

Emotional Turbulance in Adolescents

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Abstract

It is said that mind should not be allowed to master us. Instead, we should be able to master our mind. Mind apparently is the root cause of creating all problems whether mental, emotional or physical. In adolescents, havoc is created as mind keeps mastering their body and creating problems resulting into emotional turmoil. The mind of adolescents is flooded with questions they are unable to find answer for. These unanswered questions manifest in the form of search for identity, low self esteem, worries and anxieties related to physical changes, and uncontrolled emotional stage. These troubling emotions can lead to frustration, unrestrained anger, mental instability and various other problems that may cause harm to the adolescents. This is an age when they need help that can come by understanding their tribulations. By identifying visible warning signs of turbulence, help can be rendered to them by various measures that may assist adolescents to pass through this difficult phase with ease. Effective listening skills, building their confidence, healthy relationship and open discussion may help them to sail through this period smoothly. "We are not the sources of problems; we are the resources that are needed to solve them. We are not expenses; we are investments. We are not just young people; we are people and citizens of this world." (From the Children's Statement, UN Special Session on Children, May 2002)

Introduction

The root cause of all our problems—whether mental, emotional or physical, lies in only one place—our mind. When something goes wrong, we tend to toss it in our minds, looking at the problem from all sides, analysing how it will devastate our lives, how things could get even worse, and so on. If

one could just decide to stop thinking of it all, there would probably be no problems at all. But somehow, things just never seem to work that way. Even though, emotional turbulence is experienced by all at all times in life, it is more pronounced when a child is transiting from childhood to adolescence. The onslaught of sudden

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physical, mental, social growth and peer pressure causes turmoil in the life of adolescents creating havoc for the them, their family and the society in general. This emotional turbulence interferes with his/her emotional well being and initiative, making transition to adulthood quite difficult. Rapid physical growth begins in early adolescence—typically between the ages of 9 and 13—and thought processes start to take on adult characteristics. Many youngsters find these changes distressing because they do not fully understand what is happening to them.

Media portrayals of adolescents often seem to emphasise the problems that can be a part of adolescence. gang violence, school shootings, alcohol-related accidents, drug abuse, and suicides involving teens are all too frequently reflected in newspaper headlines and movie plots. In the professional literature too, adolescence is frequently portrayed as a negative stage of life—a period of storm and stress to be survived or endured (Arnett, 1999).

Adolescence is a period when the youngsters feel more strongly about everything. Fears frighten them more; pleasures excite them as never before, and irritation causes unbearable agony. They wish to live life king size. This all is so normal. Contrary to this, if they have difficult adolescent period, they engage in destructive behaviour causing harm to self as well as to society. This becomes evident in their attitude as well as behaviour. There are visible warning signs in their personality. Some of them could be repeated absence from school, poor performance in studies, substance abuse, hostile behaviour, withdrawal symptoms, etc.

This is a period when the adolescents are 'Me Centered'. In a study conducted by Jaffe, (1998), it was pointed out that adolescents take time to see and understand the perspective of the other person. They exaggerate their opinion and are generally quite dramatic in their talk which is quite visible in the way they talk but this does not necessarily indicates anything otherwise.

In fact they constantly find fault in the adult's perspective. (Bjorklund and Green, 1992). This can be attributed to the growing cognitive maturity and their new found ability to think critically which encourages them to look for discrepancies in every situation and person.

General Reasons for Turbulence in Adolescents

The psyche of the adolescents is affected as they do not know as well as understand the reasons for so much turmoil in their body and mind. They seek answers for many questions and in this search for answers, they tend to turn to their friends who are in the same boat and are as uninformed as the seeker.

They are not able to handle serious mood swings when they experience severe ups and downs in their mood with alarming frequency. There are some general reasons like changes in the body, difficulty in adjusting to the surroundings, emotional conflicts and difficulty in forming proper relationships. Emotional confusion with family and friends, are pointers towards this turbulence.

Generally, adolescents experience stress especially in situations that appear

difficult, dangerous and painful to them. This overload and unmanageable stress lead to anxiety, withdrawal, aggression, poor skills to cope with the situations. Added to all this is the demand from the school that leads to frustration, negative thoughts and many other psychosomatic disorders.

The adolescents like freedom and independent functioning. They are unhappy if parents interfere with their freedom. Their constant struggle with a sense of identity, a strange feeling about their body and sudden growth spurts, conflicts with parents, increased self reliance, peer relationship, cognitive changes, morals, values and lot more coming together is too much for them to handle.

They are so obsessed with their physical appearance that it starts affecting their self esteem. Research findings have shown that adolescent girls have greater dissatisfaction with physical appearance than boys. (Harter, 1990).

1. Physical Changes

Physical changes are pronounced and at times affect their development of self esteem. Imbalance of hormones leads to metabolic variations in functions and marked mood swings. This affects their energy levels making them lethargic at times and hyperactive at other. Teens often show dissatisfaction with their body, and this, sometimes leads to behavioural disorders like temper tantrums, bouts of anger etc. Arguing for the sake of argument is also common at this age.

2. Emerging Independence and Search for Identity

Adolescents vacillate between wishing to be seen as unique, independent and wanting to do the accepted thing to group norms. There is a constant struggle going on in their mind between the desires for independence and wanting to conform to the norms of the group. Acceptance by the group, however, is very important for them, but at the same time, they want assurance and acceptance from the adults.

The focus changes from social life to friends for them. They have a keen desire to be independent but at the same time, they want approval as well as support of the adults. To be accepted by the peer is a very keen longing in them even if it is at the cost of surrendering the individuality. This also has an effect on their appearance and social effectiveness. The focus from social values to friends changes so much that they start questioning previously accepted values from their families.

Peer pressure becomes a very dominant factor at this stage, but adolescents of different cultures spend different amount of time with their peers (Fuligni and Stevenson, 1995, Larson et al., 1999). In a study conducted by Chen. (1998) it was pointed out that peer factor plays a less important role in Chinese adolescents' misconduct as compared to the American adolescents as they spend less time with their peer. The findings of the study conducted by Greenberger, Chen, Tally and Dong, (2000) has clearly brought out the importance of the peer relationship of the adolescents for their psychological well being in different cultures. In yet another research study

on socio-emotional learning by Blum, McNeely, and Rinehart, (2002) and Eccles Gootman, (2002) it was found that adolescents are more attached to schools if they receive instructions in self awareness, self-management, relationship skills and responsible decision making. Greater attachment to school in turn leads to less risky behaviour and better performance in academics. It was further pointed out that this in turn has positive effects on them when they go for higher education. This also helps them in higher earnings.

3. Self Esteem

The self esteem of a child develops during childhood and remains fairly stable through the entire period of adolescence. The focal point of thoughts of the adolescents is self and internal world of feelings.

As the cognitive ability of the adolescent develops, the ability to conceptualise the self in terms of an abstract, multidimensional framework also increases. This leads to increasing awareness of self, making self esteem more silent during adolescence. A low self esteem causes intolerable problem for the adolescent and that sometimes leads to emotional suffering, Overholser 1995).

A strong feeling that no body likes me, often troubles them which gets further precipitated as it gets associated with negative emotions leading to depression, eating disorders and delinquent behaviour and problems of adjustment (Harter and Marold, 1992, Striegel-Moore and Cachelin, 1999).

Such uncontrolled emotional state at times leads to adolescent suicide which

is caused by chemical imbalances in the brain caused by extreme agonizing stress. There are warning signs of these tendencies which include loss of attention in activities that interested them earlier, difficulty in concentrating in work, personal neglect, general lethargy, changes in sleep pattern etc.

There is a marked interest in the opposite sex in adolescents at this age.

Adolescence is marked by a new interest in the opposite sex. Boys face a more physical desire, whereas girls face a more emotional desire for closeness and intimacy.

Although adolescence will present challenges for young people and their parents, awareness and communication can help pave the way for a smooth transition into this exciting phase of life.

How to Help Them

The lives of adolescents can be incapacitated by negative emotions which are tremendously powerful. These negative emotions can weaken the adolescents causing inconsistency in the energy system which in turn causes a chain of emotional imbalances such as frustration, mental instability, inferiority complex, etc. The emotional well being of the adolescents is disturbed if there is any emotional turbulence. The main reasons for this turbulence are anxiety, anger, fear and guilt. The adolescent is not able to deal with the pain and the reasons that cause this pain. Adolescents need the help for restoration of this balance.

It is needless to mention that the negative emotions are tremendously powerful. They can debilitate lives very quickly by causing disparity

in energy system, which triggers a sequence of emotional imbalance i.e., frustration, melancholia, persistent agony, mental instability, uncontrolled anger, inferiority complex etc. This ultimately culminates in ill health.

They need help to identify the troubling emotion and release it by expressing it. Adolescents are well aware of their strengths, their goals and have the skills to Act on what they want. The best way to deal with them is to engage in a dialogue and connect with them with non-threatening questions.

There are various measures that if adopted can help the adolescents to sail through this turbulent period with ease. Some of them can be as listed below:

- Effective listening skills: Effective listening skills can help a great deal. Listen to them rather than speak. According to Forgatch and Patterson (1989), listening to adolescents non-judgmentally enables them to realise that you value their opinion and this develops their trust in you.
- Asking open-ended questions that require more than a yes or no response helps the adolescents to think through their response. (Hill and O'Brien, 1999).
- Avoid asking WHY questions to them as that put them on the defensive. The question should be reframed in such a way that the response of the adolescent corresponds with his thought process rather than something else. (Plutchik, 2002).
- While providing help to the confused adolescent, the emotional state of the adolescent has to be matched. This will help the adolescent as he/ she will feel understood. (Forgatch and Patterson, 1989).
- Using informal ways of telling them how you came out of a similar situation keeping in view their short span of attention in that emotional state. Choosing a topic that would be relevant to them at that point of time would show them the way to come out of the distressing situation. (Keating, 1990).
- Giving confidence to adolescents to think through the issues. Do not challenge their view point but at the same time tell them how others might have a different perspective of the same situation, and the influence and impact of these differences. (Santilli and Hudson, 1992).
- Youth understands the relationship between their strengths and their goals, and have the skills to act on that understanding.
- Nurture positive relationship with them. The interactions with them should be characterised by respect for their feelings, opinion, warmth towards them, consistency, love and care with more of listening and less of suggestive talking.
- As they need to be encouraged to take their own decisions, they should be allowed to make mistakes and learn from them.
- Genuine interest needs to be shown in their activities.
- Unconditional acceptance with positive feedback can have tremendous effect on the psyche of the adolescents.
- Acknowledging their special abilities, talents and uniqueness can also help

them to pull out of the emotional distress.

Conclusion

Communicating your love, care and concern is the single most important factor that parents and teachers can employ for their children. This will help them to come out of the emotional barriers when they are passing through

the turbulent phase of transition from childhood to adolescent. Along with effective communication, it is also important to address the problem rather than live in the hope that it will go away. The emotional trouble can be tackled if the adolescents get the opportunity to work through the problem with timely and effective guidance.

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Web - Links

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