



Teen Issues and Concerns

Before Reading

- What are some of the major problems teenagers face today?

- Who could teenagers talk to if they need help with some problems?
- What are some of the resources your community offers to help teenagers?
- If you were the mayor of your city, what resources would you make available to help teenagers?
- What do you think of the proverb “It takes a village to raise a child”?

While Reading

See *Infer*, p. VI

As you read, make logical guesses using what you see.

- Who wrote some of these letters?
- Who is answering some of these letters?
- What are some of the concerns of the letter writers?
- Which of these letters do you find most interesting? Why?

Vocabulary

bridge the gap - to connect two things, or to make the difference between two things smaller

loaded question - a question heavy with emotional impact or implications, or that requires a specific answer

shrug your shoulders - a gesture that may mean "I don't know," "I have no interest" or "I don't care"

Generation gap is a term denoting the difference in basic values between teenagers and adults. Parents expect the behaviour of responsible “mini-adults” from their teens. Teenagers, however, are caught in a world that glorifies the “greed is good” motto and encourages rebel-teen attitudes that poke fun at their parents’ traditional ideas and beliefs. How can we **bridge the gap** between these contrasting values? At Teen Spirit, we believe in dialogue. Our blog receives tons of letters from teens, concerned parents and even teachers. So, we have decided to devote some of our blog space to publishing the most frequently requested advice, along with the answers.

Dr. Laura Jensen is a teen psychologist and frequent contributor to our blog. She will answer some of our readers’ letters.

Dear Dr. Jensen,

As a teenager, I know that teens face many problems. I value your input as a specialist very much. Could you tell me, in your view, what are

some of the major problems faced by teens and some of the solutions?

Thank you,

A Worried Teen

Dear Worried Teen,

You ask such **loaded questions**. In our complex world, the problems are many and the solutions not always simple. They often require a willingness to help and to listen without judging. These are some of the problems teenagers face and they are not in any particular order.

- Teen suicide is the third leading cause of death among teenagers and young adults.
- In-person or indirect (online) bullying is an ongoing pattern of abuse; in-person – by physical or verbal attacks; indirectly – by exclusion, spreading rumours, manipulating, shaming, controlling or diminishing others...

- Internet addictions and online gaming habits develop when a person spends countless hours per day (sometimes up to 20 hours per day) gaming or surfing the Net, eventually interfering with emotional, physical and intellectual development.
- Eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia, binge eating, etc. can have deadly effects on girls, and boys as well.
- Teen hookups is a culture that encourages sexual encounters without emotional engagement or commitment. Girls are especially under pressure to get involved in these acts, then shamed for participating (or not) in them. This culture causes disastrous clashes of values and devastating crises of self-esteem.
- Online violence in video games and films can influence a person's behaviour and there is a danger of becoming desensitized to it through overexposure.
- Violence at home can be of the physical, verbal or emotional type. Teens exposed to

violence of this kind (whether directed at them or at others) are at high risk of becoming violent themselves.

- Violence and death culture. There is a direct correlation between a culture that glorifies violence and death with individual and neighbourhood violence.

All these problems are serious and require professional help. Should one of your friends confide in you about any such problem, ask the advice of a trusted adult. She or he will tell you which community resources are available. If you remain silent about your friend's problem, you will not help your friend. Do not make the mistake of taking your friend's problems lightly and just **shrug your shoulders**, thinking the problems will go away by themselves.

They will not.

Until your friend gets the needed help, keep on talking, but, most of all, listen with a compassionate ear and do not judge. Nobody really knows what it is like to walk in somebody else's shoes, but a caring friend can make all the difference in the world.



Vocabulary

synapse - a junction between brain cells through which impulses are received and transmitted

cortices - (plural of cortex) cerebral or grey matter that plays an important part in a person's consciousness

insight - intuitive understanding of a person or thing

empathy - the ability to understand and share the feelings of other people

Dear Doctor,

Help! My teenager has turned into a slob. He leaves plates under his bed, clothes on the floor, forgets

and loses things, never washes a dish... Why doesn't he care about being tidy anymore? I didn't raise him this way. What should I do?

Exasperated Mom

Dear Exasperated Mom,

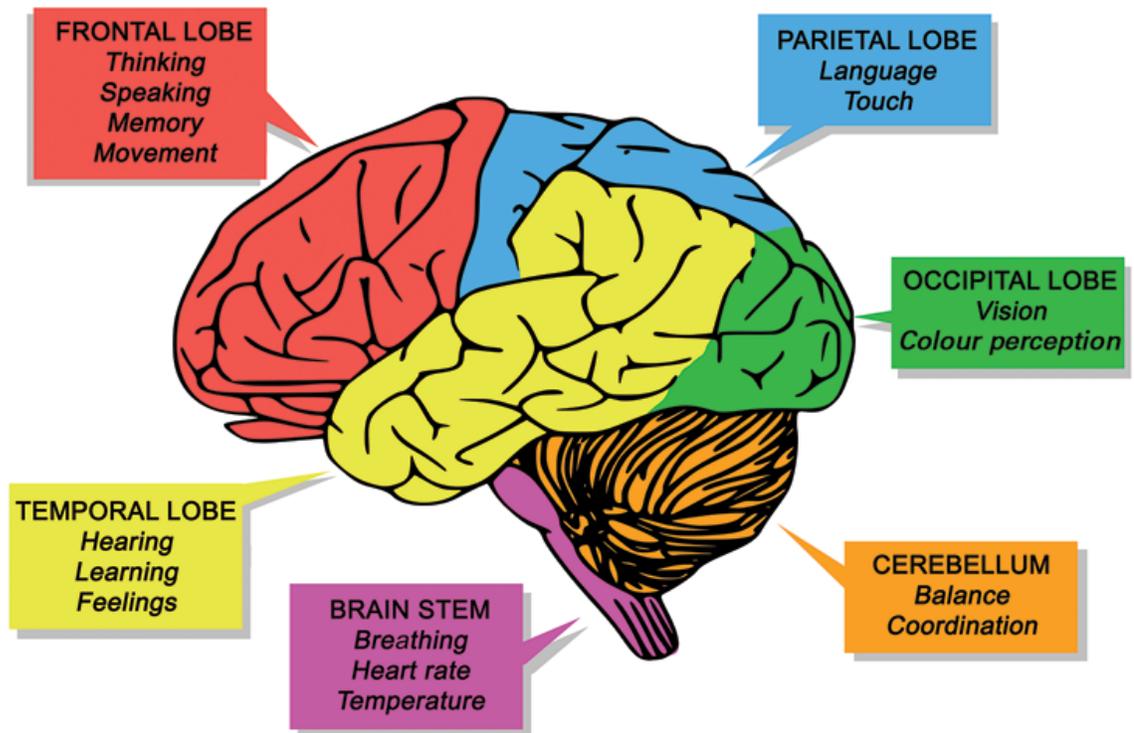
It takes planning to be tidy and it also takes a certain level of cognitive control. The teenage brain is not very good at planning because it has not yet developed this intellectual function.

Let me explain about the brain. The human brain functions thanks to a series of connections made through **synapses**. Synapses are insulated by a fatty substance called *myelin*. It takes years to create fully functional synapses. Newly created synapses move slowly from the back of the brain to the front. The last parts of the brain to be interconnected are the frontal and prefrontal **cortices**. These parts control **insight**, **empathy** and *risk taking*. Smart adolescents do stupid things in a very impulsive way because the frontal and prefrontal parts of their brains develop later. Organization and planning are not high priorities for most teenagers, because, as far as they are concerned, they have more

interesting and fun things to do. Meanwhile, here are a few tips to help get your teen organized:

- Encourage the use of a daily planner (social and academic organizer).
- Encourage the idea of keeping track of time with a watch, stopwatch or cellphone.
- Use coloured sticky notes to remind your teen what to do – or what to prioritize – for homework, after-school activities or household chores.
- Provide your teen with boxes, binders, single-subject notebooks, different coloured folders, accordion files, three-hole punch, stapler and paper clips. All or a combination of these articles will keep small electronics, wires and related papers in their proper places and should minimize clutter in your teen's room.

I'm sure that, in time, your teen will show you that you have been a good teacher! Good luck!



Vocabulary

novelty-seeking - personality trait associated with searching for new and exciting activity

Dear Dr. Laura,

I can't talk to my mom anymore. I love her, but I wish she would stop asking so many questions. Sometimes, she makes me so angry! How can I make her understand I need my own space? Please tell me what to do.

Loony Louie

Dear Loony Louie,

You are at an age of self-discovery and **novelty-seeking** behaviour. It is normal to want to cut ties from the secure world of your childhood. Your mom probably understands your need to be independent; after all, she was a teenager herself once. However, she is worried, and we do live in a complicated world. It is the first time in history that teenagers have had so much stimulation and exposure to so many potential stress factors. Your mom worries about you and wants to remain vigilant. She wants to protect you from possible danger. It is important that you remain connected to her, because no one will ever love you like your mom does.

Here is what I did when my children were your age: we enjoyed taking long car drives and so we did and talked on the way. Because I needed to keep my eyes on the road, there was no eye contact, so it was easier to start talking about sensitive subjects. Is there an activity you enjoy doing with your mom? When you are both relaxed and enjoying yourselves, it is easier to open the channels of communication.

Try it and let me know how it goes. I wish you the best of luck!



Vocabulary

restlessness - inability to relax

peer pressure - the influence people of the same age have on their own group

bond of trust - mutual trust

cutthroat competition - attempt to eliminate all other competitors

hatch - when a baby bird or animal comes out of the egg

Dear Dr. Jensen,

I used to love school, but now it doesn't interest me at all. I can't be bothered to study, complete my work or hand it in. Why can't I be more motivated?

I don't understand why this is happening to me.

DeMotivated

Dear Demotivated,

The fact that you are asking for help is a good sign. Are you just a little demotivated, or a whole lot?

If you are only slightly demotivated, ask yourself, "What are my difficulties at school?"

Let's say you have difficulties listening, concentrating or sitting still. I would suggest you join a drama group, chess club, debating team or sports team. Any of these activities will help you to concentrate, focus on tasks and overcome your **restlessness**.

Let's say you dislike a school subject, like math. There are tons of math games online, such as puzzles or Sudoku. Find them and play with your friends and family. Think of the many small ways you use math in real life, like when you go shopping, add up your hours on your paycheque, calculate distance over time or in lots of other ways. This should help you understand the importance and relevance of math in your life.

Also ask yourself, "How much time do I spend online or playing video games?" If it's more than two hours per day, you must put some limits to your time online. It is certainly more fun to be online than doing schoolwork, but gaming and social media will not help in motivating you to do that schoolwork or to achieve your future goals.

If you think you are seriously demotivated, it might be a symptom of a learning or processing problem. If that is the case, it is best to talk with your parents or a teacher you can trust. A specialist could help

diagnose a problem if it exists, then suggest solutions. In the teenage years, we are still building synapses and modifying them as we learn, so if there is a problem, now is the time to fix it.

If you can get the proper help, you can change your capacity for academic achievement and this can really change your destiny. You are not alone. Ask for help and you will get it. Good luck!

Dear Doctor,

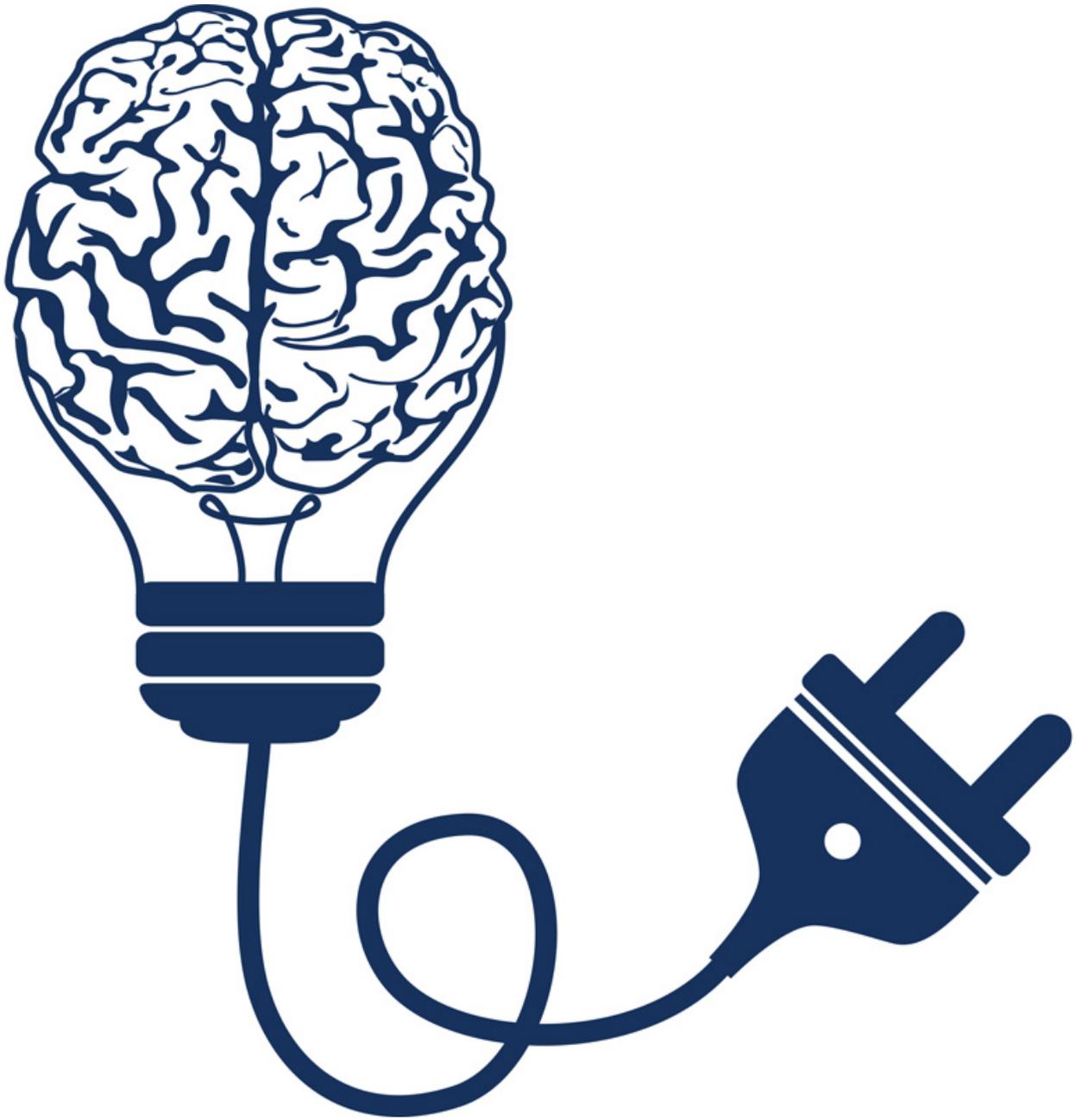
Should I worry about my teenager's alcohol or drug use? There are so many conflicting reports on substance abuse. What should I know about this problem?

Wondering in Suburbia

Dear Wondering,

Many teens experiment with drugs and alcohol, but most do not become addicts. They do it for various reasons, including curiosity, a need to experiment, **peer pressure**, stress, emotional issues

or a desire to escape reality. Teens react differently from adults after ingesting similar amounts of drugs or alcohol. For example, binge drinking will cause brain damage in a teen, but only intoxication in an adult. Drugs will also be more damaging to a teen. Young people have a greater capacity for quick learning and, ironically, addiction is a form of learning. Teens will become addicted faster to a substance than if they ingest it in later life. Chronic pot smoking has long-term effects. It changes the chemistry of a teen's brain, just as enriching environments or academic learning do. Studies have shown that when teens smoke pot for prolonged periods, their verbal IQs drop. The most important thing to remember is to keep communicating and ensure your teen knows the dangers involved in such risky behaviour.



Dear Dr. Jensen,

*I am a teacher who has seen drastic changes in the student-teacher relationship over the years. It seems to me that the once sacred **bond of trust** and hard*

*work is now broken. It is becoming increasingly difficult to criticize a student's performance. It is as if they have become too delicate to handle criticism. How can they learn if they can't take criticism? Students lack academic discipline and I worry that they are unprepared to face the **cutthroat competition** of the real world. What do you think of the lack of discipline of today's youth? Thank you for your thoughts.*

Worried in my Classroom

Dear Worried,

The key to everything in life is patience. An egg will **hatch** in time, but not if you smash it first.

Teenagers are very impatient for success. They want it as quickly as the fast-food they are so fond of consuming. Today's teens are vulnerable to many temptations. Unfortunately, their parents and teachers often do not take enough time to listen to their teens' concerns. That is dangerous because there is no substitute for parents or teachers in a teenager's life. I would try to instill a proper balance of values and necessary academic discipline in your students.

From your letter, I understand you love your students. So, you know teenagers require love, patience, understanding and empathy from the adults around them. Teens are very much aware what values they are expected to represent and hold dear. Give them time, trust and plenty of love. In the words of Zig Ziglar, “*Teens go where there’s excitement, but stay where there is love.*”

After Reading

Answer the following questions using a complete sentence.

1

In your opinion, is novelty-seeking behaviour a trait only exhibited by teenagers?

2

Why do teens tend to do stupid things and act impulsively?

3

How do online bullies behave?

4

What does myelin do?

5

How might a teenager be affected by smoking pot for long periods?

6

What are the differences and similarities between binge eating and binge drinking?

7

Dr. Jensen recommends no more than two hours of online time per day. In your opinion, is this reasonable? Why?

8

Explain “verbal IQ” in your own words.