

Points to Ponder for Parents

Critical Thinking: Decision Making and Stress Management

Teens are faced with making tough decisions every day. Some of those decisions may be about substance use. It is important for you, as parents, to understand that your teen's brain is still developing, and how that can affect their decision making. It is also important to understand that stress plays a role in our ability to make good decisions. This knowledge will help you to have a positive and supporting influence on your teen while they navigate decision making and stress management in their busy lives.

Understanding teen behaviour

There is growing scientific evidence that the brain continues to develop throughout adolescence. Reasoning and judgment begin developing in the teen years, but the process continues into the early and mid-20s.

Although teens are capable of making good decisions, this developmental process means that teens can sometimes act impulsively or “from the gut” when faced with stressful decisions. Often teens may act or react without thinking about consequences. Your involvement and support increases the likelihood that your teen will make good and rational decisions, and will successfully manage their stress in day-to-day life.

For more information on teen brain development, contact your family doctor, public health centre or library.

Decision making

Teens are faced with making difficult decisions throughout their adolescence. It is unlikely you will be there every time this happens. But you can help your teen think about how to make good decisions, and you can help them practise good decision-making. Here are some ways you can help:

- Be a role model for good decision making. Show them that you weigh decisions carefully before making them, and that you consider the consequences of your choices.
- Involve your teen in appropriate family decisions, such as setting curfews and assigning household chores.

The right environment and atmosphere can make a tough topic much easier to tackle.

Choose a place in the house where you both feel comfortable and a time of day when there aren't a lot of distractions.

A good way to engage your teen in conversation and to help them think about how to make good decisions is to ask them about decisions they have made at school, with friends or when playing a team sport. Use the following steps to lead you through your discussion:

Step 1: Determine the decision.

- What needed to be decided?
- Who was involved in the decision? (Just you? Or other people too?)
- Who was affected by the decision?

Step 2: Find out more about the decision.

- How did you feel about the decision you made?
- How did others feel about it?

Step 3: Talk about the choices.

- What were all the choices available?
- Did you consider all of them?

Step 4: Talk about the pros and cons of each choice.

- What was good and bad about each choice?

Step 5: Talk about the consequences of the choice made.

- What were the results of your decision for yourself? For others?
- Now that the decision has been made, would you have made the same choice?
- Next time you're faced with a similar decision, will you make the same choice?

Stress management

We talk about “feeling stressed,” but what that actually means is not always clear. We all have some stress in our lives. Some of us just deal with it better than others. This is no different for teens. If we can teach our teens to manage stress effectively, they will be able to think more clearly and make better decisions in spite of stress.

Stress can come from both good and bad events in our lives. Good stress for a teen could be the desire to perform well on an exam; bad stress could come from bullying, family problems or health issues.

Whatever the event is, stress can affect teens both mentally and physically. Stress can cause worry, and discomfort in the body, such as headaches or stomach aches. Stress is not something we can eliminate completely from our lives, but it can be managed in healthy ways.

Here are some tips for managing stress. Encourage your teen to try them:

- Exercise. Yes, it may be hard to get going. But once you do, you may start to feel better. It can be as simple as getting off the couch and going for a walk.
- Eat properly. Eating healthy, balanced meals can help to improve the way you feel.

- Express your feelings. You can draw, write, make music, or even yell (where no one can hear you). Expressing feelings you're holding inside may help you change those feelings.
- Talk to someone you trust. This can be scary at first, but it helps.

It is important to keep in mind that not all problems have solutions. For example, if your teen is dealing with losing a friendship, there may not be an easy solution. But your support and a chance to talk about it will still be valuable to your teen.