

# 5

# Simple Steps

to Support Teens  
during Covid-19 and  
over the Summer

Dr. Dominique Thompson



5 SIMPLE STEPS TO SUPPORT TEENS DURING COVID-19 AND OVER THE SUMMER

# About the Author



## Dr Dominique Thompson GP | Mental Health Expert | Author | TEDx Speaker

Dr Dominique Thompson is an award winning GP, young people's mental health expert, TEDx speaker, author and educator, with over 20 years of clinical experience caring for students, including as a police and expedition doctor, and as Director of Service at the University of Bristol Students' Health Service. She was named Bristol Healthcare Professional of the Year 2017. In 2019 she was nominated as one of the Top 100 West Women of the Year. Dominique is the author of **The Student Wellbeing Series** (Trigger Press), a short series of guides for young people aged 16-25 about mental health, wellbeing and life at university, and co-author of **How to Grow a Grown Up** (PenguinRandomHouse), a book for parents, carers, teachers and anyone working with young people, about raising independent and resilient young adults ready for the challenges of the 21st century. She is a co-author of **Student Mental Health & Wellbeing in Higher Education: A practical guide** (Sage), and Editor of the Psychiatry chapter of Practical General Practice 7th Ed (Elsevier).

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A background image of three teenagers sitting together and smiling. On the left is a boy with curly hair and braces, wearing a grey polo shirt over a red t-shirt. In the center is a girl with long dark hair, wearing a pink polo shirt. On the right is a boy with short brown hair, wearing a light blue polo shirt. They are all looking towards the camera.

## **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 anxiety or depression.

We need to reassure them that this weird COVID world 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'.

**Here are my 5 top tips for managing your teenagers' mental health during this unprecedented time in our lives.**



# 1 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 concentrated time 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 unavoidably corralled more 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 - but safely. Many have taken the separation better than expected, so don't let them fall into the habit of not seeing people in person, where it's safe to do so. Face to face contact is so good for their wellbeing, even if it's at a distance!

# 2 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.



# 3 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.

# 4 Encourage

## Boundaries, respect & purposeful activities

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.

With the summer weeks stretching ahead they may be losing focus and motivation, so bring up (gently) the idea that they may like to start a project, do a 'challenge', or brush up their skills, for life or their future CV!

This summer represents an opportunity, not a loss, and they could spend an hour or two a day focused on something new, as well as seeing friends, reading, gaming or exercising. It might be worth engaging their friends, or other adults they admire, in promoting this idea.

Encourage creativity, such a graphic design, or animation, writing, singing or dancing. They might try a new sport, or learn a new language, including sign language. They could improve their DJ, cooking or cocktail making skills (for impressing future flatmates), or focus on their social media design, making it look professional and requiring inspiration and skills! It can be hard for them to feel motivated to get up every day, so it shouldn't feel like school work. Frame this as something for them to really explore, get good at, and that might be useful to talk about in future interviews or to meet new people. Most importantly, they should enjoy it!



**Teens have 'black & white thinking', so everything is always "awful" or "awesome"**

~ Dr Dominique Thompson

# 5 Ask them 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 are their friends 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...?”.)





## 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 (<http://www.youngminds.org.uk/>).

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 21st century, and in my Student Wellbeing series of books for teens.

Available in most online bookstores.

