

## **Top Tips for Parents of COVID19 era 'Locked Down' Teens**

Dr Dominique Thompson  
GP, Mental Health Expert and

Author of *How to Grow a Grown Up* (PenguinRandomHouse) and the Student Wellbeing series  
(Trigger press)

### **Include them in your activities, but don't force them to join**

The whole point of the teenage years is to separate successfully from family, and survive (and thrive) without parents/ carers stepping in. Being forced to spend time locked down with their families is going against every evolutionary bone in their body, even if they don't realise it. This is partly what is making them so uncomfortable (anxiety and uncertainty won't be helping either). They are desperate to be independent, develop their self-identity and build their peer network, but are trapped indefinitely with their family. It's agony. What can you do? Encourage them to join film night or the family walk, be kind and tolerant of their need for separate space, but don't force them. Ask how you could make it easier/ better if they are reluctant. Be gently persistent if at first they push back. Walking with just one person, or several steps behind you is ok. With headphones in. It's all ok. (If anxiety is the issue... see below). Make sure they stay connected to their friends- remotely.

### **Let them sleep.**

Teenagers need about 9 hours sleep, and their body clocks are set to send them to sleep at about 1am on average. Don't try to force them to sleep earlier, just because you're exhausted. Let them sleep in till about 10am. This is their natural sleep pattern, it's just that society doesn't normally allow for this. So there is at least one (very small) silver lining for teens here, they may at last be able to get the sleep they need. Routine is important too, so encourage them not to spend all day in bed just because they can. Up at about 10-11am is good, then studying or doing some exercise, or a project, or chores- they are all purposeful activities.

### **Talk to them. They may just grunt, but they can hear you.**

They need to feel included, and not overly isolated, but give them space. Tell them they are loved, or welcome to join you for dinner or family time, that they can talk to you if they need to. They need to hear these things, even if they seem to ignore it. They can hear you pottering about, it's comforting, and annoying at the same time, but that's ok. Hug them if you can, even briefly. Talk to them in 'sideways conversations', walking the dog, preparing dinner, or on the sofa, but not eye to eye over a table, it can feel 'too much' for them. Respect their need for space and separateness.

### **Encourage boundaries and respect.**

Teens have 'black and white' thinking, so everything is always 'awful' or 'awesome'. So when they get emotional, it can feel extreme. Boundaries still matter and they still need to be respectful though, never aggressive (or even violent). If it helps, remind them that in the future they will need to be tolerated and liked by friends and flatmates, so they can start practising for future communal living now. Also, hygiene matters! But an untidy bedroom doesn't too much.

### **Ask about friends**

If you want to find out how they are coping, but you think asking them directly will cause friction, ask how their friends are managing. What their friends are doing to keep busy or fit. Talking about friends can allow them to express their *own* feelings indirectly. (This is also a good tip for general awkward conversations such as about contraception, or drugs "what do your friends think about...?".)

### **Anxiety is normal -but you can help**

Many teens are currently feeling particularly anxious and uncertain as their routine and lives are being turned upside down. They are not alone of course, but for them, the issues will range from missing their friends, boyfriends or girlfriends, to disappointment about the abrupt end of school, or cancellation of exams they have worked so hard towards, and even the cancellation of Glastonbury, among multiple other event or holiday losses this year. At such an overwhelming time, when they are not yet able to fall back on life experience, we need to reassure them, help them to find daily purpose and help them stay connected, to avoid them sliding into worse anxiety or depression.

We need to reassure them that this lockdown will not be forever, even if it feels like it.

That if they can find something useful or purposeful to do each day, they will feel better for it (study, volunteer, be creative, help others, garden, plan future celebrations or events).

And that it is important to talk to others, stay active and get outdoors every day, whatever they feel like, as it will help, by releasing some of those great 'happy hormones'.

### More serious worries and anxiety?

If they are particularly struggling then there are great online resources and support available, for example through the Young Minds website.

Their GP can speak to them, or their school may have support available, too.

If they are really suffering, and overwhelmed, unable to function or leave the house (or their room) consider asking for professional support, but try to explore gently with them the 'why' of their distress. *Why* are they so worried about going out, doing something or talking to someone? Then carefully address *that* underlying reason, rather than push them to do what they feel very uncomfortable doing, until they feel ready to try.

Similar issues and much more are covered in ***How to Grow a Grown Up*** (PenguinRandomHouse) a book for all parents and carers of secondary school age children, raising independent and resilient young adults in this challenging 21<sup>st</sup> century, and in my **Student Wellbeing** series of books for teens. Available in most online bookstores.

