

# Alarming Statistics a Warning for Parents

## *10 Steps to Raising Healthy Teens*



*By Lyn M. Macpherson*

**What's happening to our teens? Youth suicide rates, anxiety and depression are at an all time high, and research indicates that unless we adjust what we're doing these statistics will only get worse.**

- **Suicide rates for 15 to 24-year-olds at highest rate in 10 years.<sup>1</sup>**
- **Suicide is the biggest killer of young Australians and accounts for the deaths of more young people than car accidents.<sup>2</sup>**
- **One in four young Australians currently has a mental health condition.<sup>3</sup>**
- **One quarter of girls aged 16-17 have self-harmed.<sup>4</sup>**

According to local youth services, alcohol and drug abuse, family breakdown resulting in homelessness, self harm, eating disorders or body image issues, and suicide are of serious concern in Australian communities.

Some believe it's a consequence of ever-increasing living costs, housing unaffordability and the resulting pressure on parents and teens alike. Often both parents need to work in order to meet financial demands, leaving little time available to focus on their teenagers.

Teens from broken families and single parent families are statistically more vulnerable, according to reports. However, teens at every socio-economic level are affected.

The obvious question is what can we do to turn this around?

Well, awareness is the first step into change. Once we become aware of the pressures our young people face, we are better equipped to help, assist and guide them.

The Mission Australia Youth survey reports, “young people are most concerned with stress, school or study problems, and body image.”<sup>5</sup>

Knowing how to support our teens in ways that help them cope with these pressures provides an essential preventative measure in protecting them from anxiety, depression, mental illness and any associated fallout.

## **Key factors in supporting your teen are:**

### **1. Helping teens understand their grades do not define them**

There is increasing pressure on young people to achieve certain results, and this often culminates at HSC level where they feel they need to attain a certain ATAR in order to be acceptable – to their parents, or to themselves. This is a dangerous way to think. Life is full of options, there are always a multitude of ways around solving an issue or achieving a goal. School, and in particular the HSC, provide a valuable opportunity for parents to hone in on developing the resilience to “roll with the punches” in their teens.



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Young people need to understand there are always alternative pathways to them achieving their end goal, and that in fact many of the most successful people have taken “round-a-bout” paths. Providing them with inspirational examples can be valuable, such as Susan Kiefel, who was recently sworn in as Australia’s first female Chief Justice of High Court. This is an outstanding achievement, especially within such a male-dominated profession. And Kiefel

left school at 15. She completed her HSC part-time while working as a legal secretary. She then studied law part-time through the barristers admission board.

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## **2. Get to know your teen**

It’s really important to engage in activities with your teenager. Go to the movies. Eat out. Play tennis. Take them for a drive. Play board games as a family. Eat dinner together and make it a phone-free zone. Enjoy shopping spree together. Have a facial, massage or pedicure together. Invite them to join you for a hit of golf. The choices are endless. You don’t need to do all of it, just pick your thing, do it regularly, and have fun. The bottom line is there is no better investment in your teens well-being than one-on-one positive time with you.



What’s important is to get to know your teen. Talk to them. Give them undistracted time. This needs to be incorporated into everyday life. A great place to engage is when driving – you’re both in a confined private space, and you can give your teen your full attention without them feeling intimidated.

You can ask your teen open-ended questions – ones that cannot be answered with one word, like yes, no, good or ok, for example. As your daughter jumps in the car after school, you could greet her with an enthusiastically toned, “Hey gorgeous, tell me, what happened at school today?” And when you get home from work, you could deepen your connection with your son with an animated, “Hey mate, I’ve been wondering all day, what happened in your rugby match this afternoon? Tell me all about it.” Engaging genuinely, expressively and passionately every day with your teen is vital to their health and well-being. It gives them the sense of belonging we all need to thrive.

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### 3. Give your teen a strong sense of belonging

Viktor Frankl, the famous neurologist, psychiatrist and holocaust survivor, spent his entire life researching what enables us to thrive as human beings. He concluded it was our sense of belonging that mattered most to every one of us.



Teens are innately vulnerable in terms of belonging. They are not sure where they fit in, who they identify with, where they are going, what life beholds, who they are becoming and how to manage the mental, physical and environmental changes and challenges them and their peers are facing. They have no real sense of identity. And this is where we can support them. We can reinstate their sense of feeling loved, and feeling that sense of belonging, by showing interest in them and expressing how much they are valued by us and their family. We can also help our teens develop a sense of who they are, what they want to become, where they're going, and what their goals are (knowing nothing is cast in stone and they can make adjustments along the way, depending on opportunities in life). We need to assure teens that no matter what their choices are in life, nothing will change their belonging, our love for them and their value to us and to the rest of their family.

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This is of particular importance in broken families, where teens can feel lost and broken, not knowing if they belong to Mum or Dad. Teens afflicted by acrimonious parent divorce or separation are most at risk. Remembering a sense of belonging is vital to the health and well-being of your teen, it would make sense for both parties, Mum and Dad, to find common ground when it comes to kids – particularly teens. Divorce can be difficult, demanding, distracting and emotionally devastating to adults, but it's important to keep your eye on the ball with regard to your kids and teens. The reality is they are feeling all of these emotions too. Their world and life as they know it has come crashing down around them, and they feel powerless and out of control at a time when they are struggling to transition into adulthood. The effects of emotionally neglecting teens at a time of family breakdown can result in even more trauma and devastation, to everyone.

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The following tips can keep your teen healthy through the additional burden of a divorce or separation:

- Keep any negativity about your ex-partner to yourself, remembering kids need to be allowed to love both of their parents equally and openly.
- Resist encouraging your teen to side with you.

- Never use your kids as a go-between for you and your ex.
- Be kind and respectful to your ex in front of your teen.
- Agree with your teen when they speak highly of your ex, remembering your once loved this person yourself and they are the mother/father of someone you love dearly.
- Be sensitive to bringing new partners into your teens life, and check how they feel respecting their views without judgment.
- Check in with them regularly to find out how they're feeling and travelling with the upheaval. Offer any assistance and support they may need.
- Let them know you're there for them always, regardless of what happens.
- Assure them that the love you have for them will always remain, no matter what.
- Assert the fact that your separation had absolutely nothing to do with them.
- Regularly remind them of their value to you, and how much they mean to you.

We can help teens understand that their power to create the life they desire has everything to do with what lies within – the thoughts they decide to think over and over, the identity they create for themselves in their own mind.

When teens understand that what we focus on grows, they are given an insight into how to create the future they want. For example, if they are constantly focusing on social media popularity, “liking” as many posts as possible in order to receive return likes, posting consistently and “friending” as many strangers as possible, then they are likely to grow their social media profile. However, because they are not focusing on building real relationships and interactions, keeping up to date with their studies and getting exercise, they will not be growing social confidence, their future or their health. The result is likely to be, unsurprisingly, that their focus has grown what they thought they wanted and not what they needed.

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This also helps them to understand, despite the fact that their peers are image obsessed due to the brainwashing of current media and social media, the fact is what they look like is irrelevant to who they are. Their body changes and weight will fluctuate and evolve as they grow into adulthood, but the driving force of their life lies within them – and they can choose that.

#### **4. Encourage and support your teens passions and goals**

Get to know what drives your teen. Often they will have no idea what they want to do with their lives. You can let them know that this is healthy and normal, in fact it allows them to keep all their options open allowing them to take opportunities that inspire them along the way.

It's healthy for all human being to do what they love doing. And it's been proven that the most successful of us love what they do.



Once your teen has decided on a direction or pathway, support them, even if it's not something you would have chosen for them. Remember, our children have come through us, not to us. They belong to themselves, and it's our job to help them find themselves. The most destructive thing we can do is encourage our kids to live our unfulfilled dreams. It's a certain path to misery.

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## **5. Replace judgment with guidance and kindness**

It's important to communicate regularly with your teen, offering support and replacing judgment with guidance. The key is to be supportive and understanding.

Your teen is no longer a child, and not yet an adult. As parents, our job is to support them and guide them to be happy, fulfilled, independent and capable adults who are able to enjoy a rewarding life.



They are at the stage where we need to allow them to make adult choices, with our guidance and support. We need to allow them to take charge of their lives, while still navigating them. This can be a difficult juggling act for parents who are used to taking charge. A good way to deal with the new territory is to consider the fact that you are there to offer your teen an insight into the risks of taking certain actions or making certain decisions, the consequences of their choices, and the opportunities available to them. As parents, our job is not to dictate, but rather to facilitate.

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What this means, for example, is instead of telling your teen not to hang out with the group of kids who take drugs because they're losers, explain to them that it's up to them what they choose to do, however if they choose to hang out with those who have vastly opposing goals to them they could end up being derailed. And because all you want for them is their happiness, this concerns you. Let them know we are the sum of the five closest people to us, and that the people we choose to hang out with can enormously impact our future and our long-term happiness. These people could distract them at this important stage of their future building, and that could effect their whole life, when in all likelihood they won't even be in contact with the group in years to come. Reflect your understanding in the difficulties associated with changing peer groups, and let your teen know you will support them. Suggest they transition in stages to a new friendship group, assist them in choosing healthy friendships, discuss their progress and reflect your pride in them as they evolve.

## 6. Expose the media trap and help your teen to manage it

Our young people live in a high stimuli world today, with media, multi-media and social media besieging teens and young adults. They are constantly responding to Facebook, updating Twitter, checking Tinder and posting on Instagram and Snapchat in order to maintain their social loops.

Communication is predominantly via text or Messenger. The problem is often these forums provide a façade for connection, when in fact the reality is they can be dangerously socially isolating.



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When we as parents were teenagers, there were no mobile phones, texting didn't exist and social media was a science fiction dream. If we wanted to get to know someone we'd pick up the phone and call them. We would arrange to meet up, and we'd hang out together relying on social queues such as body language and eye contact to form bonds.

Today it would be "weird" for teens to pick up the phone and chat to a friend – unless they were very close. When they do hang out together, often they are distracted by their phones, and the bombardment of stimuli constantly demanding their attention. This creates a vicious cycle whereby they fail to develop social skills due to the constant distraction, and then they avoid social interaction through these distractions because their social skills are underdeveloped.

The solution lies in *explaining* the problem to your teen. Most of the time, if our teens feel we are onboard and hold no agenda other than their happiness, they will listen to us – provided we choose our language carefully. Any teenager will cringe and switch off if you start a sentence with, "in my day...". We need to be careful not to word things in a way that make us sound archaic or like we've just stepped out of the dark ages.

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Letting our teens know that we understand how much the world has changed, and that we cannot even imagine how difficult it must be to cope with all the additional pressures they face considering it was hard enough being a teenager before all these external pressures existed provides a good start. We could then go on to point out the fact that although the world has changed, human nature remains a constant. We can look back on history at any era to see some things never change. People need people. We all need to feel we belong, that we matter, and that we are valued by others. We need to feel loved. We need genuine connections. This is what it has always meant to be human.

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When kids see this, they can be supported in managing the bombardment of disconnecting stimuli. You could brainstorm solutions with them. It's important to allow them make the decisions. And when they make wise choices and adjustments, tell them how proud you are of them for seeing things so clearly and taking courageous action. From then on notice their changes and continue to offer words of support, pride and encouragement. Never underestimate the value of the words, such as, "I'm so proud of you".

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For example, your teen may decide to limit social media interaction to a specified hour or half hour a day (one they choose). They may cut their social media accounts back to their favourite two or three. Perhaps they will make an effort to call good friends regularly and have an undistracted chat, sharing the value of that with their friend. They may choose to watch only an hour of television a day, considering the latest episode of their favourite sitcom is unlikely to help them achieve their goals. They may do the same with games if that is the thing distracting them.

Personally, my teens have asked me to take their phones for a few hours after school in order for them to avoid the constant barrage of group messages and social media demands. Other times, they have switched their phones to "do not disturb" to prevent alerts occurring.

It is valuable to let our teens know that social media sites see them as commodities. They are powerful companies who are not concerned for our well-being. What this means is many of the people with thousands of Facebook "friends" and hundreds of "likes" are the least happy, the most troubled and the most mentally unstable. And this is because they are investing so much of their time in building their (fake) profile rather than building real connections. It's not their fault. They've been caught in an ingenious corporate trap. The truth is those who are able to moderate their social media interaction are strong enough to override unhealthy pressures, are able to achieve balance, have more time to invest in real connections and as a result they are more mentally stable. This understanding allows teens step out of the competitive mindset these corporations promote and rely on to make their fortunes.

## **7. Promote balance**

In this day and age, it's unsurprising that not only mental health but obesity is pandemic in western culture considering the superficial voids we are encouraged to invest in. With this in mind, we can discuss some points of interest with our teens. Things like how interesting it is that the blue light required for mobile devices and computer screens





prevents our brains from producing the hormone that allows us to sleep, melatonin. So, unless we turn these devices off for at least an hour before bed we will literally be unable to get a good quality night's sleep. These kinds of strategies are referred to by sleep experts as "sleep hygiene". We could debate the fact that reading books enables us to be better writers, and writing will always be a valuable tool. We could talk about how exercise gives us endorphins that make us feel good and help to prevent, manage or overcome depression. Open debates, brainstorming and conversations are great ways to open the minds of our adult-in-making.

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It's important to speak to our teens with respect and as equals to encourage them to create balance in their lives – enough exercise, alone time, moderation of media and healthy eating habits. However, we don't want them to feel like we're lecturing them, but rather that we are sharing ideas and brainstorming. Encouraging our teens to speak their mind and express their opinions on a topic not only provides an insight into who they are, it grows their confidence, it allows them to feel accepted and respected, and it develops their ability to think. We need be cautious of dismissing their views, invalidating them or correcting them. If we disagree, we could instead simply offer another point of view – respectfully and diplomatically. For example, "That's fascinating, I never thought of it like that. My view has always been..... for the following reason.....what do you think about that?" It can be empowering for your teen to learn that you don't always need to agree – that sometimes accepting different points of views can be healthy. In fact, this reflects individuality, which is what makes the world go around.

## **8. Be on their team**

You are your teens team. Ensure they know it. They need to know you are behind them, rooting for them always, and you have their best interests at heart.

When they make mistakes, which we've all done and will continue to do, remind them there is no such thing as failure – just learning what to do next time. Mistakes are how we grow, and we need them as much as we need successes.



Resist the "us and them" mentality, the "you guys are so..." as if you are not one of them. That will simply drive a chasm between you. Instead, build a sense of commonality by expressing similarities in how you saw or handled life at a similar age. Show admiration too for your teens strengths, and notice what they're good at. Build on that. It's not hard to see the good in your teen if you decide to. Focus on the good in your teen and that's what you will grow.

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## 9. Empower your teen

Trust your teen to make good, healthy decisions and tell them you trust them. If they mess up, tell them how you have always trusted them and you want to trust them again – you may just need a few weeks for them to rebuild your trust. When it comes to trusting your teen, you need to also set an example of trust to them. Don't lie to them, or mislead them. Don't manipulate them. Do what you say you will do. Walk your talk.



Remember your example is probably the most important influence in your teens life. This doesn't mean you need to be perfect. In fact, being perfect would be an unhealthy example to set any teen. It's unrealistic. Being human, by its very nature, is imperfect. And perfect would be boring and uninspiring. Instead, when we make mistakes as parents, we need to talk to our teens about it, admit our failings, and share what we've learned. Witnessing parents argue with one another, and then having both parents admit they overreacted because they were tired from work can have a considerable influence on how young adults respond in relationships. Parents could agree that next time they will wait until they have both unwound from their day before bracing potentially emotive issues, knowing this will allow them to use more discretion and diplomacy with one another.

Encourage your teen to give things a go, even things they think they won't achieve. Many people achieve things which they initially thought were pipe dreams. A "give it a go" attitude teaches our teens that a "no" has lost them nothing, but they opened themselves up to the opportunity of a "yes". It develops resilience and strength of character.

Empower your teen to believe in themselves, accept and appreciate their unique skills, talents and abilities, enjoy their passions and pursue their (ever-changing) dreams. Empower your teen with the knowing that you are always behind them, believing in them, and knowing they are a strong person who can deal with life's challenges.

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## 10. Take notice

Notice your teens moods and if you see any dramatic or uncharacteristic changes, talk to them and find out what's going on for them.

Changes to look out for:

- Excessive sleeping.
- Inability to sleep.
- Extreme mood swings.



- Restlessness.
- Inability to focus or concentrate.
- Looking sad.
- Excessive television, computer time, gaming or social media.
- Loss of appetite.
- Excessive eating.
- Lack of eye contact.
- Long periods of isolation, in their room for example.
- Little social interaction.
- Excessive social interaction.
- Anger or other forms of emotional outbursts.
- Sudden loss of interest in hobbies or interests.
- Lethargy or lack of motivation.
- Skipping school.
- Increased negative language about themselves or others.

When you do speak to your teen be careful to use supportive and compassionate language. Ask them how they're going and let them know you are feeling a little concerned because you've noticed certain changes in them and you want to know if they need to talk to you, or someone else, and if they're okay.

A great strategy for parents is to give your teen a compliment a day to build them up. Make it something very specific, with a generalization tagged on the end of it. For example, "The way you supported your brother then was just so incredibly thoughtful and kind (specific compliment). He is so lucky to have such a compassionate and caring big brother (generalized compliment)."

If you notice your teen labelling themselves, be quick to "unstick" any labels, as labels can derail us in powerful ways. You can remind your teen that labels are other people's views, and other people are affected by their own labels. For example, I used this game in my workshops. If you ask eight people to put a label on tomato sauce, you will likely get eight different responses – sweet, blood, red, sugary, yuk, yum, messy, awesome perhaps. The point is each of these labels has nothing to do with what the tomato sauce is, but rather what the tomato sauce means to them. Labels never reflect who someone is. Instead they reflect the labeler.

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In short, raising teens can be a challenging time for parents, but it's important to remember that the decisions we make over these few years can determine lifetime outcomes for both us and our emerging young adults. Golden rules are stay on their team always, put yourself in their shoes and realize you both have the same goal at the end of the day – to help your teen create a good, fulfilling, rewarding life. Making the right choices today, and supporting your teen in healthy ways, can create a future that inspires and nourishes everyone in the family.

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**For additional support, and in case of emergency, contact:**

- **Lifeline on 13 11 14**
- **Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800**
- **MensLine Australia on 1300 789 978**
- **Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467**
  - **Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636**
  - **eHeadspace on 1800 650 890**

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<sup>1</sup> Longbottom, J. (2016) ABC News, *Suicide Rates for Young Australians highest in 10 years, researchers call for new prevention strategies*. Downloaded 8<sup>th</sup> March, 2017 from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-30/system-for-suicide-prevention-rates-highest-10-years/8076780>

<sup>2</sup> Beyond Blue, *Stats and Facts*, downloaded 8<sup>th</sup> March, 2017 from <https://www.youthbeyondblue.com/footer/stats-and-facts>

<sup>3</sup> Beyond Blue, *Stats and Facts*, downloaded 8<sup>th</sup> March, 2017 from <https://www.youthbeyondblue.com/footer/stats-and-facts>

<sup>4</sup> Longbottom, J. (2016) ABC News, *Suicide Rates for Young Australians highest in 10 years, researchers call for new prevention strategies*. Downloaded 8<sup>th</sup> March, 2017 from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-30/system-for-suicide-prevention-rates-highest-10-years/8076780>

<sup>5</sup> Mission Australia. 2015. *Youth survey report 2015*. Available from: [www.missionaustralia.com.au/what-we-do/research-evaluation/youth-survey](http://www.missionaustralia.com.au/what-we-do/research-evaluation/youth-survey)