

Solutions

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Positive Ties Develop Youth Resilience During Challenging Times

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FAMILY SERVICES
EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Challenges for Youth

The challenges that face present day youth are complex and multifaceted. They include meeting developmental milestones, family and peer relationships, pressures to perform academically and the expectation for an early vocational direction. Some youth face additional difficulties related to sexual identity, mental health, poverty, instability in the home, disability, bullying, addiction and transition to a new country and culture.

Responses to these challenges vary greatly. Most youth are surviving and thriving, despite these pressures. If youth were a separate species, social scientists would be interested in learning more about their resiliency and capacity for adaptation. Yet there is a segment of youth who struggle significantly. Their struggles are communicated to us through their social withdrawal, acting out behaviors, depression, perfectionism, self-harming and other high risk behaviors.

Families may feel overwhelmed by these problems. Public perception can amplify fear and increase feelings of isolation and hopelessness in families.

Frequently, the media doesn't provide a balanced perspective, emphasizing the problem over the solution. In light of all of this, how can we keep our collective eye on the real capacities of our young people, remembering that they are still works in progress? It might be helpful to consider ways in which the process of development can be supported rather than getting too caught up in particular hiccups along the way.

Signs of High or Chronic Stress in Adolescents & Young Adults

- ❖ sleeping and eating changes
- ❖ agitation
- ❖ increase in conflicts
- ❖ physical complaints
- ❖ delinquent behavior
- ❖ poor concentration

Pinpointing Problem Areas

If you are experiencing challenges with an adolescent in your life, it might be helpful to narrow down what you are dealing with. Ask yourself, am I dealing with...

- ❖ The expected challenges of adolescence
- ❖ Concerns that include an added dimension connected to a special situation; single parenting, blended family issues, violence or a youth with mental illness
- ❖ Acting-out teens

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Please give credit to Christine Garinger, BN, mindyourmind.ca*

What are the Protective Factors?

Dr. Jean Clinton, a child and adolescent psychiatrist and an Assistant Clinical Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neuroscience at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario has said,

“...youth need someone whose eyes light up when they see them...they need more of our time, not less”

A sought-after educator, Dr Clinton inspires hope and optimism. Her presentation “The Teenage Brain: Under Construction” emphasizes that critical developmental processes occur in teenage brains. While bodies mature to adult size seemingly earlier and earlier, the last part of the brain to develop is its capacity for executive functioning. This is the area responsible for logical thinking, planning and judgment, regulation of emotions and urges and inhibition. Development is not fully complete until the mid 20’s.

Evidence suggests that in fact our young people are riding a tilt-a-whirl, walking a tight-rope, essentially living life like a carnival acrobat until their brain biology settles in. Protecting that biological process of maturation is crucial. Prolonged stress can actually damage the brain.

On the other hand, positive relationships provide the most potent protective factors. Youth need strong attachments. The McCreary Centre in Vancouver BC recently released the results of a survey of over 29 000 students. Study highlights point convincingly to the following: that youth who feel cared for by their family; feel connected to school; have competent, caring adults to turn to with problems; and who have supportive friends with positive social values are less likely to succumb to external, negative influences. In addition, they are less likely to engage in risky behaviors. They also tend to report lower levels of emotional distress.

Vulnerable, at-risk youth benefit in many ways with even a small improvement in a protective factor such as school or family connectedness.

The Adolescent Health Survey indicates that in addition to reducing emotional distress protective factors create opportunities for developing creative skills and artistic expression, for teamwork, for health enhancing social activities and for making a difference in the community through volunteer work.

A Sense of Purpose

Defined by researchers, resilience means doing well in life despite adversity. Adversity can be represented in the extreme such as abuse or poverty or it may be present in the face of everyday challenges. Resilience is an essential part of supporting the capacities of the individual to respond positively to his or her world.

Identifying a sense of meaning in life, having faith and hope, contributes to resilience in young people. Meaningful participation and involvement in an activity with a focus outside him/herself is known as youth engagement.

Creating a Support Team

Depending on your circumstances you may require support from multiple sectors including: counseling support, medical support, legal support, crisis support, and educational support.

In all situations:

- Know that youth are more vulnerable if they have been personally affected by a loss, live in a vulnerable community or are dealing with mental health challenges
- Acknowledge feelings, invite open discussion and questions
- Role model self-care
- Focus on resilience, protective factors and strengths
- Expressing strong emotions builds resilience
- Be Optimistic
- Invite open conversations but don’t push
- Anxiety can result due to media overload
- Consider developmental abilities (remember the teenage brain is under construction)
- Spend energy on coping, not blaming
- Help others in need, build community
- Watch behaviours that signal problems
- Practice realistic strategies:
 - clear communication, set limits, define responsibilities, enforce consequences, negotiate don’t dictate, problem solve, manage anger

mindyourmind.ca is a innovative mental health program delivered by an FSEAP partner and is available internationally at no charge. The program brings young people together in person and online to develop skills in leadership and advocacy while focusing on the issues of mental health and wellness. **mindyourmind.ca** has developed an online checklist for parents with the goal of promoting new, more effective communication strategies between parents/caregivers and their teens.

The tool can be accessed at: <http://www.mindyourmind.ca/mind-tools/answer-stuff/parents.html>

fseap -- offers confidential professional assistance on a wide variety of personal and work-related issues. For information and assistance from your EAP call: **(613) 725-5676**