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HELPING MY HIGH SCHOOLER MANAGE THEIR EMOTIONS

As a counselor for teenagers, you'd probably never guess what my most memorable and favorite sessions look like. I truly love all of my clients and believe it is an honor and privilege to work with each one of them, but there are a few sessions that stick out to me the most. They all start the same way: The parent walks into the office alone because they couldn't get their student to get out of the car.

Surprised? I'll tell you why. I love being able to meet students where they are when they least expect it. I go to the car, talk through the window if the car is locked, or, if I am lucky enough, sit in the car with them and say, "I get it. I wouldn't want to be here either." These are my most memorable sessions because I get to see how impactful it can be to simply empathize with where my clients are in that moment. So far, I have been able to get them all out of the car and into the office within the first hour.

I definitely didn't always have this type of response. I was actually a horrible babysitter growing up, because if I didn't agree with how the kids were feeling, then my responses weren't super helpful. I love how human nature's first response to intense negative emotions are oh-so-helpful phrases like, "Calm down," "Get over it," or "It's not that big of a deal." These responses are easy to say. They feel logical even. But they rarely have any benefits.

The problem is that the logical response is not what any of our brains need in the midst of an emotional low, especially in high school. In these phases, adolescent brains are actually functioning normally, but the way they function looks far different from an adult brain. The brain actually takes about 25 years to fully develop. Now, I don't mean to scare you. We both know that a 12-year-old brain and a 25-year-old brain are not the same, but this just is an example of how brain development and emotional management are learned processes and not singular events. During those growing years, the emotional part of our brain, called the amygdala, is ULTRA sensitive. In other words, it's super reactive. Seen this before in your kid? Because of this, teenagers will interpret and experience events more intensely. To add to the fun, the part of our brains responsible for logical reasoning, called the prefrontal cortex, is still working on those neural connections to the amygdala in order to be efficient and effective. The prefrontal cortex works at a slower pace.

So, what do we do in the meantime? How do we parent kids through this development?

First off, **expect intensity**. In intense situations, the brain's response will automatically want to fight, flight, or freeze. Maybe you have seen this in your own family, but just in case you haven't, let me break these down.

- In the **fight** mindset, people run toward conflict in attempt to win.
- But in the **flight** mindset, people run away from conflict to avoid it altogether.
- Lastly, with the **freeze** mindset, people become stagnant and can appear to be listening to the other person but not sharing their own opinions.

Depending on your kid's personality and environment, these responses will come out with force. Whether it is a kid completely shut down, angry, or isolated, this will come out with passion because of where their brain is functioning from in the moment. **In order for the brain to "calm down," it needs to feel safe.** When their is felt safety, the amygdala will begin to ease up.



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You can demonstrate this safety by showing empathy. Accept and validate where your kid is with understanding (even when you don't agree). We can't help what we don't know, so we need to respond in a way that allows them to be glad they opened up. In the future, they will know you are safe—which will make those late-night conversations go much smoother as you open up a space for future and deeper issues.

Do not fix. Why? They won't hear it yet. "In one ear and out the other" is a real thing when it comes to managing emotions. When we have a logical response to intense emotions, it's like communicating in different languages. When the brain is responded to and cared for emotionally (the current language it is speaking), then the brain will feel safe to slow down and think rationally. Until that happens, it might as well be back in French class.

Work smarter, not harder. Everyone wants to be comforted differently, and some ways work better than others. Find out what is most meaningful to your teen by identifying their top two love languages and starting there. This also shows them that you are intentionally thinking of their needs in a thoughtful way, which will become helpful in gaining trust and giving advice at a later time.

Parents, your heart and instinct to help is necessary! Giving your student advice and helping them fix their problems is how you know to love best. However, the previous steps are essential in beginning to understand your teen—even into why the "fix" may not be as easy as it seems. Regardless, helping your teenager manage their emotions will help you know better how to give advice that is helpful, while gaining their trust so they actually **hear your advice**.

Whew! I know that was A LOT! Now, when using these techniques, one of the most important things to do is apply this them to yourself. You need to give yourself empathy and understanding before you try to give those things to someone else. Why? Because we are all human. and none of this comes naturally. Give yourself grace just like you work to give to your teen. You are doing a great job, and your willingness to continue to want to grow and learn new skills to relate to your teenager is proof of that.

This Additional Resource was written by Kayla Lin, MEd, LAPC, NCC.

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