

Tips and Tools for Your Parenting Toolkit

- Make an effort to read and interpret your child's feelings and thoughts the best that you can. Even if you don't fully understand or have a different perspective, it's important to listen attentively. This helps them feel that you are genuinely making an effort to connect with them. This doesn't mean that you must agree or say "yes" to everything they say, but the first step is to connect, hear them out, and then offer guidance or advice if needed.
- Often your child might just want to express themselves and be heard without seeking solutions. So avoid jumping into problem-solving mode or offering immediate advice when your child shares with you. ***This is a common source of frustration among young people.*** Allow them to come to you to just vent and/or share their feelings. Afterward, you can ask, "Would you be open to some suggestions?".
- Show genuine curiosity about your teenager, both in what they express and what they believe. Use phrases like: "Oh, that's interesting, tell me more?" or "Your perspective on that is different than mine... could you share more about it?". This approach fosters open and constructive dialogue.
- Strive to be as present as possible by disconnecting from your own tech. Create a space for them to approach you when they're ready. When they see that you are available and free of distractions, they are more likely to come to you.
- Validating their feelings lets them know that you're attuned to them and their needs. This quality of attunement is truly significant in building a strong connection. Continually acknowledge their emotions by saying things like, "Wow, you seem really upset" or "That must have been really frustrating for you."
- If you fail to connect effectively and make an obvious mistake, take the initiative to repair it. Extend a genuine apology, expressing that you misunderstood them and simply say you're sorry. Avoid tacking on a "but" to the end of your apology. Instead, share what you wish you had done or said differently. Modeling this for your child instills a valuable life skill they will always benefit from.
- Remember your role as the parent and don't tolerate abusive behavior from your child (this can be name-calling, throwing things, publicly shaming you, or any form of physical harm). It's important to distinguish between typical teenage behavior, such as door slamming and eye-rolling, and actual abuse. While these latter actions aren't healthy forms of communication, they're often how teenagers express their emotions. It's essential to let them know that there are better ways to communicate.

- It's important to develop the capacity to tolerate the way your teenager expresses intense and challenging emotions like anger, despair, or jealousy. Allowing them to express these emotions – as long as it's done in a non-abusive manner – is necessary for emotional wellbeing.
- The significant and intense emotions mentioned above may initially surface unfiltered and uncensored. It's important to be understanding and patient with this initial expression. Over time, they will get better at conveying their feelings appropriately. It's a skill that improves with practice and support.
- Suppressing emotions can lead to profound internalization, which may manifest as various mental health challenges, including depression, eating disorders, self-harm, anxiety, and substance abuse. These coping mechanisms are often employed as a way to numb or escape from unwanted or distressing emotions.
- I often use the metaphor of "anxiety" as a lid on our emotions. None of us want to feel unwanted and unpleasant emotions, but it's essential that we do. Developing the skill of recognizing and understanding our emotions and knowing how to effectively deal with them can help us avoid the need to suppress or bottle them up.
- If your child perceives that you are intolerant, frustrated, tired, or overwhelmed, they may bottle up their emotions. If there's something you find particularly challenging to handle emotionally as a parent, it's advisable to seek support from your partner, a trusted friend, or a counselor to ensure you can provide the necessary emotional support to your child.
- It is not your child's responsibility to care for you or manage your emotions. The parent-child dynamic should be the other way around. As a parent, it is your duty to be emotionally available to them as best you can.

This worksheet is influenced by the work of:

1. Emotion Focused Family Therapy (<https://www.mentalhealthfoundations.ca/>)
2. Dr. Daniel Siegel (<https://drdansiegel.com/>)
3. And the Book: Skills-based Caring for a Loved One with an Eating Disorder: The New Maudsley Method