

comings and household rules and also figure out how to manage new sources of excitement and risk ranging from parties, drinking, drugs, and driving to social media, sex, and romance. On top of all that, school becomes freighted in new ways.

Even when the emotions involved in normal adolescent development are unpleasant, unwanted, or troublesome, they can still be the ones that make the best sense in the moment. What really matters is that adolescents learn to *manage* their disruptive feelings effectively. Let's now address how to help them do just that.

CHAPTER FOUR

Managing Emotions, Part One: Helping Teens Express Their Feelings

I opened my waiting room door on a Thursday afternoon in March to collect sixteen-year-old Jada for our appointment. Jada had recently gotten her license and now drove herself to our sessions. Carrying only her car keys, she slowly got up from the chair in my waiting room to follow me into my office. I could tell from the way she was moving that something was weighing her down.

We had first started meeting the previous November, when Jada's parents had become worried that she was depressed. Jada was having trouble sleeping, was often despondent, and struggled to focus on her schoolwork. She never did meet the full diagnostic criteria for clinical depression, but we made a strong connection and our work brought to light the worries she had about how she fit in at school and how she measured up against her impressive older sister. Once we were in the rhythm of weekly sessions, Jada's mood improved substantially. Given that several members of her extended family had been diagnosed with depression, Jada's parents were glad to support our ongoing regular meetings even though their daughter was now generally feeling pretty good.

On this particular Thursday, however, Jada sat heavily on my couch. I waited quietly for her to get us started as she pulled her

long braids over one shoulder, fiddled with her necklace, then ran her hands over her tight, pre-ripped jeans.

"Today was awful," she began. "The casting came out for the spring musical—I tried out for the lead, but I got stuck in the chorus." She learned this when her drama teacher, who had done the casting, found her during a free period and asked to talk privately. "She told me that she really likes my singing, that she understood that the role I got wasn't the one I wanted, and that there would be two more musicals before I graduated and lots of time for me to grow as a performer."

I nodded reassuringly, then asked Jada how she had responded to her teacher.

"Actually, I cried when she told me. She was really nice about it and got me some water. But then I had to pull myself together because I had a quiz the next period." Jada explained that when she completed the quiz she asked to be excused to use the restroom. "I went into a stall and cried some more, but then I had to pull it together again to go to my last period class."

I took in Jada's description of her day with a mix of sympathy and admiration. On the one hand, I just hated to picture Jada sitting alone in a bathroom stall crying. On the other hand, her account of the afternoon—one in which she alternated between weeping and "pulling it together"—captured perfectly what it means to have the right feelings at the right time and to *manage them effectively*. Yes, intense, unwanted emotions are unpleasant, but they are part of life, and when they hit, we psychologists are really concerned with only one question: How well are those feelings being handled?

To return to the central premise of this book, mental health is not about feeling good. Distress comes with being human, and it certainly comes with being a teenager dealing with the challenges and disappointments that are part of growing up. When our teens become upset, our goal should be to help them manage

their emotions well. The term psychologists use for the ideal management of feelings is *emotion regulation*. The body of research behind this concept is massive, but it can be organized under two basic headings: (1) gaining relief from destabilizing emotions by finding healthy ways to *express them*, and (2) when necessary, taking a break from unwanted emotions by using healthy tactics to *rein them in*.

It's beyond our power to prevent or quickly banish our teens' psychological pain, nor should that even be our goal. We can and should, however, help our teenagers develop ways to regulate their emotions that offer relief and do no harm. Jada did this beautifully, drawing on both emotional expression and emotional control to handle her disappointment over not getting the part she wanted. She cried in the presence of a caring teacher (healthy expression), then pushed the pause button on her sadness to take a quiz (healthy control). She excused herself to find a private place to cry a bit more (healthy expression), regained her composure to get through her last class (healthy control), and used her session with me to talk about her disappointment and frustration (healthy expression). What might look like a rough afternoon to anyone else looks like a master class in emotional regulation to those of us who help young people handle their feelings for a living.

Expression and control, control and expression. Most of the time, teenagers work out the needed balance on their own, as Jada did. But not always. Sometimes teens struggle to find appropriate outlets for their emotions, and sometimes their emotions run roughshod over everything else and need to be reined in. In either of these cases there's a definite need—and fortunately lots of room—for adults to step in and help.

I appreciate that this may be a new and unfamiliar way to think about how to help teenagers deal with uncomfortable feelings. But remember this: As parents we cannot prevent emotional

pain in our teenagers. Rather, we should be in the business of helping them manage discomfort when it comes. Taking a management, not banishment, approach to unwanted feelings accomplishes exactly what parents of adolescents should be aiming for. We strengthen our connections to our teenagers when we come to notice and admire the very impressive work they are already doing to regulate their emotions. Further, we equip our teenagers for *independent* emotional lives by helping them learn to regulate their feelings effectively. And we set them up for *full* emotional lives as well, so they won't live in fear of strong feelings.

Think of this chapter and the next as giving you the emotional regulation playbook in two complementary volumes. Volume 1 (this chapter) will guide you in helping teenagers express their emotions in order to make them more bearable. Volume 2 (the next chapter) will be the playbook for helping teenagers take a break from their feelings as needed, to, in Jada's words, "pull themselves together" when it's time.

Why does the emotional expression playbook come first? Because finding an appropriate outlet for feelings almost always on its own provides our teenagers with all of the psychological relief they need. So let's get to it.

Talking About Feelings Works

We take it as a given that putting feelings into words brings emotional relief. Conventional wisdom and personal experience tell us that "getting something off our chest," or "venting," or "talking about what's *really* going on" helps us feel better. But if you think about it, we should stand back in wonder at the fact that simply describing an uncomfortable psychological state somehow makes that state easier to bear. Though my entire career as a

clinical psychologist rests on the assumption that finding words for emotions eases suffering, I've never quite gotten over the magic of this phenomenon.

Well, it's not exactly magic, and there are a number of theories about why putting feelings into words reduces psychological discomfort. One is that we can only gain insight, and thus relief, when we move emotions from the realm of abstract experience to the realm of language and thought. Another is that talking about painful feelings reduces our sense of isolation by allowing us to inform others of our otherwise invisible internal realities. We may still be awash in misery even after we've told someone about it, but it's usually better not to be entirely alone with our distress. In truth, psychologists have not come to broad agreement about why, exactly, we usually end up feeling better when we tell people that we're feeling lousy. But differing theories aside, we know that talking about feelings works. Beyond the abundant evidence of the effectiveness of talk therapy, we can measure the benefits of verbalizing emotions even at the physiological level.

In one study, research participants looked at upsetting photographs of natural disasters, gruesome accidents, or people in obvious agony. Then some of them were instructed to talk about their own emotional responses to the images, while others were told to simply state facts about the pictures. As the subjects either shared their personal feelings or presented objective facts, electrodes measured their emotional arousal via the electrical activity of their skin. Data from the electrodes showed that talking about the *feelings* brought on by the images had a calming effect, but describing the *facts* did not.

Another study used a similar approach to look at what happens in the brain itself when we give voice to how we're feeling. Researchers again asked volunteers to view distressing pictures and, in this study, instructed some to remain silent and others to describe how it felt to look at the images. As they looked at the

pictures, the research participants' brains were monitored using *positron emission tomography*, a technology that allows for the observation of neurological activity in real time. Once again, the act of talking about feelings was shown to have a calming effect—this time on the activity of the amygdala and other parts of the brain associated with emotional arousal—while staying silent did not.

So, conventional wisdom about the benefit of talking about feelings is scientifically confirmed. Which brings us to a practical point in the parenting of teenagers: When we are actually faced with teens telling us just how very uneasy they are, we need to remember that their descriptions of their emotional pain—which may be vivid and dire-sounding—don't add to their emotional distress, but usually reduce it. It's critical to remember that by the time teens are *telling* us that they feel anxious or angry or sad or any other emotion they choose to put into words, they're already using an effective strategy for helping themselves cope with it. As a psychologist, I know this through and through. As a parent, though, I often forget it. When bedtime is approaching and one of my girls wants to talk about something that's been bothering her all day, I'm likely to think "Oh no! Where is this coming from?" rather than recognizing that she's already done the remarkable work of noticing her emotional discomfort, reflecting on it, giving that feeling a description, and then bringing it to me. What I often fail to appreciate on the spot is that she's already carried her emotional football all the way to the one-yard line. In the heat of the moment, I can make the mistake of focusing on *why* she's holding this football and on how I can get her to drop it as quickly as possible. But when I get it right, I recognize how much yardage she has gained on her own and that she's made it easy for me to help her over the goal line of relief.

Listening, Really Listening, Matters

So, when teenagers tell us they are in psychological pain, what's our best response? Usually, it's simply to listen to what they have to say. This may seem obvious and easy on paper, but it can be surprisingly difficult to do in reality. We hate to see our teens suffer, and reflexively we attempt to ease their distress by trying to chase from the field whatever caused it. A teen says she doesn't like the timing of the shifts she's been assigned at work, and we tell her that she should talk to her manager. A teen is angry that a classmate swooped in and stole his prom date, and we list off other classmates he could ask. A teen complains about missing a best friend who is away at camp, and we offer reassurance that a letter is sure to come any day.

There's nothing wrong with any of these suggestions, but as you have likely learned from personal experience, they usually don't go over well. That's because we've focused our attention on the wrong target. Instead of trying to erase the problem that caused our teenager to become upset, we should see—at least at first—whether the act of putting feelings into words provides all the relief that is needed. Simply talking about feelings reduces their intensity, so let your teenager talk. Before you jump in with reassurance, a piece of advice, or a recollection of having had a similar experience a million years ago when you were a teenager, see what happens if you *just listen*.

Let me say right here that it's easy to think we're listening when we're really not. Instead of listening, we are often waiting for our teenager to finish talking so that we can share a thought that came to mind soon after our teen got started. That's not listening, that's turn taking. To *really* listen, imagine that you are a newspaper editor and that your teenager is one of your reporters, reading you a draft of a newspaper article about an aggravating teacher, or a classmate she's worried about, or some other

that alone, her shoulders dropped and she relaxed. The next step," my friend half-joked, "is to get my husband to stop telling her that she'll be fine or that she can make friends in her new math class."

Even knowing that offering empathy goes very far, it can be hard to summon a tender response for everything adolescents bring our way. This can be especially true when we're at the end of our own long day and what our teenager wants to share is a litany of complaints. When I'm hustling to get dinner on the table and to keep the evening moving along so that I can wind down before bed, I often find that my fatigue is high and my empathy is low. At the literal end of the day, it can be a challenge for me to bring my parenting A game when one of my girls starts grousing about what happened at school. At these times, here's what gets me through: I take myself back to an auditorium in New Jersey where, many years ago, I was wrapping up a conversation about stress and anxiety with an audience of secondary school students.

"Before we finish," I said, "I have a question for you. Since I'm going to be giving a talk on this topic to your parents tonight, when I'm with them, is there anything you want me to pass along?" Several hands went up, including one belonging to a ninth grade girl with an earnest look on her face, who clearly had something pressing to say.

When I called on her, she stood and made her request: "Please tell them that when I complain about my school day, the *only* thing I want them to say back is, 'Oh my God, that stinks!'" Many of her classmates nodded in vigorous agreement, and some even applauded.

The parental reply that this Year 10 wanted to the exclusion of all others is now my default response to end-of-day complaining. I promise you, it will almost always provide the validation and support that teenagers need to feel better.

Yet even with this trusty response at my disposal and its long track record of working well, I still manage to blow it sometimes. Not long ago, my younger daughter came home from school unhappy about the fact that she would spend most of the next day taking standardized tests. When I started to rattle off reassurance that she could handle it and suggestions for how she might maintain her focus throughout the day, she looked at me quizzically and said, "Can't I just get a 'That stinks!'"?

Helping Teens Get Specific About Feelings

The more precise teenagers can be when articulating their feelings, the bigger the benefit they'll get. Psychologists refer to making fine-grained distinctions among individual feelings as *emotional granularity*, and research demonstrates that being able to describe inner experiences with precision is associated with better emotional regulation and better mental health overall. Improving specificity puts the power of verbalizing feelings on steroids. Saying "I'm feeling despondent" brings more relief than saying "I'm sad." And remarking that "I feel bitter about what happened" dispels more distress than "I'm mad."

While teenagers often brim with emotions, they don't always know how to name what's happening inside and sometimes need help arriving at the most apt description. Though I've understood this point for as long as I've been a psychologist, I gained a new perspective on it while reading Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* a few years ago. Early in the book, I stopped at a line describing Mrs. Bennet, the piece-of-work mother of the novel's heroine, Elizabeth, and her four sisters. It read, "When she was discontented, she fancied herself nervous." The sentence got me thinking about how often teens come to my office sharing that they feel anxious, but then go on to describe a frustrating fight with a

friend or, with more than a hint of excitement in their voices, an upcoming playoff game that they'll be competing in. Often, when teens report feeling *anxious*, they seem to be saying that they feel stirred up, that they *don't feel calm*. Anxiety is certainly one form of emotional arousal—the one that psychologists link to feeling frightened or threatened—but it's also just one of a great number of emotions in the “not calm” category.

Today's teenagers use the term “anxiety” a lot. When I hear them use it in my office, I prick up my ears and listen for a chance to help them improve their emotional granularity. Keeping my mental thesaurus at the ready, I ask them to tell me more about what's going on. If a teenager describes a situation that has left them feeling scared or threatened, in my head I'll agree that the term “anxiety” fits and turn our work toward managing the teen's nerves. But once I get more of the story, it's not at all unusual for my response to fall along the lines of “I hear that you feel anxious about your fight with your friend, which makes sense. But do you think you might also be feeling annoyed or irritated by it?” or “There's no question that big games can be anxiety-provoking, but I'm wondering if you might also have some apprehension or even excitement about how it will go.”

What I do in my office to refine the specificity of how teens describe their inner worlds, you can do at home. When teenagers talk about feeling anxious—or “upset,” “pissed,” “bummed,” or any other vaguely defined emotion—they are usually handing us opportunities to help them develop their emotional vocabulary. If your son makes a sweeping statement, such as “Everything sucks!,” try responding gently with “How come?” or “What's up?” Then listen for specifics. If he elaborates that “Our English teacher just dumped a truckload of homework on our class,” empathize with the fact that he might now be feeling aggravated, or swamped, or beleaguered, or discouraged, or any other adjective that you think might hit the mark more closely. If your daughter

shares that she's “not happy” about the cancellation of a long-anticipated event, let her know that it makes all the sense in the world for her to feel unhappy, but that it would be totally understandable if she also felt disappointed, let down, crushed, or resentful.

Offering teenagers subtler and pinpointed terms to describe their inner worlds supports them across two fronts: It turns the road to emotional relief through verbalization into a superhighway, and it's also a profound gesture of empathy. Bringing a teen's fuzzy description of psychological turmoil into focus with exact and accurate terms requires a real emotional investment and a high level of psychological attunement—a degree of devotion that most teenagers find greatly comforting.

Getting Teens to Open Up

So far, this chapter has quietly assumed that teens will be given to talking about their emotions. But that's a pretty big assumption. What about the teens who are extremely private, the ones who rarely or never offer us an internal weather report even when we can see that a squall is brewing? Or what about teens who have language or learning differences that make it challenging for them to put their thoughts and feelings into words? Many parents raising teens who tend to keep their feelings to themselves spend a lot of time *wishing* they knew more about what their adolescent is thinking and feeling. They would jump at the chance to listen, headline, empathize, and help their teens refine their emotional vocabulary. Most would even welcome complaining! Instead, they often get conversations that go something like this:

“How was school?”
“Fine.”

"Anything interesting happen today?"
"Nope."

Is there any way to overcome this reticence? It's not always easy to get teens talking about closely held emotions, but there are some strategies to up the odds of having a meaningful conversation. The first thing to remember is that teenagers, especially tight-lipped ones, *really* don't like to be put on the spot. So your number one priority is to keep your teen out of the hot seat.

One way is to steer clear of direct questions. Instead of asking "How do you feel about your new coach?" you can take an indirect tack: "What are people saying about the coach who just came in? Do they like her?" Instead of "Were you glad to hear that finals are now being held before winter break?" try "What's the word on the street about the new finals schedule?" Though we'd certainly prefer to know what our own teenagers feel about a given situation, consider it a win—especially with teens who tend to be quiet—to get a discussion going about any emotional topics that they might be willing to comment on. While our ultimate aim is to help teenagers find emotional relief by describing their own feelings, getting them to talk about what their peers are feeling might help get the ball rolling.

You can also stack the conversational deck in your favor by saving your questions for times when you and your teen are not face-to-face. Many parents find that they have some of their most unguarded discussions with their teenagers when they're together on a drive or a walk. It can be a lot easier for teenagers to share their inner world when they don't have to look at us. Whenever I want to bring up a delicate topic with one of my daughters, I wait until we're out driving, and *then* I wait until we're about three minutes from arriving back home. The combined effect of our both being eyes front and my daughter's knowing that the subject cannot possibly be entertained for long gives us a fight-

ing chance for a meaningful, if brief, conversation that would otherwise be a nonstarter.

Another way to keep teens clear of the hot seat is to appreciate that the abstract nature of emotions makes them especially challenging to talk about. To ask questions about facts and events, such as "Did you have art class today?" is one thing. To inquire about the subtleties of a teen's emotional world is an entirely different ballgame. You may pitch a question like "You seem upset, what's going on?" and then be instantly ready, glove open and on your toes, to field the answer. But your teen may need time to process the question before swinging. This lag may also be influenced by your teen's thinking style—how much they like to talk through their thoughts as they take shape versus how much they like to fully work them out in their head before they speak. On top of that, there's the issue of processing speed—the pace at which people think—which varies widely from person to person and is not, incidentally, closely related to overall intelligence. With all these factors in play, you can see what a long shot it might be to ask your teen about a nebulous emotional experience she may be having and then get a prompt, satisfying reply. To account for teens who need time to think about what they're feeling, put some space between your question and their answer. "You've seemed out of sorts the last couple of days," you might say to your teen on a Saturday morning. "If you want to chat at any point this weekend, you know I'm always game."

Looking for yet one more way to keep teens out of the hot seat and make it easier for them to express their emotions more freely? Try reaching out by text. I was first put on to this approach by a friend, the mother of two adolescent boys who both hold their cards close to their chest. She shared with me that her deepest and most heartfelt conversations with her sons have inevitably occurred through text messages. Once, when one of her

sons had ended the semester with uncharacteristically low grades in two of his classes, my friend and her husband tried to talk with him about what had happened. He kept telling them that he didn't know what to say, so they went to bed having given up on trying to have a conversation about it.

"After he went to school the next morning," my friend told me, "I texted him to say that he wasn't in trouble, but that we just wanted to make sense of his grades. He replied with the longest text I've ever gotten from anyone." In it, he said that he felt ashamed about the grades, terrible about disappointing them, and scared that they were mad at him. My friend and her son then texted back and forth over the day and were able to unpack the issue in a way that would never have been possible in person. "After all that, he texted me to say that he really appreciated our support and that he loves us. I burst into tears when I read it." A bit sheepishly, my friend added, "I just wish that he could say all this in person."

I saw no reason for my friend to feel self-conscious about the story. While it's easy to imagine that other parents are sitting around their kitchen table having long heart-to-hearts with their teenagers, I suspect that's pretty rare. I told her as much, and that I thought that she'd struck upon a brilliant solution, which I hoped that lots of other parents were already on to as well.

If we think about it, addressing emotionally charged topics by text is a perfect way to get a touchy conversation going while keeping teens out of the hot seat. They don't have to look at us, they can take as long as they need to answer, and the written response may result in a far more precise accounting of how they feel than they would ever communicate in person.

The next time your loath-to-talk teen leaves for school under an emotional cloud, try sending a text: "It seems as if you had a hard morning, how are you doing now?" If you get a meaningful response, jackpot—well done! By all means, text back a validating

reply. But I'd urge you to resist the temptation to try to pick up the conversational thread in person at the end of the day. Switching from texting to talking might leave your teenager regretting having opened up and might cause both lines to go dead.

And if you get little or nothing back, don't despair. Teens, in my experience, *do* want to share what's on their mind with their parents. But they usually want to engage on their terms, not ours.

Letting Teens Set the Terms of Engagement

Not long ago I visited a school in New Orleans, where I presented to the students, staff, and faculty during the day and to the parents in the evening. A heavy rainstorm started about an hour before the parents' talk, so the audience was a small but intrepid group who had arrived in full foul-weather gear. In that evening presentation I mentioned how much more forthcoming teens can be when we save our questions for the car. Once the talk was over and we had done the question-and-answer session, most of the parents headed back out into the storm, but a handful clustered near the podium to talk with me and catch up with one another.

A middle-aged man and his wife graciously thanked me for my presentation and wanted to talk further.

"What you said about teenagers being more talkative in the car?" he began. "That's true. At least that's what we find with our fourteen-year-old daughter. But the other time that she talks a lot is at night. When we're in bed reading and about to go to sleep, she comes into our room and plants herself in a chair. And then she'll talk to us for twenty minutes or so about all sorts of things."

His wife put her hand on his arm and was quick to say more.

"He used to try to shut this down because of the hour, telling her that it was getting late and we all needed to go to sleep. But I made him stop," she said, her husband now nodding in agreement. "She doesn't talk much otherwise, so we'll take what we can get."

A tall dad, a friend of theirs, was standing nearby listening to our conversation. As he heard them describing their daughter's practice of opening up at night, the look on his face shifted abruptly from mild interest to startled recognition. "That's exactly what I used to do when I was a teenager!" he interjected. "I would come home from boarding school and not say much to my parents until they were already in bed. Then I'd stand in their doorway, leaning against the doorframe, and tell them all about what had been happening at school. I hadn't thought about that until just now."

"This is truly fascinating!" I said to all three parents. Then, directing my question to the tall dad, I asked, "Do you think it was because you could end the conversation when you wanted to? That you could walk away knowing that your folks weren't going to get out of bed to ask you follow-up questions?"

"Yes, looking back on it, I think that's exactly what was going on," he said. I could see from their faces that this idea was dawning on the parents of the fourteen-year-old, too.

"Now that you say it," said the mom, "it seems like that's what's happening in our house as well. The conversation's over when our daughter decides it's over. Knowing her, I bet that makes it easier for her to open up."

So often, our efforts to get teenagers to share what's on their mind involve trying to engage them at the times and around the topics that make the most sense to us. Of course there's nothing wrong with greeting our teens at the end of the day with a

friendly "How was school?" But we should be prepared for that conversation to go nowhere. Why? Because teenagers, at their very core, are autonomy-seeking creatures. When we ask a teenager about his day at a moment that works for us, we are in effect calling him to a meeting for which we ourselves have set both the time and the agenda. Given the strength of their drive for self-determination, I've learned that adolescents, especially sphinx-like ones, are most likely to open up when *they* get to set the terms of engagement. Through this lens, the nighttime chattiness that I learned about in New Orleans makes even more sense. In both cases, it was the teenager who was deciding when the meeting began and when it ended. And they were also the ones setting the agenda, calling the meeting only when their parents had already put their own agendas away for the day.

"Now wait a minute," you might be thinking, "should my teen really get to be the one who calls all the meetings? And is he supposed to be allowed to call them at odd hours? He knows that we love him and are curious about his life—isn't it reasonable to suppose that he could meet us halfway, being open to chat sometimes on his terms, sometimes on ours?" In truth, teenagers often meet us halfway, and we should bear as much in mind. Every time I get a real answer when I ask one of my daughters how she feels about school, her weekend plans, or anything else, she has agreed to my terms of engagement. She has set aside her marrow-deep wish to be in sole charge of her ship and has allowed me to board and inspect it.

As parents, we want our teens to steer our way when they need someone to talk to. This means that we need to stand ready to connect under terms that may work better for them than they do for us. Let's not blow it. Let's not shut down their odd-hour overtures without considering that this may be how they can express closely held emotions without sacrificing a sense of autonomy. Of course, this doesn't mean that you need to take midnight phone

calls from your university student for nonemergency conversations. But it does mean that we should make room for the adolescent need for self-determination in how they go about sharing themselves with us. The same teen who stays at a distance during the day may pull up close at night. When this happens, let's remember that we're being called to a meeting we want to attend.

Taking and Making Conversational Openings

Research shows that most adolescents like their parents and want to connect with us. In fact, a complaint that I often hear from teens is that when they *do* want to talk—even during normal business hours—it can be hard to get our attention. Whenever an adolescent brings this up in our clinical work, I can't help but sit in my office chair and feel guilty as I picture how these interactions play out in my own home.

For instance, without consciously meaning to have done so, I've designated dinner as the time when we'll get together and talk about the important aspects of our day. My daughters may oblige and participate in my agenda for our dinner meeting, or they may not be in the mood to talk at that time. Regardless, once the meal is cleaned up, I move on to the rest of my evening plans. I call my parents or my friends, dig out from under my email, work on my grocery list, and so on. At some point after dinner, with me in the middle of trying to figure out which items in the to-be-dealt-with pile on the kitchen counter can no longer be ignored, one of my girls stops by to say, "There was a fight at school today." I might turn toward her, nod, and even say "Whoa!"—but there's a good chance I'll miss her invitation to have a talk. Instead of setting the papers aside, tuning in, and asking some questions, I might only half listen to the rest of what she volunteers, trying mainly to hold on to my previous

train of thought. I'm not proud of any of this, especially given that my daughters know me better than I know myself (just as your teen knows you) and can tell when my attention is divided.

There are certainly times when we shouldn't interrupt what we're doing. But if we're home and one of our teenagers wants to talk to us, we should recognize the opportunity for what it is and welcome it. My instincts in this department are not always good—there's little I enjoy more than checking tasks off my to-do list—but my decades of clinical practice have been a great help. For many years before I became the mother of teenagers, I heard the parents in my practice lamenting how quickly the end of secondary school had arrived. So whenever I feel torn between sticking with my own plan for the evening and setting it aside to engage, I remind myself that I will soon have evening upon evening to spend as I please. And when that time comes, I'll regret it if I didn't make the most of the nights when one of my teenagers was feeling chatty.

In addition to picking up the conversational topics that our kids put on the table, there's another way we can make it more likely that our teens will seek us out as a listening ear: by being around. Though we usually spend a lot of time with our children when they're younger, we see our kids less as they age. Normally developing teenagers tend to be busy with pursuits related to school, extracurriculars, jobs, friends, or all of the above. And many parents, myself included, welcome the freedom of being able to make plans without having to hire a babysitter. Just as the adolescents in my care sometimes complain that their parents don't always listen, many have also told me that they wish their parents were around more. Until I heard this grievance from enough teenagers to appreciate how common it was, it baffled me for two reasons. First, our teens often give us the impression that they'd *love* it if we weren't home so much. Second, I strongly suspected that the teenagers who were telling me that they

wished their parents were around more were also ignoring those same parents most of the time when they *were* home.

Over time, however, I have come to think that teenagers feel most at ease when they know where their folks are, in much the same way that securely attached toddlers keep track of their parents' movements around the house even as they pursue their own activities. Further, having us nearby means that teenagers can readily talk with us about the topics they care about when, for them, the moment strikes.

So how do we make ourselves enough of a presence to be accessible to our teens, but not so much that we seem as if we're hovering? One friend of mine has agreed to his teenage daughter's request for him to work or read nearby while she does her homework. Another makes a practice of folding laundry each evening in the room where her teenagers watch TV. For my part, I save my customarily drawn-out kitchen cleaning for times I know my girls are going to be home. In this way, I am available, utterly interruptible, and right in their traffic pattern, just in case they have a sudden urge to talk.

Owning and Repairing Parenting Mistakes

Wanting our kids to talk to us and going out of our way to make that possible doesn't mean we'll always get it right when they do. I was reminded of this one Tuesday after Thanksgiving when fourteen-year-old Corey arrived at our weekly appointment as angry as I'd ever seen her. She was so wound up that she didn't even unzip her parka when she came in and plunked herself down on my couch. Sitting stiffly upright, it was as if she hoped that keeping her coat fully zipped would help her to hold herself together.

"Is something up?" I asked, eager to find out what was going on.

"Arrgh!" she grunted through clenched teeth. "Thanksgiving was the worst!"

"What happened?"

She paused, took a wind-up breath, and poured out her complaint. "My aunt—my mom's sister—lives in Nashville, and she came up to have Thanksgiving with us. We were all having a good time—Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday—and I usually really like having my aunt around. But then after dinner we were cleaning up in the kitchen and she asked me how things were going with Reza, this boy in my class that I've had a crush on for forever."

I could see where this was headed.

"I didn't tell her about Reza—my mom did. I couldn't believe it! I played it off with my aunt—I was like, 'Oh, he's fine'—and she got it that I didn't want to talk about it. But I am so pissed at my mom."

"I see," I said. "Did you say something to your mom about it?"

"No. I mean she knows I'm mad, but I don't think she thinks it's a big deal," she said, finally unzipping her coat and letting her back relax into the seat.

"But clearly it is," I offered sympathetically.

"Yes! I can't believe that my mom told her about it. I feel like I can't have anything private."

"Do you think you will bring it up with your mom? That you'll let her know how mad you are?"

"Probably not," she said, "but I can tell you that's the last time I'm talking with her about anything I really care about."

Parents make mistakes. And an easy one to make is to share information that to us seems ordinary, unremarkable, even endearing, but to our teenager is meant to be like a state secret. Errors like this can keep our teens from wanting to express their emo-

tions to us. Suppose you've already tried everything that this chapter has suggested to help teens open up—you've kept them out of the hot seat, let them set the terms of engagement, tuned in when they *are* in the mood to talk, and are as available as you can be should those moments arise—and your teen still hesitates to share anything of personal importance with you. At this point, it's worth considering carefully whether you might have said or done something that closed down the lines of communication.

If you suspect that you're in a situation like Corey's mom's—that you shared information that was meant to be kept private—offer your teen a genuine apology. Do this both because it is warranted and also as a way to try to reboot your connection to your teen and regain trust. As for effective apologies, researchers have found that they include six components: explicitly saying that you are sorry, offering an explanation, acknowledging responsibility, promising not to repeat the mistake, trying to make amends, and requesting forgiveness. If we were to script such an apology for Corey's mom, it would go something like this: "I'm sorry I told my sister about Reza, I didn't think you'd mind her knowing. But I realize now that that information was not mine to pass along. Going forward, I promise to keep our conversations between us unless I've gotten your permission to share something. I know I screwed this up and hope you might forgive me."

The following week, Corey arrived for her appointment far more at ease. She was talkative as usual and returned to the topic that had brought her to my practice in the first place—her difficulty making and keeping friends. As she shared the good news that over the weekend she'd gotten together with a girl she enjoyed spending time with in art class, I wondered whether I should double back to our conversation from the previous week. On the one hand, I'm always inclined to follow my clients' lead

on how they want to use their time in therapy. On the other, it can seem insensitive or inattentive *not* to mention a previous week's session when it included an intense, and as yet unresolved, topic.

When Corey came to a stopping place, I let her know that I was glad to hear that she'd made a promising connection. Then I paused a moment before commenting, "Last week, you were pretty bothered about things with your mom."

"Oh, yeah," she said matter-of-factly, "they're better now."

"How come?" I asked.

"She could tell I was still upset about the Reza thing, so she brought it up. We talked about it and I let her know that I wasn't okay with her telling her sister the things I told her. My mom acted a little defensive, but she got it. So . . . I think we're good."

It didn't sound as though Corey got the full six-step apology that I generally recommend, but I also knew that she and her mom—who had been raising Corey on her own for nearly ten years—had a strong connection, which, I trust, helped them ride out this particular bump in their relational road.

Whether or not you have "blabbed" (as some teenagers say), I think that it's a good policy to let teens know that what they share with us will stay with us. Adolescents can collect a lot of emotionally freighted information in the course of a regular day. Knowing that they can unload details freely at home can be a weight off their mind and, as an added bonus, help them refrain from engaging in unnecessary gossip with their peers.

Of course, there may be times when your teenager shares information that must be disclosed, such as news of a friend who keeps getting blackout drunk or of a coach whose behavior is out of line. When these tricky situations arise, it's important to suppress the impulse to pick up the phone and make an informational end run around your teen. That would almost certainly

leave your teenager regretting having opened up. Barring an immediate safety concern, work *with* your teen to figure out how to get the information where it needs to go.

Remember Zach? The sophomore who lost himself in a videogame when Mara, the girl he'd been making out with, asked him about the status of their relationship? He and I continued to work together through his time in Year 12, and over that time he and Mara started to date in a serious way. As they became closer, Mara shared with him that she sometimes had thoughts about suicide but that she didn't believe she'd ever act on them. Zach was understandably unsettled by this revelation, and after several sleepless nights, he told his mom what had been keeping him awake. Zach's mom wanted to call Mara's parents right away, but Zach didn't want Mara to know he'd betrayed her confidence. Unsure what to do, Zach texted me to see if I could help them figure out a solution, so he and his mom and I got on a three-way call.

Once they brought me up to speed, I told Zach that I agreed that Mara's parents needed to know but added that, as I saw it, there was more than one way to make that happen. One route would be for Zach to tell Mara that he cared about her and wanted to help her to get the support she deserved. For that to happen, she'd need to tell her parents what she had told Zach, and if she couldn't, Zach would have to reach out to them himself. Another route would be for Zach or his mom to go ahead and call Mara's parents. After we talked it through, Zach wanted to go with the first approach, and when we met the following week, he shared what had happened.

"Mara didn't really want to say anything to her parents, but she knew it was the right thing to do. She told me that she'd tell them." He said that even though he trusted her, he told Mara that he'd be able to sleep better if her folks confirmed that she'd spoken to them. "She understood. Not too long after we talked,

her dad sent me a text saying that he really appreciated that I'd helped Mara open up to them." While it's certainly quicker to make an impulsive phone call than to work with our teen on how to handle sensitive information, doing so comes with the risk of making teenagers clam up. Being patient and weighing other options can allow us to do the right thing without closing down the lines of communication at home.

Being too free with information teens share with us isn't the only error that can keep them from telling us what's really on their mind. Adolescents sometimes stop talking because we've reacted to their hurt feelings with judgmental commentary, perhaps responding to a teenager who is aching over having been left out, once again, by a longtime friend with "Why do you even hang out with Jack when you know that he'll ditch you in a heartbeat?" And they're likely to keep things to themselves if they have reason to think we'll come back at them with any version of "I told you so." If a teenager is angry with himself for not being able to afford the new sneakers he wants, reminding him that you thought he paid too much for the last pair might be a true, but unhelpful, response.

When your teen shuts down and you know where you went wrong, offer a heartfelt (full six-part!) apology. If you suspect you made a misstep somewhere along the line but don't know exactly what it was, try not to be defensive, and instead make an earnest appeal to your teen along these lines: "I can tell that you're not feeling comfortable talking with me about topics that are close to your heart. Is there anything I've done or said that has gotten in the way? I'm asking because I want to make it right between us."

Valuing Nonverbal Expression

In October of my older daughter's final year of secondary school, I walked into the kitchen to find her vigorously shaking an unopened can of seltzer water.

"What are you doing?" I asked, totally perplexed.

"The university application process," she responded in a strained tone, continuing to shake the can as hard as she could, "is making me *so* tense! I'm going to get rid of some stress by spraying seltzer water all over the backyard!"

I love teenagers. To the problem of finding an outlet for their feelings, they come up with solutions—often very inventive ones—that would never occur to adults. Though my daughter's impromptu pressure valve for the stress of the university admissions season was a new one on me, I had no problem with it. With near anthropological interest I watched her spray seltzer on our grass and driveway, then come back in the house and return to working on her application essays.

What did I make of my daughter's mental health during that episode? First check: Did her feelings fit the moment? Amid the demanding, tedious, consequential, capricious college process, stress was a *perfectly* fitting response. Now, second check: Was she managing it effectively? As idiosyncratic as my daughter's emotional regulation tactic was, it still ticked the "effective" box. Why? Because teenagers are managing emotions well whenever they turn to adaptive strategies, meaning actions that provide relief without doing harm.

So far, this chapter has focused on helping teens *talk* about what they are feeling. While verbalization is a common and highly effective way to express emotions, it's hardly the only healthy or adaptive one. If your teenager just isn't a talker, or struggles to

put thoughts and feelings into words, you're probably glad to hear this. And you may already be aware of the nonverbal tactics your teen uses to find an outlet for emotional tension.

Some teenagers take the edge off unpleasant feelings by channeling them into physical activity. When they become angry or irritated, they might go for a run, join a knock-around pickup basketball game, or practice a smashing tennis serve. Others find relief for unwanted feelings by turning to creative outlets. They might make drawings that communicate a sense of longing, write stories or poems centered on themes of disappointment, pound out a song on the piano to release frustration, or belt out a tune to vent indignation. As one talented teenage musician explained to me, when his mom asks how he's feeling, "My mind just fills with static, but when I'm writing lyrics, that's how I figure out what's happening in my head."

Not all teenagers create their own music, but experience has taught me that a huge percentage of them *listen* to music as a way to manage their feelings. I have my own vivid memories of listening to particular songs when in particular moods as a teenager, and I'm guessing that you have these memories too. These days, when I speak to secondary school audiences about coping with stress, anxiety, and other toll-taking emotions, I always set aside time to ask how many of them listen to playlists they've created for when they want to shake off a bad mood. Usually, almost every hand goes up. Then I ask my audience to raise their hand if they have made a playlist dedicated to any of several emotional categories, which I call off one by one. It turns out that lots of teenagers have "happy," "pump-up," and "chill" playlists. But even more have "angry" and "sad" playlists.

Given the incredible power that music has to shape how we feel, it might seem strange that so many teens would make playlists for *bad* moods. But they do. Just as we, with our prehistoric mixtapes, did when we were teenagers. How come? Because ado-

lescents have an intuitive grasp of one of my favorite psychological maxims: When we're dealing with a painful feeling, often the only way out is through. Teenagers have told me, and research confirms, that when they are burdened by dark or unpleasant emotions, they'll sometimes listen to a song that matches their mood, with the express aim of using that music to activate the tears, angry one-teen dance party, or raucous sing-along that will help them bring down their discomfort.

While music generally helps teens ride out choppy emotional waters, some adults may worry that listening to emotionally intense songs—especially forceful and edgy music, such as heavy metal—may actually increase distress rather than reduce it. One of my favorite research studies addresses this very question. Psychologists recruited a group of adolescents who enjoyed listening to one or more forms of “extreme” music, a category that included heavy metal, punk, screamo, and hardcore. Electrodes attached to the teenagers monitored their heart rate as—at the instruction of the research team—they gave detailed descriptions of an experience that had made them irate, a technique that has been found to effectively stir up feelings of anger. Half of the research participants then listened to ten minutes of music from one of their own extreme music playlists, while the other half sat in silence. After telling their stories, and then again after the ten minutes of either listening to music or sitting in silence, participants filled out forms asking them to rate their emotional state “at that moment.”

What did the researchers find? For everyone in the study, recalling the experience that made them angry led to an increase in heart rate (a measure of emotional arousal) and self-reported feelings of hostility, irritability, and stress. And, regardless of whether they spent the next ten minutes listening to their extreme music or sitting quietly, *all* of the research participants reported that their feelings had cooled. But here's where the two

groups differed. For those adolescents who spent the ten minutes listening to extreme music, their heart rate remained elevated but did not increase. For those who sat silently for the ten minutes, their heart rate slowed. In what may be the study's most interesting finding, after the ten minutes, the research participants who listened to extreme music playlists reported an increase in *positive* emotions—they felt energized and inspired—while those who sat silently reported no increase in positive feelings.

The takeaways for this study are many. First, it dispels the notion that extreme music makes angry teenagers angrier. Everyone in the study reported that they felt calmer ten minutes after riling themselves up, whether they had listened to extreme music or not. Second, while the music listeners' heart rates remained elevated, they *did not increase*, providing physiological evidence that they did not become angrier as a result of listening to intense music. Third, the fact that the music listeners' heart rates remained elevated as they went from telling their ire-provoking stories to hearing their playlists suggests that the intense music allowed the participants to prolong—and more fully experience—the physiological arousal associated with getting mad.

Now, you may be thinking that it sounds like a *bad* thing for teenagers to prolong their anger. Let me explain. In the end, the researchers found that being able to really “get into” the experience of feeling mad helped the music listeners *alone* turn the corner, with the negative emotions of hostility, irritation, and stress giving way to the positive emotions of feeling energized and inspired. In other words, the immersive emotional experience of listening to music seemed to speed the adolescents in the study through—and out the other side of—their negative emotions. Though this study focused on anger and extreme music, other research has found that when teenagers are sad and listen to melancholy music, there is a similar benefit. In finding an outlet for their sorrow, they hasten a sense of relief.

To return to now familiar terrain: Experiencing psychological pain is an unavoidable aspect of life and—given the many normal challenges and disappointments inherent to adolescence—an inescapable fact of being a teenager. As such, our goal cannot be to prevent or chase away adolescent distress but rather to help our teenagers *regulate* their emotions. This means, in part, ensuring that they find healthy outlets for the uncomfortable ones. Adolescents often intuitively do this on their own, perhaps by talking about their inner world, but also by jumping on trampolines, spraying seltzer in the backyard, beating their drum sets, listening to carefully curated playlists, and more.

Around these nonverbal expressions of emotion, adults have two jobs. One is to recognize and accept that teens sometimes use quirky but adaptive tactics to get their feelings out; behavior that appears inexplicable at first glance may turn out to make good emotional sense for our kid. The other is to actively support their inventive approaches, no matter how offbeat they may seem to us; if your teen's getting much-needed relief costs you only a can of seltzer water and a wet driveway, treat it as a bargain.

Recognizing Unhealthy Emotional Expression

What about emotional expression that causes harm either to your teenager or to someone else? Sometimes a teen comes home from school in a rotten mood and takes out his frustration—either physically or verbally—on an unsuspecting younger sibling who happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sometimes angry teenagers will say hurtful things to people they care about. When anything like this happens, it should always be

taken seriously. The teenager's emotions may be entirely justified, but the way those emotions are being expressed is a problem. As the adults on the scene, we'll want to help teens learn to see this critical distinction. "I get it that you had a hard day," you can say, "but attacking your sister isn't how to deal with it. You can tell me what's wrong, go for a run, or find some other way to feel better. Just leave your sister out of it." Or "It's okay to be pissed, but you can't speak to me like that. Let's talk when you've had a chance to calm down."

Even when teenagers attribute their hurtful behavior to emotions that garner our sympathy—such as when they chalk up being short-tempered to feeling anxious or stressed—we shouldn't give them a free pass. "If you want to talk about what's making you anxious, I'm here for that," you could offer, "but being cranky with me is only going to leave us both feeling worse." If you sometimes need to redirect your teenager's emotional expression, you are hardly alone—it's fair to say that this challenge just comes with the territory of raising adolescents. So long as teens dependably find their way to harmless outlets for their feelings, there's no reason for alarm, even if they do need reminders from time to time. If, however, your teen seems stuck in a rut and cannot move beyond expressing emotion in ways that might bring fleeting relief but hurt others or strain important relationships, consult with a mental health professional for guidance and support.

Sometimes teens discharge their emotions in ways that are, without question, real grounds for concern. We noted in chapter 2 that boys, in particular, are sometimes socialized to deal with distress through aggression or violence, though this is hardly exclusive to males. Also, adolescents sometimes relieve emotional discomfort by hurting *themselves*, such as when they engage in cutting or other forms of self-harm.

Whether the violence is directed outward or inward, there are

key points to keep in mind. First, teenagers who are hurting others or themselves are letting us know that they are suffering and that they don't have healthy ways to express that suffering. Second, teenagers who rely on violence warrant help, regardless of who is being harmed. This should come in the form of professional guidance, so that they can come to understand what's behind their destructive behavior and develop healthy strategies for gaining emotional relief.

Finally, the *magnitude* of emotional expression should not interfere with aspects of a young person's life that are essential to growth and development. Teens will sometimes feel nervous, but that nervousness should not be so acutely or persistently expressed that it gets in the way of going to school, spending time with peers, or doing other things they ought to be doing. Teens will sometimes feel angry, but their expression of anger should not be so powerful or pervasive that it hamstrings them from making or keeping friends. Teens will sometimes feel sad, but the expression of sadness should not sweep aside their ability to be hopeful, happy, or productive. If this is happening, it's time to seek a professional evaluation, as the teen may be suffering from an anxiety disorder, mood disorder, or something else.

When teenagers feel their emotional waters rising, they need to be able to channel them into adaptive forms of expression. Adolescents may have good instincts for how to do this, but the deliberate support of loving adults makes a great difference in helping teens develop their ability to express their feelings well.

In addition to expression, there is another side to emotional self-management: the ability to bring feelings under control as needed. To that, let's now turn our attention.

CHAPTER FIVE



Managing Emotions, Part Two: Helping Teens Regain Emotional Control

At 8:59 on a Monday morning, my phone rang with a number I didn't recognize. When I don't know who's at the other end of the line, I usually let a call roll to voicemail. But I happened to be free, so I picked up.

"Oh! Dr. Damour," said a man who clearly expected to be leaving a message. "I'm glad I got you. This is Mark, Anna's dad—you met with us last year when Anna was thirteen."

"Yes, I remember you," I said, recalling that Mark and his wife, Rachel, had visited my office when Anna was at the unpleasant height of the separation-individuation process, insisting that her mom change out of her "dumpy" outfit before her friends came over, and the like. "How are you? And what's going on?"

"Well, we're okay," he said genially. "Of course, I wouldn't be calling if *everything* was fine . . ."

"Well, I suppose that's true," I said lightheartedly.

"But mostly things are good. Anna's generally in a much better place than when we met with you. And things unfolded the way you said they would. She ended up getting really serious about her robotics team, and that, plus starting secondary school and finding a solid group of friends, made a big difference. Anna's done a great job of starting to figure out what she's all about,