Source: [Headspace](#))
- Nearly 1 in 5 teen girls (16-17) surveyed would meet the clinical criteria for depression and one fifth of adolescents had “very high or high levels of psychological distress”, according to [The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents](#) report 2015.
- [The Mission Australia Youth Survey 2016](#) demonstrates three issues of personal concern for young people 15-19 were *coping with stress, school or study problems* and *body image*. The top 3 national issues nominated were: *alcohol & drugs, discrimination & equity* and *mental health*.
- In 2013-2014, there were more than 33,000 hospitalisation admissions for intentional self-harm across Australia. Stats suggest less than 13% of young people who self-harm come to clinical attention. (source: [Headspace](#)).
- 1 in 10 12-17-year-olds report having self-harmed at some point, around three quarters saying they’ve done so in the past year. (Source: [The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents](#) report 2015)
- Fewer 12-17-year-olds are drinking alcohol AND markedly more of them are abstaining. (They are also delaying their uptake of smoking and illicit drug use until their older —16% of 12-17 year-olds have used illicit drugs). (Source: [Michael Livingston, “Trends in non-drinking among Australian Adolescents”, Society for the Study of Addiction, 2014](#))
- Alcohol remains a key risk factor for injury among young people, with one in five drinkers aged 16-17 reporting alcohol-related injuries and one in 10 a regretted sexual experience linked to their drinking. (Source: [Livingston](#))
- 23% of 11-24-year-olds surveyed were “very concerned” about family conflict (Source: [ARACY –Report Card-Wellbeing of Young Australians 2013](#)).
- 43,165 young people aged 15-24 approached specialist homelessness agencies between 2015-16. This number has decreased since 2011-12. Domestic violence or unstable housing are the two most common reasons given for young people presenting alone. (Source: [Australian Institute of Health & Welfare](#))
- Increased sexualisation of both boys and girls and confusing world of social media. Teen pregnancy rates are higher than OECD average.
- 32% of young people do not complete Year 12. The Youth Unemployment Rate in Australia increased to 13.2% in September 2014 from 12.8% in August of 2014. There are also new challenges to further study.
- Between 2008 and 2014, the proportion of new university graduates in full-time employment dropped from 56.4 per cent to 41.7 per cent. (Source: [ABC News](#))

“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

- Seeking autonomy
- Identity searching
- Needing to belong
- Immature brain driving a mature looking body
- Separation from parents
- 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?

- Overproduction of dendrites and synaptic connections.
- Pruning — use it or lose it!
- Myelination — the process of insulating the neurons and synaptic connections.
- Adolescents are relying on their amygdala rather than the pre-frontal lobe — *flight, freeze or fight* responses are more likely.
- Emotional illiteracy is the norm for many, including intense mood swings and confusion.
- Window of sensitivity.
- Hot cognition.

The world now appears as if through a cracked windscreen.

Adolescents need more sleep than pre-pubescents or adults.

Please share with the adolescents in your life this fantastic article from heysigmund.com:
[THE ADOLESCENT BRAIN — WHAT ALL TEENS NEED TO KNOW](#)

Danger signs of teens at risk

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

All adolescents need lots of support and encouragement to navigate the bumpy road — the journey from childhood to adulthood.

“Lighthouses” are essential for adolescents to 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

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

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

HOME — having a safe base to come to rest, restore and fill their cup is 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 — i.e. 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 CDs, quiet time at beach

Pets that love unconditionally!

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

Significant immersion in nature — walking, surfing, fishing, walking the dog

Acts of service — helping others

Discovering new purpose & meaning — starting something new, gratitude journal, fitness program

Useful apps & programs

[The Reachout Toolbox](#) helps you set goals and then find the right apps to support you to achieve them.

[iCope](#): Offers a motivational push to help you through tough spots... offers alternatives to deliberate self-harm by providing practical and easy steps to distract, displace and seek-help.

[Body Beautiful](#): Promotes positive body image and self-esteem among women and girls.

[DeepSleep](#): Incorporates guided meditation to help overcome insomnia and get to sleep.

[Recharge](#): A six-week program to improve mood, energy and wellbeing by setting better sleep patterns.

[SuperBetter](#): An online game to help you achieve health-related goals by increasing resilience.

[The Brave Program](#): self-help programs for teens to help cope with worry and anxiety.

[Break Up Shake Up](#): Easy, fun things to do to help you cope with a relationship breakup and recover quicker.

[Girl Gone Happy](#): developed by a Perth student to support teen girls.

[Breathe](#): An app from Reachout to help with physical symptoms of stress and anxiety.

[Smiling Mind](#): A modern meditation app for young people... helps with stress, anxiety, depression, positive thinking and general wellbeing.

[The Check-in app](#): From beyondblue this app helps you start a conversation with a friend who may be struggling.

[MoodGym](#): Skills for preventing and coping with depression.

Help for teens

If you need someone to help you feel safe, accepted and heard, please call or visit:

Kids Help Line: 1800 55 1800 or www.kidshelp.com.au

Life Line: 131 11 44 or www.lifeline.org.au

Suicide Callback Service: 1300 65 94 67 or www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

The following sites also have some fantastic information and resources to help teens navigate a range of issues.

www.reachout.com.au

www.eheadspace.org.au

www.youthsuicide.com

www.youthbeyondblue.com

www.youthfocus.com.au

www.headspace.org.au

www.dryes.com.au

Some of these services also offer email or web counselling and live chat.

“Every teenager has a spark — something that is good, beautiful and useful to the world. Sparks illuminate a young person’s life and give it energy and purpose.”

— Peter. L. Benson PhD, *Sparks: How Parents Can Help Ignite The Hidden Strengths of Teenagers* (2008)

Adolescence is the best time to tap into a person’s potential.

Watch Maggie’s TEDx Youth@Hale talk with your adolescent.

Exploring the Big Question — Why Am I Here?



Visit: youtube.com/maggiedentauthor to watch the talk and see our playlist of other useful video blogs about adolescence.

And you can read some blogs about/for adolescents [here](#)

Also for adolescents, I have some great infographics, audios, ebooks and other resources in Your Kit Bag for a Bumpy Ride: <http://www.maggiedent.com/yourkitbag>

www.maggiedent.com

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