



# Supporting Teens This School Year: Reemergence Guide for Caregivers

This year, thousands of teens are returning to school. Many continue to cope with the impacts of the pandemic and the events of the past year and a half: academic loss, feelings of anxiety or depression, and in some cases grief for the loss of loved ones, race-related trauma, and family challenges such as economic hardship.

COVID-19 has affected some teens more than others due to health equity and disparity issues, especially teens of color and those with fewer economic resources. Students from marginalized groups (including racial minorities, students with disabilities, and members of the LGBTQ+ community) often experience additional stressors and challenges as well.

But with the right support, teenagers can rebound from this uniquely challenging time and reemerge into a new normal. To give families and school communities the tools to help them, the Morgan Stanley Alliance for Children's Mental Health has launched a Reemergence Initiative. This collaboration among our partners is intended to provide practical tips and valuable information to caregivers and educators. This guide is broken down into the following topics:

- 1 Understanding Reemergence and Its Effect on Teen Mental Health
- 2 Helping Teens Feel More Connected
- 3 Addressing Academic Deficits
- 4 Prioritizing Self-Care for Caregivers
- 5 Collaborating With Teachers and School Administrators

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## About the Morgan Stanley Alliance for Children's Mental Health

The Morgan Stanley Alliance for Children's Mental Health brings together key leaders in the children's mental health space and combines the resources and reach of Morgan Stanley and its Foundation with the knowledge and experience of its distinguished nonprofit member organizations, including the Child Mind Institute, the Columbia University Department of Psychiatry, The Jed Foundation, New York-Presbyterian Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital and the Steve Fund in the U.S. The Alliance helps address strategically children's mental health concerns and the far-reaching challenges of stress, anxiety, and depression.



# Understanding Reemergence and Its Effect on Teen Mental Health

## How can caregivers support their teens' mental health this year?

### What to look for

After a year of disruption and uncertainty, many teens are experiencing feelings of anxiety and depression. But it can be difficult for caregivers to know what to look for — or how to help. Knowing the signs will help caregivers support teens who are struggling.

### Anxiety

Heightened anxiety in times of uncertainty is normal; however, it's a problem if a teen's anxiety is preventing them from doing the things they need or want to do.

Signs of anxiety in teens can include:

- Recurring fears and worries
- Trouble concentrating
- Extreme self-consciousness
- Avoiding difficult or new situations
- Physical ailments, like headaches or stomachaches
- Repeated reassurance-seeking
- Sleep problems
- Substance use
- Disruptive behavior
- Drop in grades or school refusal

### Depression

Depression is easy to miss in teens and spotting the signs is even more difficult during the pandemic, when sadness and irritability are normal reactions to stress and uncertainty. Be on the lookout for big changes in behavior, mood and habits. Depression can be serious, but early treatment and intervention can help.

Signs of depression in teens can include:

- Unusual sadness or irritability
- Loss of interest in favorite activities
- Changes in weight
- Shifts in sleep patterns
- Sluggishness
- Negative self-talk ("I'm no good.")
- Feeling worthless or hopeless
- Thoughts of or attempts at suicide

### Grief and bereavement

Supporting kids who are grieving, especially when you may be grieving yourself, can feel overwhelming. There is no right way to grieve. If your teen has lost a loved one, provide opportunities for them to talk about it. Share your own experiences with grief and loss.

It's also important to remember that many teens may be grieving the loss of time with friends, rites of passage like prom or graduation, and even the future they expected. Take their feelings seriously and avoid comparisons. Instead, let them know you're there to listen and offer support.

## How to help

As kids reemerge, caregivers can help by keeping the lines of communication open. Check in with your child regularly. Teens may not always want to talk but asking how they are, even when nothing seems wrong, lets them know that you're there to talk if there is a problem they want to share.

Caregivers can also validate teens' emotions — even when those emotions seem dramatic or hard to understand. When your child is struggling it's normal to want to "fix" it. But try to resist minimizing teens' feelings or jumping right into problem-solving mode. Instead, focus on listening, empathizing, and let your child know that it's normal to feel sad, angry, or overwhelmed.

When in doubt, ask for help. Reach out to a school counselor, their doctor or a local therapist. Some teens may be reluctant to accept help; be patient and persistent, and if you think your teen is harming themselves or considering suicide, take action. Some people worry that talking about suicide makes it more likely, but the opposite is true. If you're worried (and especially if your child mentions suicide), talk to your child about your concerns in a calm, non-judgmental way. If you think they're in immediate danger, call 911 or take them to the nearest hospital.

### RESOURCES

[The Child Mind Institute: Supporting Students' Mental Health](#)

[The Child Mind Institute: Helping Children Cope With Grief](#)

[The Child Mind Institute: A Teachers' Guide to Anxiety in the Classroom](#)

[Steve Fund: Video on Supporting the Mental Health of Students of Color in the Transition from High School to College](#)

[Steve Fund: Video on Family Communication](#)

[Steve Fund: Video on Being an Ally to Your Child](#)

# Helping Teens Feel More Connected

## What can caregivers do to help teenagers feel connected to each other?

Teens reemerging into the world of school, friends and relationships may feel overwhelmed. Caregivers can help by offering encouragement, support and understanding.

### Keep an eye on anxiety

Even teens that were socially confident before the pandemic may find themselves anxious about diving back into the daily ups and downs of school and socializing. Let your child know that feeling anxious is normal. Sharing some of your own worries (and how you're planning to manage them) can help. For example, if your child is feeling anxious about going back to school in person, you could say "I know what you mean. I'm feeling nervous about going back to my office, too. It's really hard. You know, I made a list of all the things I'm excited about, like getting to see my friends, and that helped. Let's make one for you, too!"

Remember, getting back to normal will take a while. Teens may feel fine one week and overwhelmed the next. Make sure to check in often, and let your child know you're there to listen if they need to talk.

### Create opportunities for connection

As teens adjust to the new normal, supporting self-esteem is key. After a year of struggle and frustration, many kids, especially those with mental health or learning challenges, have lost confidence and may need some extra cheerleading and ample time to decompress.

Make sure your child has time to just relax with friends and participate in things they enjoy. That could look like:

- Offering to let your child and their friends hang out at your house (or offering a yard or porch if teens are still unvaccinated).
- Saying yes a little more to requests for socializing: "Sure, you can go get ice cream with Jake."
- Encouraging activities that provide real-world engagement and connection, like playing or watching live sports, going to a concert, or taking a hike with friends.

### RESOURCES

[The Jed Foundation: Seize the Awkward](#)

[The Jed Foundation: Love is Louder](#)

[The Child Mind Institute: How to Talk About Mental Health \(for Teens\)](#)

[Steve Fund: Workshop on Well-Being in Color](#)

[Steve Fund: Podcast on Finding Your Home Away From Home](#)

[Steve Fund: Podcast on Blood vs. Chosen Family](#)

# Addressing Academic Deficits

## How can caregivers address academic deficits and help teens manage competing demands?

### Give your teen, and yourself, some compassion

Your teen's health (including mental health) is more important than grades. But the academic challenges that came with the pandemic are real. Prioritizing mental health doesn't mean that heading back to school has to feel like a lost cause. Help your teen set reasonable, achievable goals. For example, getting all their homework in, even if the assignments aren't perfect. By consciously choosing a few top priorities for your teen, you can make sure that the most important bases are still covered.

### Plan for problems

As teens adjust to the school routine — including the continued uncertainty of the coronavirus variants — setbacks will happen. But they don't have to be the end of the world. Instead of waiting for disaster to strike, talk with your teen and agree on a plan for what they'll do if they miss an assignment or fail a test, like talking to the teacher about extra credit or putting extra effort into their next project.

Remember, if something does go wrong teens may feel frustrated, sad or worried about disappointing you. Set up regular check-ins, be kind and praise them for being honest: "I'm glad you told me your paper is late! I know you were worried about it. Let me help you."

### Validate teens

Listen and learn about your teen's concerns and validate that this is a very stressful and challenging time. Share some ways teens can help themselves, including:

- Sharing their concerns and receiving validation from their caregivers, friends, and teachers
- Focusing on things that they have control over
- Making a plan with achievable goals for the next school year

### Empower teens

Giving teens control (within reason) will send the message that you have confidence in their abilities. A little success goes a long way towards building (and protecting) confidence. Let teens take the lead whenever possible. This could look like:

- Getting their backpack ready the night before
- Asking a teacher for help
- Arranging a study session
- Planning their weekly schedule

## RESOURCES

[The Child Mind Institute: Academic Setbacks During COVID](#)

[The Jed Foundation: College Search and Stress During COVID-19](#)

[Steve Fund: Video on College Decisions and Mental Health](#)

[Steve Fund: Video on Supporting the Mental Health of Students of Color in the Transition from High School to College](#)

# Prioritizing Self-Care for Caregivers

Taking care of yourself helps you be a better caregiver. How can parents and other family members care for themselves during this time?

## Be a role model by making time for yourself

Be intentional about creating space to recharge and decompress. Demonstrate positive coping skills and strategies. This could look like taking a shower or bath, walking around the block alone (or with your pet), or designating time to read or simply zone out after the kids have gone to bed.

## Prioritize healthy choices

Stress makes it easy to slip into habits that feel good in the moment but can be harmful in the long term. This doesn't mean you should be pressuring yourself to get into tip-top shape or beating yourself up for bingeing your favorite shows. It does mean being thoughtful and intentional about how you're treating yourself and your body. Small changes like making time to take a walk or choosing to go to bed a little earlier can reduce stress and increase resilience.

## Be realistic

Perfectionism and parenting (and, you know, just being a person) don't mix. Avoid burnout by setting realistic expectations and giving yourself grace if you can't meet them.

## Set boundaries

Strong boundaries are a cornerstone of self-care. When you're overwhelmed, it's very difficult to care for yourself or anyone else. Boundaries can be as simple as saying "no" to commitments you just don't have time for, asking your partner to pick up some slack at home, or taking a break from a friend or family member who has trouble respecting your time.

## Do things that bring you joy

Parenting can be all-consuming, especially during difficult times. Making time for hobbies or activities you enjoy or making the choice to learn a new skill is an important part of caring for yourself. Maybe there's a knitting project you've always wanted to try, or you've been meaning to get back into running. Or maybe you'd just like to finish that book you've been reading for a month. Doing these things helps your kids see what resilience looks like in action.

## Setting an example

However you choose to practice self-care, remember that making time for yourself is not selfish, it's necessary — and it sends a powerful message to teens. Making healthy choices, setting strong boundaries, prioritizing joy — in short, showing that you value yourself — sets an example that will help your children do the same.

## RESOURCES

[The Child Mind Institute: Facebook Live Conversations on Parenting During the Coronavirus](#)

[The Jed Foundation: COVID-19 Resource Guide for Caregivers](#)

[The Child Mind Institute: Using Mindfulness Techniques](#)

# Collaborating With Teachers and School Administrators

How can caregivers work effectively with school staff and administrators to support their teen's mental health and learning needs?

## Start early

The best way to ensure your teen gets the support they need is to collaborate with their school. Start by making contact with your teen's teachers to discuss your child's needs and learning profile. The more teachers know, the more they can help. Ask if your child's teacher would be open to monthly check-ins. That way you can make sure you're on the same page and share any new information without waiting until parent-teacher conferences.

## Encourage teens to participate

Give your child the chance to come with you or contribute to meetings. Encouraging teens to practice advocating for themselves in a supported, safe situation will help them gain confidence and independence. And the more involved teens feel in their own educational growth, the more invested they'll be in the outcome.

## Be kind and compassionate

Teachers and school staff are also reeling from the stress and trauma of the pandemic. Respecting their boundaries, and time, is key. When you talk with educators, ask how they prefer to be contacted (email? texts?) and let them know you understand they're human, too. Being patient, kind, and understanding will help you build a better relationship with your child's teachers and increase the chance they'll come to you with concerns as the year progresses.

If you're communicating via email or text, you can also ask when you can reasonably expect a reply to questions. That way you'll understand how teachers organize their time and know when it's appropriate to send a gentle reminder if you haven't heard back.

## RESOURCES

[The Child Mind Institute: Supporting Students' Mental Health \(to share with teachers\)](#)

[The Child Mind Institute: Preparing Your Child to Go Back to School in Person](#)

[The Child Mind Institute: A Teachers' Guide to Anxiety in the Classroom \(to share with teachers\)](#)

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