Excerpted from Chapter 3 of *The New Adolescence*

How to Help Teens DEAL WITH STRESS

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INTRODUCTION

The Happiness Paradox

Although income inequality has been increasing since the 1970s, we Americans are living in a time of unprecedented consumer consumption, the likes of which were unimaginable before World War II. We pursue pleasure—and it's close cousin comfort—like it's our job. The result? We aren't happier, but most Americans are more comfortable, at least materially, than ever before. We eat out in restaurants more often, and we own more material goods designed to provide convenience and comfort. And we have devices and technologies that bring these things to us in a steady stream of ease and gratification.

Given all this material comfort, it is ironic that people talk about their stress—and the stress of our teens and college students—as though life is barely endurable.

The relentless pursuit (and easy availability) of comfort steers us toward a single feeling state: happiness. Seduced by the obvious desirability of pleasure, our innate drive to avoid discomfort, and the genuine benefits of happiness, it's easy to sour on anything less than comfort and joy. This also means that we tend to view discomfort as toxic, unmanageable, and unbearable. And this, ironically, makes us more uncomfortable.

Here's why: As the range of experiences we seek narrows to include fewer and fewer experiences that fall outside of our "comfort zone," we get out of the practice of dealing with the harder bits of life. Hardship—or even just uneasiness—requires a skillfulness that teens today aren't necessarily developing.

So while it's true that happiness comes from positive emotions, a joyful life also comes from resilience. When we have the tools we need, we can cope with life's inevitable difficulties and painful moments. Like it or not, we tend to develop the skills we need to cope with difficulty and discomfort only when we need them: when we're dealing with difficulty and discomfort.

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For that reason, a certain amount of stress can be healthy. A mountain of research shows that we learn and grow when we are out of our comfort zone—when we are exposed to something new. This is important because stress can act as a vaccine for future stress. (Researchers even call it "stress inoculation.") People who can weather stressful circumstances frequently go on to demonstrate above-average resilience.

But as our kids deal with discomfort less and less, minor inconveniences (like a long line or unexpected traffic) start to feel difficult to navigate. Loss, even if it is just a high school soccer game, feels intolerable. Not getting what we want can feel humiliating and scary.

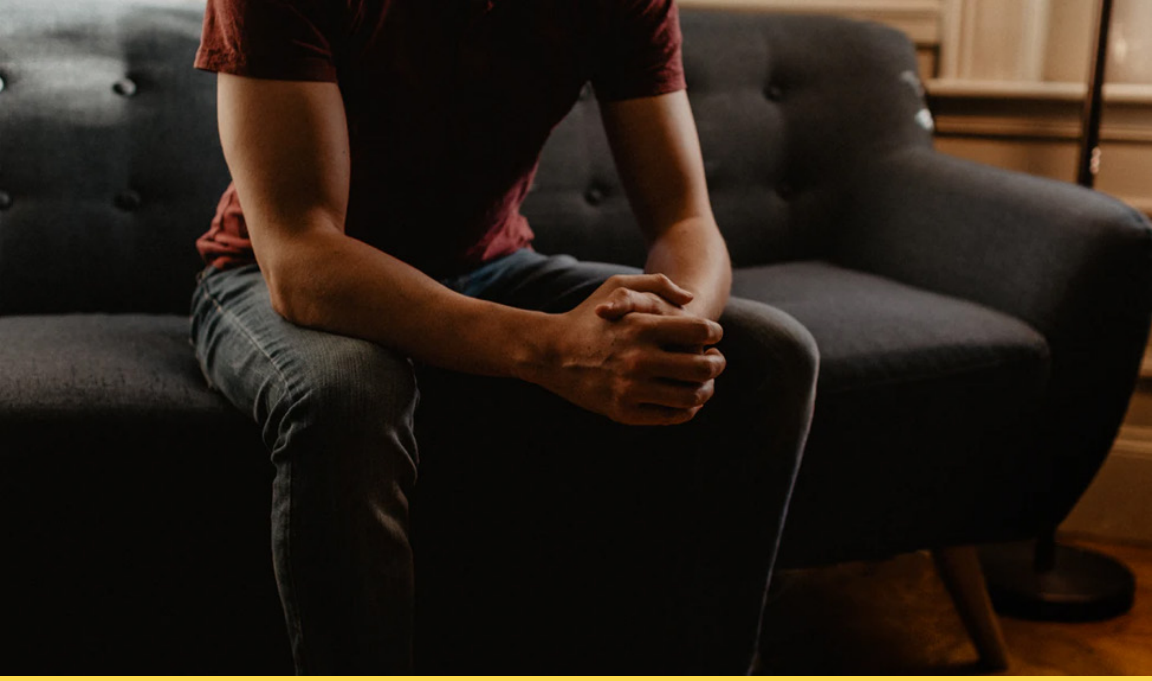
When we parents see that our kids are anxious or upset, we understandably want to protect them from emotional pain. We want to take it away. We don't like to see their anguish, so we do anything we can to eliminate their discomfort and difficulty. It turns out that this is not so helpful.

When teenagers are over-helped, they learn that it must be really awful to experience difficult things, such as homesickness, a super-hard class, or

changing schools. This just isn't true. Difficulty is rarely terrible if you have the skills you need to navigate it. Even if we only want to feel happy, life will still be full of "difficult" emotions like anger, sadness, and disappointment, and most will pass uneventfully. The so-called negative emotions are not necessarily traumatic, scarring, unnatural—or to be avoided.

We think we are helping our kids when we rush in to protect them from disappointment and difficulty. Still, when we do so, we are basically teaching them that they can't handle challenges on their own. This probably is true if they've never dealt with difficulty independently; teens who always have problems solved for them don't know how to solve problems themselves.

This guide will show you how to teach the teens in your life how they can solve their problems—and manage their own stress—themselves.



7 STEPS TO COACH TEENS THROUGH DIFFICULTY

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to become your kids' coach. The critical difference between managing a teenager and coaching one is that parent-managers rescue their teens from pain, whereas parent-coaches see their kids as capable of making choices and solving their own problems. As coaches, we can ask questions that help our teens see the possibilities for positive action. Instead of making their decisions for them, we can help them make better decisions for themselves. We can help them focus on what they do want instead of what they do not want.

A clarification: Parent-coaches are nothing like mediocre athletic coaches, yelling instructions from the sidelines. As discussed in chapter two of *The New Adolescence*, we're trying to be less bossy and less controlling. This doesn't mean, however, that we step back so far that we become lenient or neglectful. As coaches, we still create the scaffolding and structure our kids need to keep them safe and healthy and to allow them to develop the skills

they need for health and happiness. We might lead drills and enforce league rules, so to speak, but they are the team captain.

When our kids are struggling, instead of trying to mask or take away their pain, we can help them feel more comfortable with discomfort. This way, kids learn to rise to new challenges and grow from trying or painful experiences. (Or they can learn positive ways of coping when they aren't getting what they want.)

Another caveat: Some teens are so anxious or depressed that they clearly need professional psychological support. The tactics in this short guide are for kids who are feeling normal grief over a loss, normal stress because of academic pressure, normal sadness, or insecurities in response to social difficulties, and so on. If you aren't sure if the challenging emotions your teen is experiencing are in the range of normal, please consult with a licensed therapist.

STEP 1

Confront the stress.

The most important thing to do when a teen is anxious or suffering is to help them confront the stressor or worry rather than avoid it. Why? Because avoidance fuels anxiety.

In the short run, avoidance doesn't seem to fuel anxiety; it appears to provide relief. We often feel better just by thinking about avoiding something that is stressing us out. But because avoidance doesn't actually help us cope with whatever has us so worried, it'll usually come back to bite us in relatively short order.

Avoiding worries, stressors, and problems prevents our teens from seeing that they have what it takes to deal with their fears and challenges—and this is an essential thing for them to learn. Moreover, avoidance fuels future avoidance, which in turn increases the odds that our teens will become increasingly afraid of whatever it is that they are avoiding. All of this worsens anxiety over time.

Below are some strategies that help more than offering reassurance, giving direction, or distracting your teen from their issue.

STEP 2

Ask them to describe the difficult circumstance.

Maybe it is a problematic friendship, or perhaps they didn't make a team they really wanted to be on. Perhaps they are stressed about an upcoming test or feeling left out of a social scene. Maybe they embarrassed themselves in class, or maybe they are physically sick and in pain.

As parents, we need to recognize that their difficulties are real—even if they sometimes seem to us to be dramatic, overblown, or irrational. The key is not to deny what they are going through and how it is making them feel. For example, when they say that they are lonely, we might be tempted to say, "But you have so many friends!" Instead, have them simply give you the facts of the hard place they are in, and in response, show genuine curiosity about their experience. You are not trying to take away their pain. The goal is for them to feel seen and heard by you.

STEP 3

Help them identify how they are *feeling* in response to the circumstance.

"I'm feeling anxious right now," they might say, or "I feel stressed and nervous." This is the "name it to tame it" technique, and research shows that when we label our emotions, we are better able to integrate them. If they start telling you a story that is making them more emotional, gently bring them back to what they are feeling. The task here is to identify *what* they are feeling, not necessarily *why* they are feeling that way. This can be difficult for parents and teenagers alike because we can get attached to our narratives about why we are upset. It's usually easier to stick to our story than to reveal how we are feeling. But again, the task here is to talk about the actual emotions, not the reasons for their feelings.

Encourage your teens to hang in there with unpleasant feelings. See if they can objectify their emotions. Ask, "Where in your body do you feel anxious/lonely/homesick/sad? Does the feeling have a color? A texture? A shape?" Don't let kids distract themselves from their difficult emotions before they've

acknowledged them. You might need to remind them that avoiding their feelings—or the situations that make them feel that way—actually prolongs difficult emotions.

See if you can sum up their stressful experience or circumstance (the facts, not the story) and their feelings about the situation in a simple phrase or two. For example, "You ate lunch by yourself again today. You feel sad and lonely." Throw in a little empathy if you feel like you need to, such as, "That's so hard. I can remember eating lunch alone and feeling lonely when I was in high school, too. It's awful." Kids and teens are much more likely to listen to us if they feel understood.

A WORD ABOUT KIDS WHO ARE VERY, VERY UPSET

It's normal if teens seem to be trying to make you just as upset as they are. Kids often communicate what they are feeling by inducing those same feelings in other people. When this happens, try to hold up an emotional mirror between you two by verbally reflecting back to them what they seem to be feeling. For instance, say something like, "I can see that you are really suffering" or "I can see that you are very, very upset right now." Let them see that you aren't afraid of their big emotions and that you aren't trying to change or fix them. It's hard, but resist the urge to reassure them, tell them everything is going to be okay, or offer platitudes like "this too shall pass."

STEP 4

Ask them about the source of their stress.

I've taken a lot of advice on this topic from psychologist Lisa Damour, author of *Under Pressure: Confronting the Epidemic of Stress and Anxiety in Girls*. Damour's stance is that we parents are most useful to our teenagers when we help them ask themselves, "What is the source of my stress?" and "Why am I anxious?" It might be evident to you what is going on, but the task here isn't to hand them a diagnosis, but rather to help them see for themselves what is going on more clearly.

It can help to let kids know what stresses most people out. Sonia Lupien at the Centre for Studies on Human Stress has a convenient acronym, NUTS, for what makes life stressful:

Novelty
Unpredictability
Threat to the ego
Sense of control

STEP 5

Encourage them to classify their *type* of stress.

In addition to searching for sources of stress, it can be helpful for teens to classify the particular strain of stress they are experiencing. Is it related to an adverse life event? Is it the result of cumulative day-to-day difficulties that are beyond the teen's control? Or is it a daily hassle?

Life event stressors are things such as mourning the death of a loved one, changing schools, or dealing with divorce. The more change a life event requires a teen to make, the more stressful it will be.

Chronic stress is when "basic life circumstances are persistently difficult," according to Damour. Chronic stress is caused by things like living in poverty or living with a severely depressed parent or having a chronic illness like cancer. I also suspect that many of today's teens are experiencing a form of chronic stress caused by current events. Three-quarters of teenagers in the US say they are stressed about mass shootings and school shootings. More than half feel stressed about the current political climate, and more than two-thirds feel significantly stressed about our nation's future. About 60 percent are worried about the rise in suicide rates, about climate change

and global warming, and about the separation and deportation of immigrant and migrant families. Although as adults we may have the skills we need to shield us from these chronic stressors, a majority of our teenagers do not yet have this ability. Social media is also a source of constant stress for many teens. Nearly half say social media makes them feel judged, and more than one-third report feeling bad about themselves as a result of social media use.

Surprisingly, one study found that the number of **daily hassles** a teen faces can predict their emotional distress over time. It turns out that daily hassles have a more significant impact on teens' well-being than other types of stress! In fact, daily hassles tend to be more distressing for teens than adverse life events or chronic stress. Knowing this, we can often help kids solve some of their daily hassles, even if we can't change their circumstances.

For example, when one of my daughters was going through a hard time at school socially, she also had a daily hassle: getting home from school. She often had to wait forty minutes or longer for the bus to come at the end of the school day. This was precious homework time. She was super stressed and having a hard time keeping up in her classes. I couldn't ease her social pain (a chronic stressor), but we eliminated the daily hassle of getting her home from school by creating a carpool.

STEP 6

Help them see that their stress can be helpful.

Stress, according to Damour, is the tension or strain we feel when we are pushed outside of our comfort zones. Stress is healthy and helpful when it creates enough tension and strain to foster growth.

Think of a muscle that is stressed by weight training. It tenses up and even breaks down a little. The weight might be tough to lift, and the muscle might be sore afterward. Still, the stress of a heavy weight—so long as it isn't so heavy that it causes a significant injury—strengthens the muscle.

Stress can work the same way. For example, school is supposed to be stressful: it is supposed to stretch teens so that they can grow. Anxiety, on the other hand, is the fear, dread, and panic that can come up for us in the face of a stressor (or even just the mere thought of a stressor).

Sometimes anxiety is an important warning system that we are in danger. It's appropriate for us to feel anxious when we are riding in a car if the driver is texting, for example. Legitimate anxiety makes us want to get the heck out of imminent danger. I once had a really nice-seeming neighbor who scared the bejeezus out of me. Every time he'd stop to chat, friendly

and normal-seeming as he was, the hair on my neck would stand up and my heart would start racing and thudding in my chest. It was all I could do not to run and hide from him. It turns out that my anxiety was legitimate, as I later found out that he had spent a decade in a maximum-security prison for violent sex crimes.

Other times, anxiety is more about excitement than it is a sign of danger. As Maria Shriver writes in *And One More Thing Before You Go...*, "Anxiety is a glimpse of your own daring . . . Part of your agitation is just excitement about what you're getting ready to accomplish. Whatever you're afraid of—that is the very thing you should try to do."

But more often than not, our anxiety isn't helpful. Unhelpful anxiety makes us hesitate rather than bolt. We are afraid of looking stupid, so we don't ask a burning question. We fear failing, so we don't even try.

We can help our teens figure out whether they are experiencing legitimate anxiety or unhelpful anxiety. Do they have the desire to get the heck out of an imminently dangerous situation? If so, their anxiety is likely legitimate. We can support them in getting out of that dangerous situation. But if their anxiety is paralyzing them, help them consider that their anxiety may be unfounded and that it is holding them back.

STEP 7

Practice acceptance.

The goal here is to help kids drop their resistance to the problematic situation and accept that it exists. For teens to do that, it helps when we also allow whatever is happening to be as it is for the moment. Why? Because resisting the current reality doesn't help us recover, learn, grow, or feel better. It merely amplifies the difficult emotions we are feeling. There is real truth to the old aphorism that what we resist persists. Weirdly, resistance prolongs our pain and difficulty. The more our kids resist reality, the more likely it is that they will start showing signs of a dysregulated stress response. In other words, when kids aren't managing stressful or difficult situations effectively, they tend to start having larger and larger stress responses to smaller and smaller stimuli.

But how do we even begin to stop resisting what hurts or what scares us? And how do we help our kids do this, too?

Behavioral science and great wisdom traditions both point us toward acceptance. Research psychologist Kristin Neff has shown that resistance increases our suffering, while acceptance is one of those counterintuitive secrets to happiness. It is strangely effective to simply accept that which we

cannot control, especially if we are in a difficult or painful situation. To do this, we allow a difficult situation, and also our emotions about the situation. We can't make our kids practice acceptance. Still, we can model our own practice of acceptance around their circumstances—and their feelings about that situation.

For example, they might have a particularly difficult relationship with a teacher or classmate. We can show them that we calmly accept this difficult relationship, and even that problematic relationships are a part of life. We can also let them know that we don't expect them to feel calm about this. We don't expect them to feel anything other than the frustration that they are currently feeling. In turn, they too might accept the difficult relationship as their present reality and also that they feel frustrated by the situation.

This doesn't mean that the situation will never get better; acceptance is not the same as resignation. We don't accept that things are going to stay the same forever, just whatever is happening at the moment. Teens can work to make the relationship less difficult (or to do their best studying for the next test, or whatever the situation), while at the same time accepting the reality that right now, the situation is very difficult. Maybe it will get better, and maybe it won't. Practicing acceptance in the face of difficulty is hard, and it's also the most effective way to move forward.

This approach requires trust on the parent's part. Trust that if your teen is still here and still breathing, everything is actually okay. Trust that even if we don't give them specific instructions for solving their issue, life will continue to unfold just as it's meant to. Trust that even if it all goes to hell, even if other people make mistakes or do things differently than we would do them, our kids can deal with the outcome. Trust that they (and we) can handle all the painful emotions that come up in response to what does or does not happen. Trust that they can handle loss and grief should it come.

We parents need to trust that this approach—practicing acceptance rather than resistance—works. When we accept the reality of a difficult or scary situation and our limited control, it allows our kids to do the same. Importantly, acceptance also frees them up to move forward, rather than remaining paralyzed by difficulty and fear.

In the end, we parents can't take away our children's pain and discomfort, as much as we might want to—and usually, we'll do well not to try to. But by peacefully accepting that being human is often hard and uncomfortable and even painful, we open the door to compassion and wisdom—both theirs and ours.

CHEATSHEET

Helping Teens Deal with Stress

Step 1: Confront the Stress. The most important thing to do when a teen is anxious or suffering is to help them confront the stressor or worry rather than avoid it. Why? Because avoidance fuels anxiety.

Step 2: Ask them to describe the difficult circumstance. Have them simply give you the facts of the hard place they are in, and in response, show genuine curiosity about their experience. You are not trying to take away their pain. The goal is for them to feel seen and heard by you.

Step 3. Help them identify how they are *feeling* in response to the circumstance. This is the "name it to tame it" technique, and research shows that when we label our emotions, we are better able to integrate them.

Step 4. Ask them about the source of their stress. We can encourage them to look for what might be new or changing in their lives. Similarly, we can help them look for sources of unpredictability or to identify ways that

they feel threatened. And we can ask them about the things in their lives that feel out of their control.

Step 5. Encourage them to classify their type of stress. In addition to searching for sources of stress, it can be helpful for teens to classify the particular strain of stress they are experiencing. Is it related to a negative life event? Is it the result of cumulative day-to-day difficulties that are beyond the teen's control? Or is it a daily hassle?

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