



*In this issue, I'm introducing my friend Tara Russo, a mindfulness coach. Mindfulness is something many of us are finding supportive through these challenging times. Lou Harvey-Zahra*

## THE TRANSFORMING TEENAGE BRAIN – A MINDFUL APPROACH

The teenage years are a time of physical change, not only in the body but also the brain. Nicola Morgan, author of *Blame My Brain: The Amazing Teenage Brain Revealed*, informs us that the prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain responsible for rational thought, reflection and decision-making – undergoes drastic change during adolescence. This can result in the teenage brain's amygdala working overtime. The almond-shaped amygdala, which works on instinct and is where the fight-or-flight response starts, is part of the limbic system, which influences emotion and behaviour. Morgan states the theory that teenagers have difficulty judging the emotion in adult facial expressions, which can sometimes lead to fiery, irrational responses. This explains why my younger daughter, on occasion, mistakenly perceives me as angry when I am not. So how can we help support our teens during this potentially turbulent time? A mindful approach can certainly help. Mindfulness means being present in the moment, not brooding on the past or fretting about the future. Here are some ways you and your teen can be more mindful.

**MINDFULNESS MEDITATION.** Practising meditation strengthens the connections between the prefrontal cortex and the limbic system. This helps us to keep our cool when someone pushes our buttons. For example, our teen, when asked to tidy their room, might respond calmly instead of having a strop. Equally, if our teen is rude to us, instead of shouting at them, we might model how to set healthy boundaries by remaining calm when we request that they are polite. (After all, they might just have misread our facial expressions!) There are free apps which offer guided meditations, such as Insight Timer and YouTube.

**MINDFUL BREATHING.** Focusing on our breath can help to calm us. Take care not to judge your breath – as to whether it is too shallow or not, say – but simply notice it. One of my favourite breathing exercises is to inhale deeply, then exhale as if blowing out the candles on the imaginary birthday cake of an 80-year-old. An extended out breath helps to bring down our blood pressure and soothe us.

**MINDFUL LISTENING.** It's important to fully listen to our teenagers when they come to us with their difficulties, without immediately trying to solve their problems, however tempting that might be. Mindful listening can

help us remain attentive and quiet, allowing our teens the opportunity to find their own solution. It shows them we trust their problem-solving ability and is a boost to their confidence. If your teen finds it difficult to talk to you, using storylines in soaps or dramas as a springboard to discuss uncomfortable emotions might be a way in. A useful tip is to sit next to your teen for this kind of discussion, as this is much less intense than sitting face to face; car journeys lend themselves perfectly to this. It is worth reminding your teen that emotions can change like the weather; they might feel low one minute but soon feel happier.

**MINDFUL EXERCISE.** Bring awareness to the sensations in the body and to your surroundings. For example, if you join your teen on a walk or run, you could count how many different models of car you see, or different types of trees or flowers; you could notice how the breeze feels on your face or how your breathing is affected by the intensity of the activity. If you watch an exercise video, you could notice if the floor surface is furry or smooth, warm or cold; how refreshing a drink of water is; and so on.

**MINDFUL COOKING, BAKING AND EATING.** Measuring ingredients and paying attention to the recipe's instructions require full focus. After, encourage your teen to notice the scent of their culinary creation, the sensations as it hits their taste buds, the sound it makes when they chew it, its texture in their mouth, and how their body feels when they consume it.

**FUN IS MINDFUL!** It is easy to be absorbed in something you enjoy. Encourage your teen to spend time each day doing something they like – perhaps playing a musical instrument, reading a book or chatting with a friend. If your teen is attached to their mobile phone, bring mindfulness into this by encouraging them to focus on it quietly for two minutes, contemplating its colour, its sound, whether it is heavy or light, smooth or textured, light or dark.

Parenting teenagers can be difficult; if things get tough, please reach out to professionals for a helping hand. Consider hiring a mindfulness coach for your child, or you could even train in mindful tools that you can then teach your teen. Above all, as you show your teen kindness, remember to be kind to yourself too. Self-compassion is a valuable quality to radiate as a parent and to nurture in your teen. ●

Tara Russo is the mother of two teenagers and the founder of Wellbeing for Kids UK. She is a mindfulness and meditation coach for children and young people, and runs training courses for adults. She has over 25 years' experience working with teenagers as a languages teacher in secondary schools in England.  
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