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Helping Your Angry, Unhappy Adolescent

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It's tough being an adolescent. In the recorded history of the human race, there has never been a teenager who felt truly and completely understood by his or her parents! If you find that difficult to believe, dear parent, think back to when YOU were a teenager. The emotional turmoil! The dreams! The idealism! The despair! The cynicism! The confusion! The daunting challenges of dealing with life's big-ticket issues: who am I, what do I want, where am I going?

To really complicate matters, many of the typical struggles adolescents go through become magnified by AD/HD. The emotional and unpredictable adolescent becomes a whole lot more emotional and unpredictable. The problems that come with increasing demands for responsibility, planning, and organization are tripled or quadrupled. This not only places a great deal of stress on the adolescent, but also on the parents and the entire family.

It will surprise no one to learn that relationships between parents and teens with AD/HD are characterized by more conflicts, more negative communications, more oppositional behavior from the teens, and more coercive behavior from the parents. If one or both parents also have AD/HD — duck!

What's a parent to do? First of all sit back, take a deep breath, exhale slowly, and relax. Adolescence officially ends at age 18. Dealing with adolescent issues becomes much less of a chore when your teen leaves for college or starts a full-time job. In the meantime our job as parents is to provide understanding, guidance when needed, encouragement and support, and unconditional love — even when their behavior drives us up the wall (or OUR behavior drives THEM up the wall). What will help in almost all cases is understanding the adolescent and how AD/HD impacts her or his behavior, maintaining a healthy perspective, and providing constructive help.

Provide understanding and a helping relationship

What lies beneath the adolescent's unhappy and angry exterior? If your teen is like most other teens with AD/HD (bet on it), much of the anger comes from feeling pressured and coerced, criticized, unappreciated, and misunderstood. Behind the unhappiness are very common feelings of frustration, a sense of failure, discouragement, and loss of confidence and faith in oneself. What is essential for the parent to understand is that "perception is reality." Even if these feelings and beliefs don't have a logical basis for them, to the adolescent experiencing them they are very real indeed.

Misinterpreting such feelings and behaviors as lack of respect for adults or disregard of responsibility can have disastrous consequences. No individual of any age who is feeling hurt, confused, and helpless will benefit from being criticized or punished. True understanding requires more than awareness — it requires acceptance, empathy, and a powerful caring desire to work together with the person. If these things are missing on the part of the parents, it's probably an indicator to consider some professional interventions.

Develop and maintain a healthy perspective

Imagine your child as a 30-year-old adult, sitting around with friends and saying: "I had a very happy childhood; I have many fond memories of arguing and fighting with my parents every day about cleaning my room." Parental responsibility is to help raise a healthy, responsible, reasonably happy young adult. Beyond that, "sweating the small

stuff" frustrates everyone and dampens the joys of life. There is no research whatsoever which shows that maintaining a neat room in childhood, to use one example, leads to greater success or happiness in adult life.

A healthy perspective on AD/HD avoids labels and stereotypes, values the individual first and foremost, and focuses on strengths and solutions rather than deficits and problems. AD/HD is part of the genetic makeup of the human race — it is not a disease, a scourge, or a predictor of a failed and unhappy life. The adolescent with AD/HD is, first, an adolescent like any other adolescent. Second, the adolescent is a person who also happens to have AD/HD! This distinction in perceptions and attitudes from the people around us is crucial to the person living with AD/HD. It is always sad to find an individual of any age whose sense of identity revolves around his or her AD/HD. No one likes to feel treated like a diagnostic label — least of all, a teenager! Labels and stereotypes damage a person's sense of worth and personal integrity.

One of the most useful reminders for parents to keep a healthy perspective on AD/HD consists of two simple words: "lighten up!" Provide help and encouragement as needed to manage the AD/HD, but also show faith in your child's ability to deal with this condition and find ways to cope with any problems that come up. Save the lectures — please! — when your teen's eyes begin to gloss over after the 1,000th discussion of the same topic. Focus on teaching problem solving, the HOW of changing behavior and dealing with problems rather than the WHY the behavior needs to change! Acknowledge effort, celebrate successes, and never fail to express your genuine faith in the person's ability to achieve goals and overcome obstacles.

Ten Strategies For Parents Of Teens With AD/HD

1. Understand your adolescent empathetically. We were all teenagers once. What was it like? What did you wish that your parents knew back then?
2. Develop and maintain a healthy perspective. Avoid criticism and blame. Focus on strengths and solution.
3. Avoid labels and stereotypes. Focus on the unique individual. Labels damage feelings of worth and sense of personal integrity.
4. Never punish biology. AD/HD is a neurobiological condition, not a character defect. Symptoms must be treated and managed, not criticized or punished when not within the person's control.
5. Empower the person. Teach problem solving strategies. Provide support and unconditional love. Encourage dreams.
6. Don't shut off "teen oxygen." For most adolescents a healthy social life is as life-sustaining as the oxygen they breathe. If it becomes necessary to discipline by placing restrictions on social activities, do so sparingly.

7. Be a positive role model. The most powerful role models are parents and other individuals in meaningful relationships. If you want your teen to be a certain type of person, BE that type of person!
8. Don't be a dictator. Show a willingness to work things out. Minimize excessive oppositional conflicts.
9. Don't preach — teach! Endless lecturing or nagging get tuned out. Focus on the HOW of getting things done, then monitoring and improving those efforts.
10. Lose some battles, but win the war. Healthy compromise beats endless battles.

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About The Author

Peter Jaksa, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist with over 30 years' experience working with children, adolescents, and adults with ADHD. Dr. Jaksa is the author of numerous articles and columns about ADHD, including articles published in **ADDitude Magazine**, **Attention Magazine**, **Organize Magazine**, and **FOCUS**. He has provided interviews to national publications and news organizations including the **Wall Street Journal**, **CNN**, **U.S. News & World Report**, **Chicago Tribune**, and **Men's Health Magazine**. He has presented at national conferences to health care professionals, educators, and the general public. Dr. Jaksa is a contributing writer for **ADDitude Magazine** and a member of the Scientific Advisory Board. He is the author of *Life With ADHD* and co-author of *Real People, Real ADHD*.