



DR DIANE HARNER

# Dr Diane Harner

A Parent's Guide to Responding to COVID-19

WEBINAR

Featuring: Dr. Diane Harner

*Interviewer: Tanya Meessmann, Girl Shaped Flames*



Includes help sheets for Grounding, Co-regulation, Starting conversations and explains the neuroscience that you need to know to support your teen daughter through the current crisis and beyond.

**Access the video here:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GopdpQfL1vI>





## **A Parent's Guide to Responding to COVID-19**

We are in an unprecedented time of change and uncertainty as we navigate our way through the COVID-19 pandemic. Parenting teenagers during stable times can bring its own challenges, but parenting teens in a time of crisis takes our skills and responsibilities to another level.

This webinar is dedicated to answering important questions that parents have around how they support their teen in times of crisis. We cover topics such as:

- self-regulation and co-regulation to manage big emotions.
- grounding techniques that we can use to calm down
- the importance of providing space for teens to express their emotions without judgment.
- the role of schedule and routine within the context of creating a sense of certainty and control and also regarding home-schooling.
- social isolation and how to manage your teen's distress at not being able to connect with their friends in a way that they are used to.
- offer tips as to how you can have the conversation with your teen about the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain, and even enhance, your connection.

We have provided some help sheets with details about Grounding techniques, Co-regulation strategies, Conversation starters and also a summary of what you need to know about your teenager's brain to assist in your parenting.

To help you navigate through the webinar the following time stamps show the topic that is discussed at that time.

- 1:30 What is the first thing that we need to do to support our girls during this crisis?
- 2:43 Role of self-awareness to support self-regulation
- 4:00 The role of grounding techniques with examples (Also see Grounding Help sheet)
- 5:23 Starting the conversation about COVID-19. (Also see Conversation Starter Help sheet)
- 7:55 The importance of connecting girls with what they can control
- 8:30 What if our daughter won't talk to us?
- 10:30 What changes in behaviour might we see?
- 12:18 Explanation of how the teen brain works (Also See Neuroscience 101 help sheet)
- 14:27 The role of co-regulation is supporting our girls to cope (See Co-regulation help sheet)
- 17:30 The concept of radical acceptance of emotions in the moment
- 18:00 Finding the balance between accepting emotional expression and healthy interactions
- 19:20 The major concerns that our girls might have – social isolation, missing out
- 25:00 The role of schedules and routines and having a rhythm for the day
- 28:00 Communicating the seriousness of the situation by making it relevant to them
- 31:20 Diet, sleep, exercise and the benefit of 1 on 1 time
- 37:18 The power of a parent's role in modelling healthy behaviours and coping strategies
- 39:20 What are the positives that we can take out of this crisis?
- 44:07 Dr Diane Harner's personal experience being a mum during this crisis.

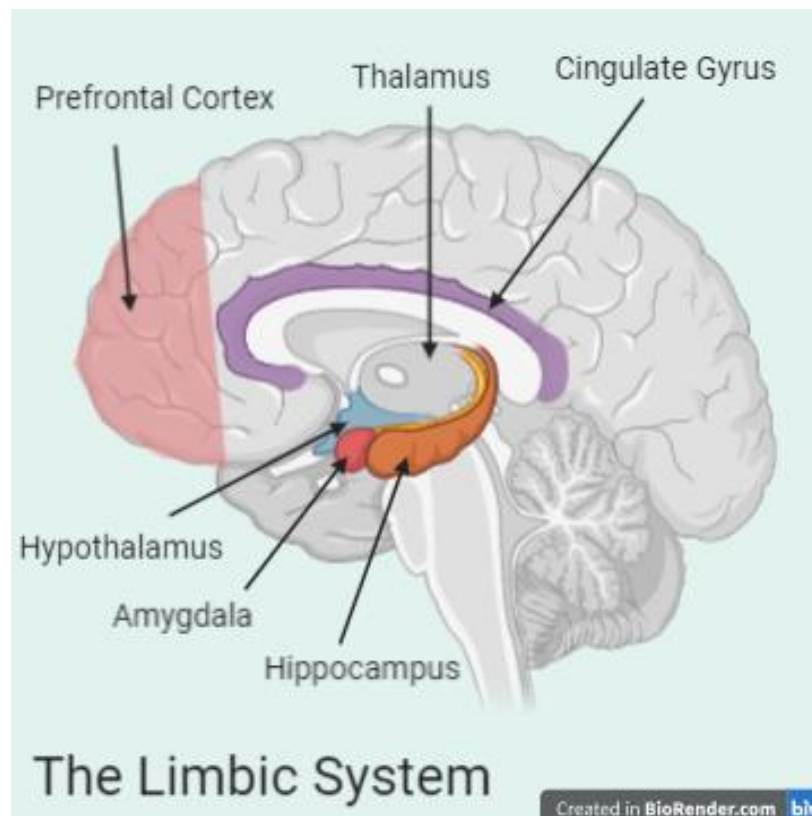


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# Neuroscience 101: information parents need to know about the teenage brain

The teenage years are a critical time of brain development. After infancy, it is the biggest brain growth spurt we have in our lives. Whilst our brain is probably as large as it is going to get at the beginning of adolescence it will **not be fully mature until mid to late 20s**. Most importantly, the part of the brain that is responsible for impulse control, planning, analyzing, reasoning and emotional regulation is very underdeveloped in adolescence. Add to this, the introduction of sex hormones to the brain and our teens have a lot going on. Here is some information about what is happening in the brain of our teens to help you understand why they behave the way they do and how we can support them.

Figure 1. The brain: showing the prefrontal cortex (pink) and the parts of the limbic system (all other labelled structures)





**1. Their brain is not fully mature and the sensible part of the brain is not fully online yet.**

The brain matures from the back to the front as we grow up and is not fully mature until our mid to late 20s. The last part of the brain to mature is the prefrontal cortex at the front of our brain behind our forehead (*See Figure 1*). The prefrontal cortex is very underdeveloped and is not fully connected with other parts of the brain in adolescence. The unfortunate thing is that it is this part of the brain that is responsible for logical, rational thought, decision making, analysis, reasoning, working memory, impulse control, assessment of danger/risk and emotional regulation. This means that our teen's ability to tap into those functions is very limited. This is why as parents we often exclaim: "What were you thinking?!" The answer is, they probably weren't, not logically anyway. It is important to remember that your teen has minimal control over this and we need to be mindful of what we can expect from them in this regard.

**2. The emotional part of the brain is in charge.** The part of the brain that is developed and highly active during the teen years is the emotional part of the brain called the Limbic system (*See Figure 1*). The Limbic system is pretty much running the show and influences all aspects of life for teens. Due to this emotional drive, teens are wired for intense emotional experiences, anger, frustration, fear, moodiness, fighting, running away, and seeking reward, joy and excitement. Part of this enhanced emotional activity is due to the influence of sex hormones i.e. testosterone, progesterone and estrogen. Teen brains are seeing these sex hormones for the first time but the brain has not yet figured out how to modulate the body's response. For girls, we know that estrogen and progesterone fluctuate with the menstrual cycle and both of these chemicals also play a role in controlling mood. These extremes of emotion can be very unsettling for our teens and often they can't explain why they are feeling so emotional. If you put this together with the prefrontal cortex's inability to regulate these emotions, you realise that teens have very limited capacity to manage this emotional rollercoaster. This is where co-regulation with parents is critical (*See Co-regulation and Grounding exercise help sheets*).



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**3. The brain is the most fertile that it will ever be during adolescence, but has limited connectivity.** The teen brain has an overabundance of neurons which are the building blocks of the brain and are responsible for our ability to learn and perform mental and physical functions. In terms of the capacity to learn, the teenage brain performs at peak efficiency and has enormous potential. Encouraging your teen to engage in as many activities and learning experiences as they can during their teens is highly recommended. Throughout adolescence the brain “prunes” the neurons that are not using based on the “use it or lose it” principle and by the time adolescence is finished, millions and millions of neurons will have been lost. The impact of this overabundance of neurons and increased learning capacity during adolescence is that it causes a drive to seek out sensory stimulation and experiences. This can result in teens engaging in risky thrill-seeking behavior and a seemingly endless capacity to engage with multiple devices at one time. Unfortunately, this overabundance of neurons is accompanied by an undersupply of white matter (myelin), which is the conductive material that allows information to flow throughout the brain. This means that messages don’t move as quickly from one brain area to another and can result in slow reactions, vacant looks and an inability to respond to situations in an appropriate way, including not considering consequences of their risk-taking behavior. As much as they will resist, teens need parents to help them manage their risk-taking and develop their capacity for predictive thinking.

**4. Teens develop the ability to see themselves through the eyes of others and this can increase their social anxiety.** As the teen brain develops, they begin to have the capacity for abstract thought, which is the ability to think about things which are intangible. As this capacity develops, teens start to think about themselves in different ways and wonder about what others think of them, primarily their social group. As a result, seeking peer approval becomes incredibly important. The influence of parents diminishes as they strive to establish their independence and work out who they are separate to their parents. Instead they look to their friends to see how to behave so they are accepted socially. Peer approval has been shown to be highly



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rewarding to the teen brain which is why teens are more likely to show off, take risks and imitate the behavior of others in social situations.

Another chemical that becomes influential in the teen brain, particularly in the limbic system, is oxytocin. Oxytocin is often described as the “bonding hormone” however, its impact on the highly sensitive limbic system of a teen has been linked to self-consciousness. This can make teens feel like everyone is watching them, which then amplifies the feelings of social anxiety. As parents we know that we shouldn’t worry about what other people think of us and we often encourage our kids to think this way also. However, these very instinctive drivers to be accepted by their peers combined with a heightened sense of self-consciousness means that we cannot minimise their feelings. We need to see the world through their eyes and have empathy for their emotional state. This is a BIG DEAL to them.

### **Further reading**

If you would like to delve further into the workings of the teenage/female brain, I recommend the following resources.

#### **The Teenage Brain by Frances E. Jensen**

A Neuroscientist's Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults

#### **The Women's Brain Book by Dr Sarah McKay**

The neuroscience of health, hormones and happiness

#### **Brainstorm by Daniel J. Siegel**

The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain



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# 20 Grounding Techniques for Parents & Teens

Grounding exercises are used to bring us into the present moment and take the focus off worries, memories, or uncomfortable thoughts. Grounding techniques can help when we notice tension or discomfort in our body or when we feel like our emotions may become overwhelming. Most grounding techniques are associated with our five senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. When we are in direct experience with our senses, we are brought to the present moment making it easier to regulate our emotions.

1. **The 5 senses:** Wherever you are, name 5 things you see, 5 things you can feel, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste.
2. Brush your hair or have someone else brush your hair for you.
3. If you wake during the night, remind yourself who you are, and where you are and say it to yourself. What year is it, what age are you now? Look around the room and notice familiar objects and name them. Feel the bed you are lying on, the warmth or coolness of the air, and notice any sounds you hear.
4. Take ten slow breaths. Focus your attention on each breath, making the out breath longer than the in breath. Shorter in breath, long, slow out breath. Say number of the breath to yourself as you exhale.
5. Eat some ice cubes or an ice block. Feel the cold in your mouth. Listen and feel it crunch between your teeth.
6. Splash some water on your face. It can be cold or warm. Notice how it feels on your hands and on your face. Notice the texture of the towel as you dry off.
7. Play with play dough or slime. Move it around in your hands, squish it between your fingers. Hold it to different parts of your body and notice how it feels different.



8. Sip a cool drink, holding it in your mouth for a few seconds to feel the temperature and taste any flavours.
9. Hold a mug of tea in both hands and feel its warmth. Don't rush drinking it; take small sips, and take your time tasting each mouthful.
10. Wherever you are, lying, sitting or standing, feel the what is under you and the weight of your body, feels the clothes on your body and notice the contact of your arms or legs on anything you are touching.
11. Stamp your feet, and notice the sensation and sound as you connect with the ground.
12. Rub your feet on soft carpet, in grass, mud, or splash your feet in a swimming pool. Notice how your feet feel.
13. Put on a piece of music and give it all of your attention. Try to pick out all of the different musical instruments that are being played.
14. Wear an elastic band on your wrist (not tight) and flick it gently, so that you feel it spring back on your wrist.
15. Pat your pet. If you have a dog or cat or other furry friend run your fingers through their fur. Feel their warmth and the softness of their coat. You could also use plush toys.
16. Light an oil burner with essential oils. Watch the candle flicker, feel its warmth, smell the fragrance of the oils.
17. Dig in the garden or pull some weeds and feel the soil in your hands, smell the earth.
18. Pop some bubble wrap. Feel the pressure under your finger just before it pops.
19. Eat a strong peppermint. Smell the peppermint before you put it in your mouth, then notice the texture and flavor of the mint as you roll it around with your tongue.
20. Say a grounding phrase like "I am safe and this feeling will pass." Repeat it until you feel the emotion start to pass





# Co-regulation Strategies for Parents

The development of healthy self-regulation strategies is critical for good mental health in teenagers. Parents and carers play an integral role in shaping the self-regulation skills of their teens and help them to manage their emotions through a process called “co-regulation”. Co-regulation is the practice of parents staying in the moment with their teen and providing the space for them to safely express their emotions, and validate them without judgment. Parents and carers then move to coaching their teens on self-awareness and help them to develop healthy emotional regulation strategies.

## **Some of the top skills that we need to foster in our teens through co-regulation are:**

1. Showing compassion for themselves and others
2. Strategies for seeking help and recognizing when they need it
3. Problem solving skills to develop self-efficacy
4. Making decisions with the future in mind i.e. understanding consequences
5. Strategies to tolerate and manage stress/distress
6. Self-awareness including attention to their emotions and the feelings in their body

## **Strategies for parents and carers to co-regulate with their teen:**

1. Parents and carers must develop their own effective self-regulation strategies first, as it is a foundational element for co-regulation. Having the awareness and control to take a moment of pause before responding to negative behaviour allows you to manage your own emotions and engage in co-regulation with your teen.
2. Create a warm and safe environment for your teen to safely express emotions. This may mean moving into a less public space or moving to a space in your house where your teen



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feels safe. A sense of safety will also be created by your demeanour and presence, or simply a hug or a warm blanket.

3. Provide support and empathy when your teen's emotions are intense. Reassure them that it is ok to feel how they are feeling right now, that the feeling will pass and you will stay with them until it does.

4. In times of conflict, give space and time for your teen to calm down. Silent presence showing empathy through facial expression and body language can be enough. The challenge is to not respond by meeting their emotion with your own elevated emotion.

5. Coach and role model self-regulation strategies that are appropriate within the context of the situation. Grounding techniques can be useful to reduce the intensity of a situation and bring your teen back into the present and take the focus off what is triggering the emotion (***See Grounding Exercises Help Sheet***).

6. In less emotional situations, give your teen the opportunity to make decisions about how to manage their behaviour and what strategies they might use to regulate their emotions.

7. In calmer times, work together with your teen to create clear boundaries about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and what rules and consequences would be reasonable if negative behaviour gets out of hand.

8. Continually maintaining open lines of communication and proactively fostering a warm, accepting and mutually respectful relationship with your teen will make co-regulation an easier process.

9. Reflecting and talking about your own emotional experiences and the helpful (and healthy) strategies that you used, both as a teenager and as an adult, will demonstrate an acceptance and normalisation of a range of emotional expression and also help teens develop their own emotional vocabulary.

10. Even though adolescents are striving for more independence, the support of a caring adult is absolutely necessary during this critical period of development. Hang in there, it won't always be easy to be calm when you are also being triggered emotionally.



# 10 Conversation Starters for Parents

Maintaining open communication with your teen girl, especially during stressful times is the most effective way of supporting her. The key is to listen more than you speak and allow the silence. If you are lucky, your teen will fill it up with their words. Often the most successful conversations with teens are had when you are side by side e.g. in the car, on the lounge watching TV, cooking together, exercising, washing up. If you are struggling to have meaningful chats, give that a try. It is not always easy to start a conversation with a teenager so here are some sentence starters to help.

1. Have you heard about ....., what do you think about it?
2. What do you understand about .....
3. (*Topic X*) is all over the news at the moment, how are feeling about it?
4. If you were the Prime Minister, what would you do?
5. Do you have any friends that you're worried about right now?
6. I have been feeling really low/anxious/frustrated today, how have you been feeling?
7. If you were to fast forward 12 months, how would you like things to be different?
8. I noticed you have been quiet, would you like to chat something out together?
9. If you had a magic wand and could fix something in the world, what would it be?
10. What do your friends think about .....

If your teen does not engage and has no intention of talking to you, we need to accept that. There is probably a reason that makes total sense to them as to why they aren't talking and forcing them to talk will not get you the result you are looking for. Be patient, be warm, be approachable, be supportive and non-judgmental. Validate what they say at least twice as much as you give them advice.



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## To Parents:

I hope that you have found some helpful ideas and strategies and also some comfort in knowing that you are not alone and it is not meant to be easy to parent a teen girl in a time of crisis. Please be gentle with yourselves, we won't get it right every time and there will likely be some friction, but if we start with the right intention, and we take care of ourselves so we can take care of our girls, I think that is a great start.

If you are feeling overwhelmed and need some support, I encourage you to reach out and talk about it, whether that be to a family member or a friend or a professional. If I can personally be of support to you, I would love you to get in touch. I offer online counselling sessions which maintain the same level of confidentiality and professionalism of a face to face session. Here are my contact details.



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