

Emerging Minds

National Workforce Centre
for Child Mental Health

Communicating with your teenager during adversity or tough times



Most parents wonder how to talk to their teenager about going through tough times

This resource will help you prepare for conversations with your teenager about your experience of adversity, so together you can better understand these challenges. It steps you through:

- **understanding how adversity affects you**
- **thinking about what your teenager notices and experiences and how they make sense of what is happening for you**
- and
- **preparing to talk to your teenager.**

“I think it’s best coming from us. I’d got to a point where I had accepted my condition, I was getting some treatment, and I knew enough about it to explain it to them in an age-appropriate way.”

Craig, parent (TAS)

Your relationship with your teenager

As a parent it can be very challenging to think about how your child views what is happening to you. It may be useful to talk to your health professional or another support person about the impact of adversity on your role as a parent.

Conversations with your child about difficult times can help them to make sense of their experience. If you are trying to understand your own experience, or need to talk about your experiences, discuss this with either an adult that you trust, a health professional or a peer worker. Do not expect your child to help you understand your experience of adversity.

Parental adversity can take many shapes and affect parents in different ways. Just because you are a parent it doesn’t mean you are unaffected by life’s challenges.

It is important to remember that your experience of adversity does not make you a bad parent. It is possible to have a great relationship with your teenager even when things are tough.

For some parents, adversity can become overwhelming and stop them from having the kind of relationship with their teenager that they would like.

Start with the reflective exercise on the next page.

A reflective exercise

Do not do this activity if you are feeling particularly distressed or overwhelmed today

Think about the effects of your experience of adversity or hard times on you and what others may notice. Mark them in the list below to get started.

- ☐ Talking and moving slowly
- ☐ Worrying a lot
- ☐ Suspicious thoughts
- ☐ Traumatic flashbacks
- ☐ Feeling sad or teary
- ☐ Feeling over-sensitive
- ☐ Self-harm
- ☐ Struggling to concentrate
- ☐ Seeing or hearing things
- ☐ Low motivation
- ☐ Not mixing with others
- ☐ Feeling anxious
- ☐ Abuse/overuse of alcohol or drugs
- ☐ Feeling numb
- ☐ Very tired
- ☐ Sleeping a lot
- ☐ Irritable, short-tempered
- ☐ Angry outbursts
- ☐ Suicidal thoughts
- ☐ Feeling restless

Are there any others? List these below:

Write five of the effects of adversity that worry you in the space provided below. Focus on those that have an impact on you as a parent. Then reflect on what you think your teenager might see, hear and feel when they are with you. Write your thoughts in the space below.

1.

Effect:

What does my child see, hear and feel?

2.

Effect:

What does my child see, hear and feel?

3.

Effect:

What does my child see, hear and feel?

4.

Effect:

What does my child see, hear and feel?

5.

Effect:

What does my child see, hear and feel?

Understanding what your teen notices and experiences

Children at different stages will notice and react to their parents' emotions differently. Parent-teen relationships can be complex. Teenagers are in the process of developing an adult view of the world; they're trying to make sense of their relationships with you and with others. Watching you go through difficult times may challenge how they see you and how they see themselves.

It is common for teenagers to worry about their parent, their parent's experiences of adversity and how this impacts their relationship with you. They may want to know what difficulties you face and what is being done to overcome these challenges, and how to explain these difficult times to others without feeling like they are being disrespectful or disloyal to you.

Thinking about the effects of the adversity that you listed in the reflective exercise:

- How might your sense of being overwhelmed be affecting your teenager?
- How might your experience of adversity impact on your relationship with them?
- Which effects appear to be the most challenging for them?
- How might this impact on their involvement with community activities, friends or peers?
- What concerns might they have about their own experience of adversity?
- How might your moods and behaviours be affecting their decisions?
- What information could help your teenager to understand your experience of adversity?

Preparing to talk with your teenager

Conversations with your teenager about your experience of adversity are important. These conversations can help you to understand your child's experiences and can help your child understand your experiences and the family situation. This may help them make sense of what is happening. When your child does not understand the situation, they can worry, feel alone and misunderstand what is going on. They may feel personally responsible and worry about you and your health and safety.

Helping your teenager to understand your circumstances and what it means for your family will:

- help them to know that it is okay to talk about difficult times
- allow them to ask questions and have honest conversations
- help them to come to you (or others) when they are worried or overwhelmed
- and
- build an understanding that can strengthen your relationship.

Other trusted adults can be helpful when explaining your experience of adversity to your child. Consider grandparents, other family members or good friends. Have a conversation with these people. Tell them about the information you have given to your teenager and the information that you would like them to share. You can also tell them if there is anything that you do not want to be shared with your teenager.



Starting the conversation with your teen

You might start a conversation about your circumstances with:

- “You may have been worried about.... or noticed....”

(Use the effects of adversity list to get started)

- “I want you to know what I am worried about. You have not caused this. It is not your fault”.

You might invite your child to talk about what they have noticed or are worried about:

- “What have you noticed that worries you?”

You can then follow with:

- “I am here to talk to you if you have any questions or are worried.”
- “If you feel you can’t come to me, you can talk to....”

An example of how you could start the conversation:

“You might have noticed I don’t seem to have much energy and I am always tired. This is because I’m going through a tough time. I want you to know you have not caused this and it is not your fault. I don’t like feeling like this and it must be hard for you to understand when you see me tired and sleeping a lot.”

Write your own starting script here:

Tips to remember

- Young people access and receive information from a number of different places such as friends, television and online, including social media. This information may not always match your experience. Listen to your child and then explain your experience.
- Make sure that the discussion happens when you are both ready and calm.
- Encourage your teenager to ask questions or raise concerns whenever they want, but understand that they may need some time to process the information first. Questions may come later.
- Set up a process so that if you are too unwell or do not have the energy to answer your teenager’s questions, they know that you will make time for them later.
- One discussion is never enough – a shared understanding takes time and your teenager’s questions and need for information will change.
- Set up a support network for your teenager so that if you cannot answer their questions they can seek answers from a person that you both trust (e.g. a family member, family friend or a health professional).
- Although discussions might be short, their meaning is important. Often the first discussion is the most daunting. Small conversations can build on your teenager’s and your family’s shared understanding over time.



Delivery partners:



RACGP

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