

Communication with Children and Teenagers Guidance for School Staff and Parents

Bringing up Emotionally Healthy Kids

Jenny Langley
Jenny.langley@cwmt.org



Seven Practical Tips for Parents

- 1) Feeding the teenage brain with science
- 2) Feeding the teenage brain with empathy
- 3) Connecting with the emotional side of the teenage brain
- 4) Cognitive restructuring for a negative teenager
- 5) Sidestepping the reassurance trap
- 6) Reflections on parental responses to the anxious teenager
- 7) Using motivational language to build stronger connections with anxious teenagers

Note: The emotional side of the brain really starts to develop around the age of 7 or 8, so in the context of this handout “teen” covers both primary and secondary school children.

This handbook is designed to provide further information and examples of evidence-based techniques that can be used by parents to improve communication with their children and teenagers.

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Practical Approaches to Improving Communication with Children and Teenagers and Breaking the Circle of “Never Good Enough”

In this handout, you will find explanations of the techniques that you have been introduced to in the parent workshop. In effect this handout provides you with a toolbox of different communication skills, and a guide with some background information on each of the techniques.

Parents are noticing that more and more of their children are struggling with a variety of issues that are affecting their emotional wellbeing. How often does your child or teenager shout “You are not listening to me, you don’t understand” and then storms out slamming the door. Communication lines are immediately severed.

Good listening skills and a non-judgemental and non-critical response from a parent or other trusted adult at an early stage can really help to keep communication lines open, to improve your relationships, and to boost their self-esteem and confidence. “My parents do care and they are listening and they are trying to understand!”

It is when a young person feels criticised or judged that they clam up, keep things to themselves and the outcome of this is that when they do come forward with a problem they are so distressed they might need much more than an empathetic ear to help them to resolve their problems. In a worst-case scenario, they never come forward and bottle things up. Things can go downhill very quickly.

Teenagers also hate being told what to do. Parents often find the phrase “I think you should” will shut down lines of communication very quickly. Consider the GP who prescribes a course of medicine or treatment without really listening to the patient’s full story. GPs get very frustrated when patients don’t follow their prescribed course of action. The patient doesn’t feel listened to or understood and very little has been achieved from that short GP intervention. Teenagers who feel listened to and understood, and who are encouraged to come up with their own ideas are much more likely to talk to their parents about issues they are trying to resolve. Using the techniques in this handbook parents can show that they believe in their child, and that they are there in the background to gently nudge and guide when it is needed.

In addition to the usual difficulties around that teenage phase, perfectionism is rife in our exam driven school system. Striving for something can be a healthy and positive attribute; it’s good to aim high. But sometimes whatever we do just isn’t good enough; we want to be too perfect and start setting unrealistic goals. Such high levels of perfectionism, often driven by low self-esteem, can turn against success and develop in to unhealthy obsession, triggering serious mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and eating disorders.

School staff and parents can learn some simple, yet well researched, evidence- based techniques that can help young people to break away from unhelpful thinking styles. These include:

- Cognitive Restructuring
- Motivational Interviewing
- Solution Focused Questioning

This handout provides a brief description of these techniques.

Starting Points to Come Alongside Your Child

When you are struggling with your child's or teenager's behaviours ask yourself the following questions:

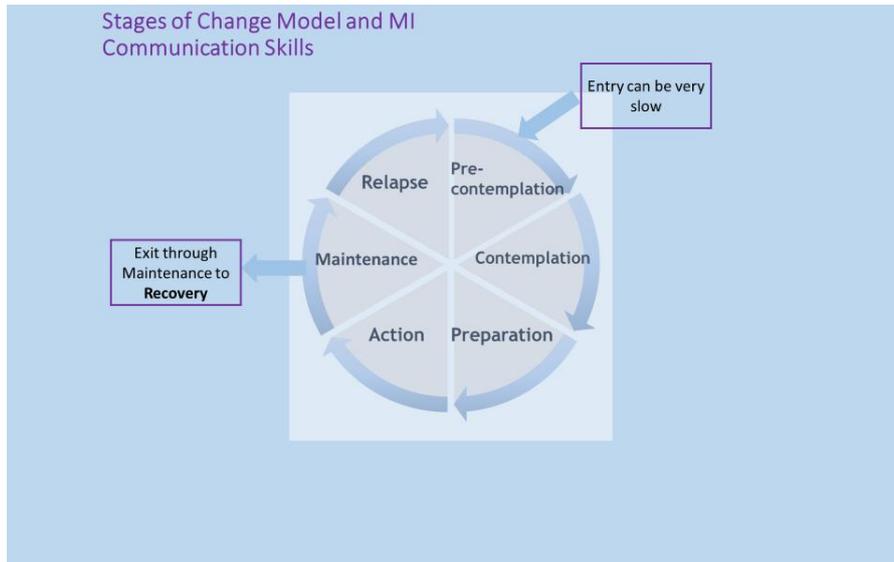
- What are the positive intentions of her behaviour? (Every behaviour has a positive intention – is she seeking attention because she is worried about something, is she pushing boundaries or taking risks because this is an important part of teenage development, is she getting some positive benefit from this behaviour such as control, euphoria, safety? Could you help her to get those same benefits in a more healthy or less risky way?)
- What is the emotion behind the behaviour? (joy, anger, fear, shame, sadness, disgust, confusion) By noticing the emotion you are showing you care and encouraging your child to attend to their emotions.
- Where is she in the cycle of change – can she see any reason to change? Can you motivate her to start to think about making some positive changes using any of these techniques? Arguing with logic with a child who sees no reason to change is likely to fall on deaf ears.

Using any of the techniques in this handout you can create a constructive conversation with your child to:

- Show you are listening and you care
- Show you believe in her ability to come up with her own options
- Show her that you are more than happy to help and guide her
- Reassure her that lots of young people find themselves in a similar predicament and with the right help things can improve very quickly
- Calmly reiterate boundaries and explain that these apply to everyone in the household/ school etc and that there are consequences for breaking these boundaries. Remember that talking is a great consequence

These techniques work equally well with girls and boys.

Cycle of Change Model



This model describes the process a person has to go through to make permanent change. It is a tool used in many therapeutic settings. The boundaries are not clear cut, this is the general process which can be used as a guide.

Pre-contemplation –not seeing there is a problem (anosognosia) or seeing there is a problem, but not willing to change it. The young person may truly believe there is nothing wrong, or might be rationalising it in their own minds: ‘I have just been a bit stressed with work lately, I’m eating loads, honestly’. They may be genuinely confused about your concerns.

Contemplation – Understands there is a problem, but may still be ambivalent about change. Part of them wants to change, the other part is resistant. It could be that the balance is not weighted highly enough for change, or they are not confident enough in their ability for change. Likely to say one thing (‘I will eat’) and do another (not eat!).

Preparation/Determination – The person has decided to change and is making plans. This can be a fragile stage.

Action - Has made a start at making changes. This stage presents many difficulties for a young person and SMART baby steps within a series of carefully planned experiments is much more likely to yield some positive steps forward.

Maintenance – Has started maintaining the action they decided on and are resisting relapse.

Relapse – May be a momentary relapse or longer, but always an important chance to **learn from mistakes**. Relapse and re-entering the cycle at an earlier stage is possible at any point, and this is all part of the necessary change process.

As you read through this handout think about where your child is in the cycle of change regarding certain behaviours that you would like them to change. If you are in Action and they are in Pre-contemplation then you are unlikely to be speaking the same language. The idea is that you seek to come alongside your child and walk slowly and patiently with them as they move around the cycle. The good news is that all of the techniques in this handout can be used at any stage. (see the example of Bella on p 20 in which Bella is firmly in pre-contemplation about carrying on with her chemistry studies. Her parents and teachers are naturally in action because it is obvious to them that she should do chemistry.)

Practical Tip One: Feeding the teenage brain with science

Rather than lecturing teenagers about healthy eating it can be more useful to discuss with them some science about the brain. The first question is how much and what type of nutrition does the brain need to function:

- The brain is a small organ weighing around 3lbs.
- It needs at least 500 calories a day.
- Within this there needs to be at least a teaspoon of “good” oil (like a car engine needs oil as well as fuel)
- The brain is made up of fatty tissue and if starved, the brain size actually shrinks.
- The part of the brain most affected is the area involved in emotional regulation and social functioning.
- Periods of fasting and feasting can also cause neuro-adaptive changes which can include addictive like changes and cravings.

These factors together can cause a vicious cycle in which the lack of adequate and regular nutrition produces brain problems which in turn cause anxiety and stress, problem eating alleviates this stress in the short term, and so the cycle continues. This explains why encouraging balanced regular eating is so important.

We also know that teenagers are more susceptible to dietary deficiencies which can affect appetite and the messages travelling to and from the brain around not only the necessity to eat, but also the desire to eat and the pleasure that results from eating. There are some interesting scientific facts around nutrition and deficiencies which are useful for all of us to understand. For example:

- Serotonin is well known for its role in mood disorders. Too little and depression can kick in for example. 95% of serotonin is produced in the stomach and so a restrictive/ chaotic diet can dramatically affect this. One theory is that carbohydrates are such a popular binge food because they are a good source of tryptophan which is essential for creating serotonin in your brain. Cravings for, and then bingeing on carbs could be the brain’s attempt to increase serotonin thus relieving symptoms of depression and anxiety.
- Eating carbohydrates is one way to stimulate serotonin production which might explain cravings for carbohydrates after a period of not eating, and also the desire to eat carbs if you have had a bad day and are feeling sad.
- Zinc levels affect your appetite and ability to absorb food, and the taste and smell of food. 85% of people have low zinc and for teens with chaotic diets this can really affect their motivation & desire to eat. Food can taste like cardboard
- Magnesium levels affect irritability levels, sleep and appetite, and can cause headaches, nausea, fatigue, and weakness as well as muscle cramps and insomnia.
- Omega 3 affects your ability to concentrate and focus and can have an impact on serotonin levels. In addition if you are depleted of omega 3,6 and 9 your hair, nails and skin can become dry and flaky.

Practical Tip Two: Feeding the teenage brain with empathy

Having empathy for the plight of children and teenagers does not mean we, as adults, agree with all their actions, but it does show we are prepared to step into their shoes and try to understand their perspective. Empathy fuels connections.

The Red Balloon/ Blue Balloon Metaphor

In this metaphor, the blue balloon represents the healthy, resilient side of the person, with a good support network and a toolbox of coping strategies. The red balloon represents the insecure, unhealthy side. We all have a red balloon and a blue balloon. For most of us, most of the time the blue balloon is much bigger. On a bad day, the red balloon can inflate a little, and by the end of a bad day we feel exhausted and supersensitive and even the slightest thing, like a light bulb blowing, can seem like a catastrophe. Luckily there is much in the blue balloon that can help to fight back. Talking to someone, a hot bath and a good night's sleep, and the red balloon is back in its box.

When your child or teen is struggling it is only natural to try to fix things for them. As their red balloon inflates it is easy to get sucked in and focus all your caring attention on what is wrong (their behaviour or bad mood) rather than what is right (their positive characteristics and ability to learn from their mistakes and to deal with setbacks), the resilient person.



An important message is that you cannot ignore the red balloon and it is critical that you seek professional help if the red balloon just seems to be getting bigger and bigger, especially where medical risk is high such as with anorexia, self-harm or suicidal ideation. When you are comfortable that your loved one is safe you can then focus your caring attention back on to the blue balloon, thus helping to re inflate it.

“Give more attention to the behaviours you like, and less attention to behaviours you don’t like”

LESS is more is a useful concept for parents:

Listen – to your child and reflect back to them what you think they are trying to tell you

Empathy – put yourself in their shoes and acknowledge that they might be facing difficult challenges

Support – make sure they now you are prepared to help

Share – in plenty of normal everyday blue balloon activities.

Understanding what anxiety feels like (popping the balloon)

Imagine you are holding a balloon with your eyes shut and somebody is walking around you with a pin. What are your natural physical responses to this stressful situation?

Typical responses might be:

- Heart pounding
- Breathing fast or
- Not really breathing much at all
- Clammy hands
- Tense muscles
- Butterflies in my stomach
- Super sensitive hearing
- Being very aware of where the person holding the pin is

Of course, these are typical responses to stress, and we would all feel similar things in a tense situation. The normal flight or fight response. Sometimes people go in to a freeze response and feel numb all over, akin to an animal playing dead in the hope the predator will go away. The good thing is that once the threat goes away these physical responses subside very quickly. It is like a wave that has come and gone quite quickly.

With a panic attack it is like these waves keep coming relentlessly for ten to fifteen minutes. The first time a child experiences a panic attack it is terrifying as it seems there is no end in sight, and it might feel like the child is going to die of a heart attack or asthma attack. Children learn to manage their panic attacks by riding the waves (imagine a rip tide – you would not try to swim against it), once the waves have subsided the child can get on with their day, but is likely to feel exhausted and might need a break, cup of tea, some fresh air before being able to get on with their day.

When a child is experiencing enduring anxiety, it can feel like these waves are coming all day. Unimaginable. Children and teens can be very good at covering this up, in effect masking their anxiety all day at school only to arrive home as an exhausted emotional wreck. This explains why school staff can be perplexed when parents raise concerns because the child appears “fine in school”.

Communication is key both in terms of the parent/ child relationship, the parent/ teacher relationship and the teacher/child relationship. Any of the techniques described in this handout can be useful.

The Crap Day Exercise

This exercise helps parents to empathise with how their child or teen might be feeling emotionally when they feel that everyone is telling them to stop doing things that help them to relax after a bad day. Anxious children and teens can develop unhelpful coping strategies including rigid rules around food, exercise, homework, exams; nail biting, skin picking and more serious self-harm; eating too much or too little; sleeping too much or too little; smoking; alcohol; drugs; inappropriate relationships. Of course, our natural parental instinct is to simply to tell them to stop but this can quickly shut all doors to communication.

The Task

Imagine some things that might happen to make a day seem really bad for you?

What do you do, or look forward to at the end of a crap day to help you feel better? Who do you turn to, to help you relax, rejuvenate, and for support? Answers might include:

Glass of chilled white wine	Gym	Planning next day
Gardening	Run	Making a to do list
Sailing	Bubble Bath	Bake a cake
Walk the dog	Shower	Yoga
Chocolate	TV	Relaxation techniques
Cup of tea and a chat	Music	Laugh or cry
Beach	Reading	Sleep

How would you feel if you were not allowed to do any of these things. Instead you have to sit with your discomfort and anxiety. Think of some words to describe how you are feeling.

Answers might include:

Scream	Rebellious	Bad
Have a tantrum	Frustrated	Angry
Walk out	Confused	Tense
Kicked even more	Emotional	Mad
Frustrated	Secretive	Tearful
Explosive temper	Angry	Annoyed
Panicky	Resentful	Resigned
Deceitful	Desperate	Crapper
Bored	Anxious	Aggressive

No wonder our children and teens slam doors when they feel we are not listening to them, we don't understand them and we don't care about their feelings. Rather than simply telling our children to stop we can be curious about what is driving their behaviour and what we can do to help.

Watch Brene Brown's powerful animation on the power of empathy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ewvngu369Jw>

Practical Tip Three: Connecting with the emotional side of the teenage brain

The neurochemical dopamine is essential for learning, paying attention and bringing nerve cells to an optimal level of excitation so that they function well. At around age 8 levels of dopamine in the brain suddenly shoot up and don't come back down until age around 20. This is one of the reasons teenagers can be so impetuous and display incredible swings in mood. Too much dopamine can result in unpredictable and seemingly unacceptable behaviour and drives teenagers to take high risk decisions with poor judgement. There are two main reasons why this surge in dopamine needs to happen. First, it helps teenagers to break free from their dependence on their parents, and second, it helps them to learn to interface with their peers by trial and error. We know that dopamine is predominantly (about 93%) under the control of the limbic emotional part of the brain. So, it follows that if teachers can make good emotional connections with their students, those students will find it easier to learn. In addition, if parents can notice and reflect on their child's emotions, this can help to forge closer relationships and connections in a calm environment whilst allowing the child to develop in an age appropriate way. An angry stressed teenager will experience huge dopamine spikes, whereas a calm supported teenager who feels listened to and understood will have the right concentrations of dopamine in the brain to function well and maximise their ability to deal with challenges.

When communicating with your children try to remember these two key things:

"Every behaviour has a positive intention"

"Look for the emotion behind the behaviour"

A technique called **ALVS** can be really useful:

Attend
Label
Validate
Soothe (Learning)

Step 1: Attend

Attend to the visible signs of the young person's emotional experience by approaching the situation calmly and acknowledging the presence of emotion through their body language:

"I see that something is up. I notice that when I asked you if you understood the reasons why you are not allowed to go on the school trip you started picking the skin on your thumb/ you were looking at the floor/ you were fiddling with your necklace/ your muscles were tensed up/ you were frowning..."

Step 2: Label

Put into words the emotions (or range of emotions) that you think the young person might possibly be experiencing.

"You seem sad. I am here if you would you like to talk about it?"

Step 3: Validate

This is the most important and yet the most challenging of all of the steps of emotion coaching. It communicates empathy:

"I can understand you might be feeling sad right now *because* you couldn't go on the school trip."

"I know you were looking forward to going on that trip"

"I might feel sad if I had a disappointment like that"

Validating involves the parent putting themselves in the young person's shoes and conveying understanding of their experience as *they* are experiencing it. This involves imagining what the situation

must be like for them. It is important to accept, allow, and validate emotions that are different from what you expected or that are hard for you to understand.

The use of the word **because** increases the effect of this step.

When validating, it is also very important to resist going for the bright side, explaining with logic or trying to help the young person to see the situation from your perspective.

A parent that can validate the young person's emotion in this way will be showing the child that he understands them (and their unique experience) and this will 1) improve the parent/child relationship, 2) encourage the young person to keep communicating with the parent when things get tough and 3) help the young person to move forward from the immediate emotional challenge.

When validating it is also very important to "speak the unspoken". Speaking the unspoken involves speaking that truth that both parties know, but that neither wants to say out loud.

"I can understand why you might feel sad **because** it really hurts to be excluded, especially when all of your friends are going on that trip".

4. Soothe

When meeting the emotion need, it is important to refer back to the basics of emotions. Each emotion has a corresponding need from the environment.

Sadness: soothing, giving a verbal or physical hug

Anger: helping to set and defend boundaries

Fear: protecting from danger (this does not mean protecting against anxiety! A real danger must be involved)

Anxiety: helping to confront the anxiety-provoking situation with empathy and support

Give positive feedback about the young person's ability to express an emotional response and try to balance this immediate negative feeling with something more positive

"I am impressed that you are able to talk to me about how you feel. You are a talented person, a great leader, determined to do well and passionate about your sporting achievements. Let's talk about how we can come up with a plan in which you can use all your skills to manage your time better so that you don't find yourself in this position again."

Learn and Problem-solve

Attending to, naming and validating an emotion/emotional experience goes a long way to connecting with the young person. A good relationship has been forged, the child trusts that the parent is really trying to understand and listen and will not simply dismiss her worries and tell her what to do.

This final step is often unnecessary since engaging in the prior steps decreases the strength of the emotion and can help many young people to then engage in their own problem-solving.

When this step *is* required, problem solving communicates "I will help you sort to this out" and it can be very helpful, but only if it comes after attending, labeling and validating the emotional experience of the young person.

"Why don't we sort out how you are going to deal with your friends talking about the school trip and/or things coming up about the school trip on social media. And then why don't we look ahead and plan how you can better manage your time so that your academic work gets sufficient attention and you can also still have plenty of time to enjoy your sport and see your friends."

Practical Tip Four : Cognitive Restructuring. The ABCDEF Model

According to Martin Seligman there are more pessimists than optimists in the world and pessimists are more likely to have lower immune systems and to display rigid perfectionist traits. The defining characteristic of pessimists is that they tend to believe bad events will last a long time (PERMANENT), will undermine everything they do (PERVASIVE), and are their own fault (PERSONAL). The optimists, who are confronted with the same hard knocks of this world, think about misfortune in the opposite way. They tend to believe defeat is just a TEMPORARY setback, that its causes are confined to this one case (NOT PERSONAL OR PERVASIVE). The optimists believe defeat is not their fault: Circumstances, bad luck, or other people brought it about. Such people are unfazed by defeat. Confronted by a bad situation, they perceive it as a challenge and try harder.

Seligman believes anyone can learn optimism. Whether currently an optimist or a pessimist, benefits can be gained from exposure to the process of learned optimism to improve response to both big and small adversities. A [learned optimism test](#) (developed by Seligman) is used to determine an individual's base level of optimism. Being in the more pessimistic categories means that learning optimism has a chance of preventing depression, helping the person achieve more, and improve physical health. Seligman's process of learning optimism consists of a simple method to train a new way of responding to adversity, specifically, by learning to talk themselves through personal defeat. It begins with the Ellis ABC model of adversity, belief, and consequence. Adversity is the event that happens, Belief is how that adversity is interpreted, and Consequences are the feelings and actions that result from the beliefs. This is demonstrated in the example below:

Adversity: Someone cuts you off in traffic.

Belief: You think, "I can't believe that idiot was so rude and selfish!"

Consequence: You are overcome with anger, yelling profanity at the other driver.

In the journey to learning optimism, emphasis is placed on first understanding one's current reaction to and interpretation of adversity. Learners are asked to keep a journal for two days in which they note small adverse events and the beliefs and consequences that followed. Next the learner returns to the journal to highlight pessimism (e.g, pervasiveness: "it doomed me...") in their written descriptions of the events.

To the ABC model, Seligman adds D(disputation), E (energization) and F (functional new thought).

Disputation centres on generating counter-evidence to any of the following: the negative beliefs in general, the causes of the event, or the implications. D also means reminding oneself of any potential usefulness of moving on from the adversity. Disputation for the above traffic example might sound like this: "I am overreacting. I don't know what situation he is in. Maybe he is on his way to his daughter's piano recital and is running late. I'm sure I have cut people off before without meaning to, so I should really cut him a break. I am not in a hurry anyway."

Over time, responses like this are predicted to change feelings to be more hopeful and positive. Successful disputation leads to energization, the E in the ABCDEF model. One is energized, and should indeed try to actively celebrate, the positive feelings and sense of accomplishment that come from successful disputation of negative beliefs. Disputation and Energization (celebration) are the keys to Seligman's method.

Teaching children learned optimism by guiding them through the ABCDEF techniques can help them to better deal with adversity they encounter in their lives. If children are taught early then the thought process of disputation is claimed to become ingrained in them. They do not, then, have to focus on being optimistic, but rather optimism becomes automatic and leads to a more positive life for that young person.

An Example of the ABCDEF Approach to Challenging Negative Thoughts Using a Cognitive Behavioural Approach

Anna has got caught up in a cycle of thinking that she must go for a long fast run after a meal because she feels bloated and fat and this is the only way she can alleviate her symptoms.

Adversity –“I ate a big lunch at school”

Belief –“I am bloated and fat”

Consequence –“ I need to go for a long fast run which is not pleasurable, is painful and makes me feel exhausted. “

It may well be that Anna automatically goes to the consequence as a result of eating a big meal, she is not even conscious of her negative belief. So, Anna has a rigid rule:

“When I have eaten a big meal, I must go for a long fast run”

In the positive psychology/ learned optimism approach we progress from ABC to D.

D is Disputing or questioning the validity of the thoughts and belief.

Having had several conversations with the gap year student who is really fit and healthy and laid back, Anna feels more able to challenge her unhealthy thought

Dispute	Effect/ Energy	Functional New Thought
<p>What are some reasons I can generate to question my unhealthy thought?</p> <p><i>We all have the same lunch and I am the only one who feels fat straight after. In fact, they seem to really enjoy their lunch and happily have a snack after school as well.</i></p> <p><i>They are not compelled to go for a long fast run. Many of my friends do lots of exercise including running and there are many other benefits, the social side, relaxation. I used to feel like that before I became so fearful of being fat. Now I actually hate running but feel compelled to go.</i></p> <p>How can I correct my thinking errors?</p> <p><i>Feeling fat makes me anxious and that will be hard to change. Perhaps I can try to think about other ways that help to reduce my anxiety. Going for a run is not the only option. Perhaps I will book onto that street dance class that some of my friends go to.</i></p>	<p>How do I feel after challenging my thoughts?</p> <p><i>On the one hand, I feel scared and nervous about trying to make changes. On the other I feel confident that now I have looked at some of the options I feel energised to give them a try.</i></p> <p>How might I act differently as a result of challenging my thoughts?</p> <p><i>I can try some new ways to reduce my anxiety around food. It will be hard but my gap year student is being really kind and supportive.</i></p>	<p>How can I express my new thought in my own words.</p> <p><i>I know that I am still going to feel fat after a large meal, but I no longer feel that I absolutely have to go for a run. There are plenty of other things that might help to reduce my anxiety and I am going to give them a try. The worst thing that can happen is that none of them work, in which case I still have the option of going for a run.</i></p>

Practical Tip Number Five : Sidestepping the Reassurance Trap

Beware of the **Reassurance Trap** when communicating with anxious children. When anyone gets anxious there is a physiological response which makes us feel stressed. We manage this by using different strategies to calm ourselves down. The problem with using reassurance as a strategy to help a needy child is that they don't learn to reassure themselves, and have to constantly rely on others to feel better.

Like taking a drug, or picking up a crying baby, the effect of reassurance is only temporary and becomes less effective as time goes on. The child's anxiety rises, and they have not learned to master their own fears. This results in chronic anxiety and no strategy to manage it. Healthy people do get anxious but they learn to manage it so that it doesn't become chronic anxiety. The way to help the young person with this is to support them to sit with the anxiety while it spikes (it will naturally reduce), and support them to look at the bigger picture and come up with their own strategies, such as looking for evidence themselves. When a child masters their fear by learning to reassure themselves, the level of anxiety returns to a much lower level than if they had received reassurance. The next time a similar fear surfaces, they will be better equipped to deal with it themselves.

Aesop's fable of the Sun & the Wind illustrates how change comes about by creating a little bit of discomfort, but not so much that the young person is likely to fail. The Sun gets the man to take his coat off, first by shining gently down to get the man to relax, and then by making the man feel uncomfortably hot as the sun gradually heats up, so that he takes his coat off. This is in contrast to the wind which blew harder and harder trying to force change, and the result was the man held on to his coat much tighter.

Useful phrases for sidestepping the reassurance trap

- "It is not helpful for me to keep reassuring you"
- "You seem very anxious/ frightened. That often makes young people seek continuous reassurance about the same things over and over, but in the long term it is not helpful."
- "You know the answer to that, I believe you can do it."
- "If I keep reassuring you it will keep your anxiety flourishing"
- "This high anxiety you are feeling right now will pass. It is like a wave. What could we do to help distract you from all these anxious thoughts? Would you like to go for a walk with the dog, do some drawing, write a poem etc"

Practical Tip Number Six: Reflections on parental responses to the anxious teenager

Instinctive caring reactions to an anxious child are not always the most helpful and can be described in a light hearted way using animal metaphors. There is no absolute right or wrong way of responding to an anxious child. If what you are doing is working of course you will carry on doing it. However, if you feel it is not working, perhaps reflect on small changes you could make that might reopen communication lines and connections with your child.

The Kangaroo

This type of carer does everything to protect by taking over all aspects of the child's life. They treat the child with kid gloves, letting them jump into the kangaroo pouch in an effort to avoid any upset or stress. The downside of this type of caring is that the child fails to learn how to approach and master life's challenges. She/he only feels safe living in this limbo land suspended in a child-like cocoon unable to visualise taking on the world in all its colour or the mantle of adulthood. The Kangaroo carer will accommodate to all demands whether they are rational or driven by high anxiety.

The Rhino

Fuelled by stress, exhaustion and frustration, or simply one's own temperament, the rhino attempts to persuade and convince using logic, argument and confrontation. The downside is that even when the child does obey, confidence to continue to do so without assistance is not developed. The more likely response to a rhino "in a china shop" is that the anxious child will argue back with an even stronger voice. Teenagers in particular do not respond well to being told what to do.

The Terrier

The terrier persistently cajoles, nags and tries to wear out the disobedient or petulant child. The downside of this terrier type behaviour is that either the child tunes out to what they perceive as irritating white noise, or gives the opportunity for covert negative counteracting behaviours. Caring motives are misunderstood and everyone's morale is sapped.

The Ostrich

The ostrich finds it hard to cope with the volcanic situation which often arises when trying to tackle the difficult problem of living with teenagers. Emotions and the complexities of human behaviour are too chaotic and confusing. The ostrich literally prefers to put his/her head down into the sand, avoiding emotions at all costs. This is something he/she knows he/she can confidently do, avoiding what seems too hard. The downside is that the child may misinterpret this approach, seeing the carer as uncaring and so may end up feeling unloved. Self-esteem is sapped away. Additionally, the concealment of emotions sets an unhelpful example for the child to follow. Setting an example of emotional honesty and spreading the concept that having controlled emotions is normal and acceptable human behaviour, will aid the child in coming to terms with their own difficulties with emotional expression.

The Jellyfish

Some carers may be unable to regulate their own intense emotional responses to highly erratic teenage behaviour. Their distress and anger is transparent to all, this gives the message that this carer needs looking after and at the very least needs to be treated with kid gloves. In this sea of emotion, it is hard to steer a clear path. Also, like a jelly fish overt anger and anxiety can exert a poisonous sting with the same uncontrolled emotions being mirrored by the young person. The downside is that these 'sad and mad' emotions escalate causing tears, tempers, sleepless nights and exhaustion in all parties.

The animal metaphors described above depict the typical instinctive emotional and behavioural responses of carers to the challenging child. The Dolphin and St Bernard metaphors represent a more emotionally regulated caring approach. The metaphor of the herd of elephants introduces the idea of social support with the collaborative approach

The Dolphin carer offers just enough caring and control.

Imagine a pod of dolphins swimming along and one of the baby dolphins starts to swim out into the danger zone. One of the dolphins, not necessarily the Mum or Dad will swim alongside them and gently nudge them back into the safety zone. This is done with a hands-off approach with the bigger picture and social support in mind. At times the adult dolphin might swim ahead, leading the way, at other times swim alongside with encouragement, watch while other family members help, and even quietly swim behind, showing trust and confidence.

The St Bernard carer offers just enough compassion and consistency.

In the face of any avalanche or trauma the St. Bernard carer responds consistently and is unfailing, reliable and dependable. The St. Bernard has a good antennae attuned to the welfare and safety of those who are lost...calm, warm and nurturing. The St Bernard instills hope in the child that they can change, that there is a future full of possibility. The St Bernard carer has the patience of a saint and offers unconditional love whatever happens. She/he does not yap too loudly and cause an avalanche

The Herd of Elephants

Collaborative care is like being a herd of elephants linking trunks and tails, to jointly care for the young ones. In this metaphor the carer works with a team of wise others to make decisions and provide care. This illustrates the importance of including friends and family and of course getting information from books and workshops. This also underlines the importance of working with a wider support network including the GP, A&E and specialist care teams when the child or teenager is struggling with poor mental health.

Practical Tip Number Seven : Using motivational language to build stronger connections with anxious teenagers

Introduction to Motivational Interviewing

People in distress are reluctant to change and fear that things might get worse. The more you ask, tell or plead with them to do something they are not inclined to do, the less and less likely they become to do it. Often it will simply serve to encourage them to stick even more steadfastly to their rigid rules. Teenagers are no exception.

Motivational interviewing is designed to elicit a behavioural change in people who do not recognise the need for change, or they feel ambivalent about it. This technique has been successfully used in the mental health arena for many years and is successful because it puts a young person in control of their own changes. The supporting adult acts as a facilitator, helping them to explore their feelings and different potential outcomes but never telling the young person what to do. The young person finds their own path to change and is therefore far more likely to stick to it.

MI skills can be adapted to almost any situation. Developing and using these skills will help you to become a better listener, help you to understand the young person's viewpoint, help you to help them to determine appropriate goals for behaviour change and help you to help motivate them to change their current behaviour to meet these goals.

Motivational Communication Skills – OARS

These language skills help you to really listen and come alongside the child:

Open Questions

These invite a young person to talk and explore their own ideas and can help the parent to understand more about how the young person is really feeling. Avoid WHY questions as much as possible.

- I am curious to know how I can help?
- What would be helpful?
- What would you like the next steps to be?
- Help me understand what you feel your options are?
- What was the best/ worst thing that has happened this week?
- Who is important to you right now?
- Would you mind if I make a few suggestions that have worked for other students?

Affirmations

These help the young person to acknowledge their own positive behaviours and character strengths, which then builds confidence in their ability to change. Affirmations also allow for recognition of the young person's difficulties, letting them know their concerns and issues are valid. Affirmations convey respect, understanding and support and need to be both genuine and appropriate

- You are so hard working, resourceful, thoughtful, creative, inspiring etc
- That's a really great idea
- I can see that you find these things difficult and you displayed a great deal of courage
- I'm not sure other young people would manage so well

Using **Very Important Encouraging Words (VIEW)** as affirmations

Parents can express unconditional love for their child, whatever he/she says or does, in many ways.

- Explicit – "I love you. I don't like that behaviour"

- Implicit – noticing and appreciating even the tiniest effort – “Thanks for helping your little brother clear the table”

Here are some VIEW words parents might use in conversations with their child. Add your own words.

<i>Adaptable</i>	<i>Collaborative</i>	<i>Eloquent</i>	<i>Funny</i>	<i>Patient</i>	<i>Sociable</i>
<i>Amazing</i>	<i>Committed</i>	<i>Empathic</i>	<i>Hard working</i>	<i>Persevering</i>	<i>Sporty</i>
<i>Articulate</i>	<i>Compassionate</i>	<i>Energetic</i>	<i>Incredible</i>	<i>Popular</i>	<i>Strong</i>
<i>Artistic</i>	<i>Conscientious</i>	<i>Enthusiastic</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>Quirky</i>	<i>Talented</i>
<i>Attentive</i>	<i>Considerate</i>	<i>Expressive</i>	<i>Intelligent</i>	<i>Reflective</i>	<i>Thoughtful</i>
<i>Brave</i>	<i>Courageous</i>	<i>Fantastic</i>	<i>Kind</i>	<i>Resilient</i>	<i>Trust worthy</i>
<i>Calm</i>	<i>Creative</i>	<i>Fearless</i>	<i>Knowledgeable</i>	<i>Resourceful</i>	<i>Versatile</i>
<i>Capable</i>	<i>Determined</i>	<i>Flexible</i>	<i>Level headed</i>	<i>Responsible</i>	<i>Wild</i>
<i>Caring</i>	<i>Diligent</i>	<i>Fortuitous</i>	<i>Loving</i>	<i>Sensible</i>	<i>Wise</i>
<i>Clever</i>	<i>Driven</i>	<i>Friendly</i>	<i>Passionate</i>	<i>Sensitive</i>	<i>Zany</i>

Parents who can identify and focus on a young person’s character strengths, whatever that young person has just said or done, rather than focusing on their weaknesses or failures, will find that the young person is much more motivated to make positive changes.

A couple of examples:

Isobel has seen the school counsellor twice. She is scheduled to have four more sessions. She says to you in an angry tone:

“I hate therapy with a passion and I am not going anymore”

Your instinctive reaction might be to argue with logic why you think she should go. An alternative response might be more motivational:

“It is good that you feel so passionately about things. Tell me more about how therapy is going.”

At the very least you will have sidestepped the anger and sown the seed that you are interested to hear how therapy is going, and possibly you have lightened the mood with a little humour.

Charlie is really annoying you with his constant chatter. He is a clever boy with really good ideas and he expresses himself really well but he can be a distraction in class. His teachers have raised this as a problem. You are also a teacher at the school.

Your instinctive reaction is to punish his disruptive behaviour:

“Charlie if you don’t stop talking in school I will take your Ipad away from you.” This might prove a deterrent in the very short term but is unlikely to work longer term.

An alternative response might be more motivational:

“Charlie we need to talk about this at the weekend”. This might have the same immediate effect as he will be curious to know why, and he will most likely be expecting a telling off. Instead you might say in that meeting:

“Charlie I have noticed that you express yourself really well and I am starting up a debating society at school. I would really appreciate it if you would help me set it up. You would be a real asset and I know many of the younger students look up to you”

Reflections

By paraphrasing a young person’s comment and repeating them back you can show you are really listening and seeking to understand what is being said. You can also seek to clarify issues you haven’t really understood and you can play devil’s advocate by slightly changing the meaning so that the young person will correct you and clarify what he is thinking.

- I can see you are struggling to start/ finish this
- Please correct me if I’m wrong. What I think you mean is ...
- It must be tough for you trying to fit everything in
- You seem overwhelmed, exhausted, distressed

Aim for three reflections/ affirmations to every open question. If you are really listening and wanting to show you are prepared to come alongside the young person, then the young person should be doing most of the talking, with gentle nudging and guidance from the parent.

Summaries

These pull together everything that has been discussed and again helps to reaffirm what has been said and to check that you fully understand the individual’s thoughts, desires and intentions. If possible, schedule the next conversation so that the child feels that you are really interested in his situation.

- In summary, we have talked about x, y and z, have I missed anything?
- We’ve covered a lot. Would you agree these are the next steps?
- Would you agree these are the key things to take away?
- We have had a really constructive conversation. Shall we talk again at the weekend?

Example Scenario using OARS

Bella is in year 8 and is devastated that she got a B in her chemistry test. It was a very hard exam and several of her friends also got B grades. Bella states she wants to drop chemistry as soon as she can which would be a shame as she is an excellent scientist.

Open Question with Empathy and Curiosity

“Bella I can see you are currently very anxious about chemistry and that your test result has been very upsetting for you. There are some good reasons why several of you got a B in the mock and I would like to talk to you about this and try to understand if there are any specific issues I might be able to help you with.”

Bella’s initial response is unlikely be positive as she is so upset:

“I don’t see the point. I am useless at chemistry and I don’t want to do it anymore. It is too hard. The additional support lessons are really stressing me out and it means I have less time to spend on the other subjects. I don’t need chemistry. I don’t want to be a chemistry teacher or a chemist. Nobody is listening to me”

The good thing about Bella’s response is that she is talking about how she is feeling.

Possible Reflections

You are so disappointed with your result that you feel like giving up

You are worried you might get a B in the real exam and that would be a terrible thing for you to deal with

You think it is too hard for you

You feel that nobody is listening to your point of view. That must be frustrating/ make you angry/ make you want to rebel.....

Possible Affirmations

Thank you for telling me how you are feeling. Some girls would find that difficult

It takes courage to pick yourself up after an unexpected setback and I know you can do it

Your work throughout the past two years has been exceptional and I believe that you have a natural talent for all the sciences

You have worked so hard and it would be a shame to give all that up at this late stage

I believe you can do this

Possible Summary

Thank you for helping me to understand how you are feeling and explaining all of your concerns about continuing with the chemistry course. I am sorry that you have felt that nobody was listening to you and I hope you feel able to talk to me about any of your future concerns. I know you have a lot going on at the moment. We are here to listen and help. You make some very valid points including the fact that you are worried that extra work in chemistry might affect your grades in other subjects. I would like you to think about some of the points I have made in response to your concerns. You are a very clever girl and I believe you will do really well in June. Perhaps we could both have a few days to reflect on everything we have talked about and let’s meet again next Tuesday at 4pm. How does that sound?

This approach should keep lines of communication open and has sown the seed in Bella’s mind that there is an alternative to giving up chemistry. Simply telling Bella she must do chemistry is likely to shut down lines of communication very quickly.

Advanced Motivational Communication Skills – DEARS

Motivational Interviewing is based around 5 principles, easily remembered using the acronym “DEARS”

- Develop Discrepancy
- Express Empathy
- Amplify Ambivalence
- Roll with Resistance
- Supporting Self Efficacy

Developing Discrepancy

The aim of this is to help the young person realise that there is a difference between where they currently are and where they want to be and that their current behaviour might be standing in the way of some of their goals. The goal is to motivate the young person to resolve the discrepancy by changing their behaviour.

Express Empathy

Struggling children might be feeling isolated, frustrated and out of control. They may feel nobody understands them and all they can hear is constant criticism and nagging to change. By stepping in to the shoes of the child and trying to understand why they are behaving a particular way, you as the parent can gain a far better picture of how to support the child, whilst also earning their trust.

Amplify Ambivalence

Even the most committed perfectionists and seemingly rebellious children can at times recognise some of the negative aspects of their behaviour. A parent who can spot an opening and can calmly verbalise the negatives and repeat and perhaps magnify them can help the child to start to see there are two sides to the story. Encouraging a child to explore these negatives as well as the positives about their behaviour can help them to recognise that change might have some positive outcomes.

Rolling with Resistance

Change isn't easy, progress can be slow and emotions can run high. As a parent you might feel the young person is making some progress only to find it is one step forward and two back, and the child is adamant they want to stay just as they are for a little longer. The key is not to damage the good relationship you have been developing by lecturing, pestering, badgering or otherwise insisting on change. Develop your own useful phrases:

“It must be baffling for you that we are all concerned and from your point of view you are ok. Tell me about the things that are going well and make you feel happy at the moment.”

“I have noticed you struggling and would like to help but maybe this isn't such a good time for you. I am here for you if you ever want to talk”

Supporting Self Efficacy

This process is all about enabling a young person to take control of their own destiny, they create their own goals and, with support they find the right path for them. The path won't always be straightforward but the important thing is they keep trying and they are given clear and positive support every time they come up with an idea/ experiment however small that challenge might be. As a parent you can help support the young person verbally and practically – helping them work out how they can execute their plan both at home and at school.

Example Scenario using DEARS

Andrew is a fabulous all-rounder who is very popular with his peers. He is involved in lots of sports, the school play, music tuition, and high academic sets. His older brother has just got in to Cambridge and he wants to follow in his footsteps. He appears very confident and happy although a few of his close friends have noticed that he has become very interested in reading about celebrities who have used self-harm as a coping mechanism. They decide to talk to Andrew's Mum who asks Andrew if everything is ok. Andrew is adamant that he is fine and that he is just intrigued that celebrities like David Beckham and Justin Bieber feel so much pressure that they develop these coping strategies. Mum feels she needs to open the door for further conversations and to show Andrew she has noticed that he may be finding life a bit difficult at the moment and that she is prepared to listen and talk, and help out if she can. She uses MI skills to act as a facilitator, helping Andrew to explore his feelings and different potential outcomes but never telling Andrew what to do. The idea is that Andrew will find his own path to change and is therefore far more likely to stick to it.

Develop Discrepancy

"I know you love doing all these different activities YET I have noticed that you seem to be struggling to fit everything in and you seem anxious"

Express Empathy

"I understand that you really enjoy all of these activities that you are doing, and you have a great deal of talent for so many different things. It must be hard sometimes to prioritise and/or to say no to things. I know many students wouldn't have the energy and resourcefulness to fit everything in."

Amplify Ambivalence

"It must be annoying and frustrating for you to see that most of your friends have more spare time to relax at the weekends. Do you think they have had to prioritise and perhaps let a few things go? I know that you wanted to go to the cinema this weekend, but you were unable to because of drama rehearsals."

Roll with Resistance

"I can see that you think I am making a fuss about nothing and that must be annoying for you. I am just concerned about you taking on too much and getting exhausted. Let's focus on something else and come back to this later..."

Supporting Self Efficacy

"You are incredibly organised and resourceful and you manage to fit so many things in to your week. I don't imagine many of your friends are so organised."

"You have clearly thought long and hard about carrying on with all your activities, and planning how you can fit everything in"

"I can see that sometimes you struggle to fit everything in and that sometimes things don't go according to plan. I admire the way you can pick yourself up when things don't go according to plan"

The Functional Analysis ABC model of behaviour.

Antecedent	Behaviour	Consequence
External – time pressure. Chaos of too much going on	Andrew has an unusual and new interest in self harm as a coping strategy	Positive – the possibility that there might be an easily accessible coping strategy that will some of the pressure
Internal – wanting to please everyone, perfectionist traits, fear of failure.....		Negative – can be very harmful and is not a healthy long term strategy. Andrew’s family, friends and tutors are on alert and are worried.

As a parent you can look at any young person’s behaviour and look at the antecedents and the consequences of the behaviour. If nothing changes a vicious cycle can develop in which the young person gets more stressed and thus more likely to adopt unhelpful and potentially harmful coping strategies.

Looking at this model can you change your own response to try and break the vicious cycle?

Can you see anything that Andrew could be doing differently to help break the cycle? Acknowledge the emotions rather than focusing on the behaviour. Is he feeling anxious, sad, stressed, out of control?

If the young person can come up with his/her own ideas and can verbalise them, they are more likely to give it a try. If the young person is really struggling, you could ask if its ok if you make a few suggestions which the young person could choose from. “Would you mind if I make a few suggestions based on things that have worked for others?”

If you give a few options the young person is much more likely to choose one of them and try it out, rather than if you just said “I think you should do this....”

Using OARS and DEARS you can help elicit change thoughts and talk from the young person.

If emotions are running high you might choose to roll with resistance and come back at a later time.

SMART BABY STEPS

Change is difficult and it is much better to have small achievable goals rather than setting the young person up to fail. Any effort by the young person to move in the right direction should be noticed and acknowledged. Patience is invaluable as progress may be very slow. Regular review of progress will help the young person to become more confident and boost her self-esteem.

Specific

Measurable

Achievable

Realistic and within a

Timeframe

As a parent, you can help guide a young person to devise their own sensible goals and to review and reflect on how things are going. Solution focused questioning is useful here.

Solution Focused Questioning

Solution Focused Questioning is a useful technique to gently challenge negative thinking and perfectionist behaviours.

Several researchers have linked positive outcomes to communication styles that:

- (1) respect the integrity and individuality of the young person,
- (2) demonstrate confidence in their ability to learn and act responsibly,
- (3) encourages the young person to examine and resolve their own problems,
- (4) involves the young person in family discussions, activities, and decisions, and
- (5) facilitate positive parent/ child relationships.

Solution-focused practices can also assist parents in preventing and resolving unhelpful behaviour problems by explicitly recognizing and amplifying the young person's strengths, resources, and successes instead of attending only to their mistakes and problems (Goldstein & Brooks, 2007). Parents have nothing to lose and everything to gain by enlisting their children as consultants on their own problems and goals. Children, like the rest of us, appreciate being asked for their opinions and ideas. Even if the young person has no specific ideas for improving things, the question itself conveys respect and enhances the parent/ child relationship—which is a benefit in parenting and behaviour management.

<http://www.drjohnmurphy.com/justforparents.htm> and

<http://www.drjohnmurphy.com/justforteachers.htm>

Solution Focused Questions Examples

- What, specifically, would you like to be different?
- What, specifically, could you do to get started?
- If the first step is successful, then what?
- Who else could you ask for support, assistance, if anyone?
- What could you ask for?
- What would be signs that things are going well?
- How would you know if you were off-track?
- What would you do if you got off-track?
- What would success look like?

Notice that solution focused questions encourage a response from the child, not just a yes or no answer. Of course, if the child is not in the mood to talk they might just grunt "I dunno", but as a parent you have sown the seed that you want to help and you are interested in their point of view.

Try to avoid stepping in and giving all the solutions yourself. Remember not to give your opinion too quickly. It is much more effective to make suggestions based on what you have heard has worked for others, or that you learned on a course, from a book etc. Avoid "I think you should" at all costs.

If the child does need you to make some suggestions then it is a good idea to put forward two or three options and then help the child to choose one using any of the techniques in this handout.

