

# INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose – No. 1 parenting educator



## The pressures of being a teen today

*It's easy to think young people today have never had it so good, but they also live with stresses that past generations of teenagers didn't have to endure.*

There's a phrase you should avoid if you want to maintain a good relationship with a child or teenager.

It's a phrase that was so often on the tip of my tongue when my kids were younger. It was so tempting sometimes to blurt out...

**"These are the best years of your life."**

Think it, but don't say it.

Here's why. (I wrote about it a recent blog post and I thought I'd repeat it in Happy Kids.)

Young people today are experiencing more pressure than ever.

The DOLLY Youth Monitor 2011 survey, for which I was a contributor and spokesperson, revealed that there has been a spike in anxiety and stress levels in 14-17 year olds.

Three in five young people felt a great need to reduce stress, with girls more likely than boys to be stressed.

The greatest source of stress for today's teens is the pressure they put on themselves. Teen girls especially seem to believe that they have to succeed at everything they do, and seem to have created impossibly high standards: 75% of girls want to be fitter; 65% want to get better marks; and 60% want to be more confident. Fear of not fitting in and of social isolation is a big worry for girls. Boys also worry about not fitting in, but not to the same extent as girls.

**Teens also worry about their families.** One in five worry that their parents will divorce. This is obviously concerning when their safe refuge is unstable at a volatile developmental stage.



### How do young people relieve pressure?

Young people relieve pressure in healthy and unhealthy ways.

More than one in four teenagers turn to music as a release, which is something that teens have always done. Sport, exercise and hanging out with friends are other healthy ways teens use to de-stress.

On the unhealthy side, some young people eat too much, some use alcohol even at this relatively young age, and others get totally lost online. *(There's nothing wrong with escaping but you need to be placed firmly in the real world).*

### Here are some other ways you can help young people maintain good mental health:

- 1. Maintain regular contact through family mealtimes.** There is a correlation between families that have 5 to 6 meals together a week and good mental health. Mealtimes give you a chance to monitor your teenagers' moods and also to talk, which is therapeutic.
- 2. Help them get plenty of sleep.** We underestimate the impact of sleep. It's vital for good wellbeing. Teens need plenty, but often get less as they get older. Learn more about good sleep hygiene so you can assist them to get a good night's sleep.
- 3. Make sure they have someone to confide in.** When life is tough, girls are more likely to talk to a friend, and boys are more likely to talk to a family member. Help them identify or find someone to talk with.
- 4. Let them do something unproductive every day.** Doing nothing is good for your mental health. It takes many forms: surfing the net, watching movies, talking to friends, playing with a pet, strumming a guitar, listening to music...
- 5. Encourage volunteering.** The Positive Psychology movement strongly advocates volunteering as a way of relieving stress as it takes young people out of themselves, letting them do things where they don't have to excel. Helping releases endorphins, which are the feel-good chemicals which affect kids' moods. The same thing happens when they are hugged. That leads me to a sixth idea...
- 6. Hug them.** Being told by people close to you that you are loved and loveable has always been good for your wellbeing. Sometimes in the endless striving for good parenting strategy we sometimes forget that it's the 'heart things' as opposed to the 'head things' we do that make the biggest difference.

Next time you feel like blurring out that your kids have never had it so good, stop and think again. Today's kids have lots of advantages but they also live with pressures that kids of previous generations didn't have to contend with.