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Has your teenager got the blues?

Their school life is in chaos, their social life on hold, their future prospects diminished – Britain's teens have had a miserable year. So how can parents help them to stay positive? By Anna Moore

As a parent in an upside-down world, you can't worry equally about all of your children at once. So for much of this year, my focus has been on my eldest two. One "graduated" this summer (having sat ad hoc exams back home in her bedroom) into the worst jobs market in living memory.

The other started university – paying around £20,000 to spend most of this year isolated with a handful of strangers, policed by security guards.

For this reason, my 14-year-old, Orla, has been left to simply get on with it. I realised my mistake a few weeks back – before the second lockdown – when I glimpsed her sitting on her bed, perfectly still, staring blankly ahead. She'd been sent home from school because of a positive Covid case in her year group.

I went in; we talked. "It just doesn't feel like my life any more," she told me. "When lockdown first happened, it was such a big thing, we were all talking about it on social media and setting our goals. Now, it's all becoming so normal, no one even reacts. It's like we're robots. School restarts and then because one girl I've never spoken to tests positive, it's expected that we have to not leave

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◀ Teenagers including (l-r) Stan and Eli Price talk about how the Covid-19 emergency has affected their education, overleaf

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our houses for another two weeks. It's like a script we're all following – and you know this will keep happening, so what's the point in working or planning or looking forward?"

In fact, this proved true. Within a fortnight of being back, another girl in her year took a "fit to fly" Covid test in order to go on holiday at half term. It came back positive, and Orla was stuck at home again. While she was self-isolating for the second time, the second lockdown was announced. And while news about a possible vaccine brought cheer to many of us last week, for most teenagers, next spring might as well be next decade. They remain very much in the locked down here and now.

There can be no doubt that teenagers, their rights and needs, their mental health and education (not to mention their economic future) have been blasted by this pandemic and its surrounding policies. Teens have spent the best part of 2020 stuck in their homes at a time when friendship, exploration and discovery, that sense of progression and forward movement, is unimaginably important. The "lockdown sacrifice" is not the same for adults. The Oxford ARC (Achieving Resilience during Covid-19) longitudinal study found that teenagers have experienced far higher levels of loneliness and isolation than their parents.

According to Naella Grew, counsellor, parenting coach, and co-author of *Teenagers Translated* (Vermilion), the teenage brain is developed by socialising. "It's a time of risk-taking and discovery, testing boundaries, making mistakes and bouncing back," she says. "All essential parts of the move to independence and it's vital to teenage brain development. Instead, this year, they have been hemmed in by rules and restrictions, all in a climate of fear."

The impact is evident. By May, demand for counselling on the NSPCC's Childline was already 15 per cent higher than the charity's monthly average. Childline callers have described feeling "trapped" and "over

described feeling trapped and overwhelmed"; they have opened up about falling out with their friends on social media, family conflict at home and worry over school work. The Oxford ARC study showed that 44 per cent of teenagers were getting less than seven hours sleep a night this year. Now, the NHS has reported a 50 per cent rise in mental health problems in those aged five to 16 years.

We have created the perfect environment for mental illness, including all the key risk factors for self-harm and suicidal ideation – social isolation, loneliness, feeling trapped and hopeless, as well as likely tensions at home.

Education has also lost much of its value. Orla's school work, the quality as well as her engagement, has definitely taken a dive and I can't find it in me to get on her case.

"For years, we've been telling our teenagers that if they miss even a day of school they face a lifetime of disaster," says Grew. "One day, we'll have to return to those messages, but they'll never believe us and they probably shouldn't. The goalposts keep moving, the curriculum and requirements changing – and there's a constant sense that exams might not even happen. Motivation is a huge problem."

And then there are all those cancelled "firsts". The milestones that teenagers plan and imagine – GCSEs and "Results Day", driving lessons, music festivals, their first house party, their first relationship. Putting your life on hold when you're middle-aged and settled like me makes little real difference – one year morphs into the next. Teenagers are future-focused; at that age, each year brings new breakthroughs. But not this year.

But, although these are challenging times, it is important to remember that there are things that we can do to help and support our teenagers.

There are five main ways to help, according to [Julia Samuel](#), psychotherapist and author of *This Too Shall Pass* (Penguin Life). See page opposite.

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I lost my friends – we didn't fall out, we just didn't stay in contact'

Stan and Eli Price, 17 and 16, Surrey

STAN

"I was in the first year of sixth form studying music when lockdown was announced. I sing and play guitar and that's what I want for the future – to be on stage. Me and my friends were going to gigs, we had plans to go to festivals in summer.

Lockdown brought some good things and a lot of bad ones. We switched to online lessons, which was not great. My diploma is coursework-based, and there was no access to school equipment so we don't know how we'll be marked.

There were days when I was really down. I felt I was missing out and there was no sense of how long for. I'd eat a lot or hardly eat anything – I put on weight and lost it about five times. I often wasn't tired at night because I hadn't moved much during the day. I also lost my friends – we didn't fall out, we just didn't stay in contact.

One good thing was that I wrote lots more music. In some ways, spending all that time with myself made me more confident about who I am. I definitely care less about what other people think of me. As soon as we went back to school in September, I formed a band. I've got new friends now, maybe people a bit more like me.

Now things have closed again, the band can't rehearse and musicians are being told to 'retrain'. All my life, music has been the only thing that motivates me. It's not just a hobby, it's how I'm wired and not something I can just put aside. Being told to stop and do something else is incomprehensible. What would people have done without the creative arts through lockdown? Imagine going about your life without ever hearing music? I am going to make a living in music. That's how I felt when I first heard this idea and that's how I'm always going to feel."

ELI

"When they announced lockdown and there was talk of just extending the Easter holidays for up to a month. I remember thinking, 'That's a long time!' For most of the summer term, our school set work for each subject – you had to get yourself up, try to get through it. It was much, much harder – teaching yourself chemistry without a teacher or school resources. My school didn't start actual online classes until just before we broke up.

I'm worried about my GCSEs next summer as it feels like we missed six months of learning. A lot of the curriculum has been made easier. For

*'I feel I have to spend
hours on extra research.
My work ethic has gone
up but it's more stressful'*

German and English, the examining boards have cut some requirements. Before lockdown, I was doing 'triple science', but now my year group has moved to 'combined science' because there's less to learn. I'm still worried that we haven't done our mocks yet so if they close schools and cancel exams, what will they grade us on? I feel every single piece of work I'm set, each piece of homework, has to show my full potential so I spend hours on extra research. My work ethic has probably gone up but it's much more stressful.

Lots of friends have found out what they're into during lockdown. Before, everyone wore tracksuits but, now people are wearing unusual stuff, everyone looks more individual and they have given up judging each other. That's a good thing."

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'When GCSEs were cancelled I felt so frightened, I couldn't sleep'

Success Imafidon, 17, London

"In March, my GCSEs were two months away, my revision was all planned. I was my school's head girl so it was important to do well. I also had a place at a summer school for students thinking of applying to medical school, and I was trying to set up work experience placements in healthcare. I was so determined.

My birthday is March 26, so I'd organised my party. When lockdown was announced, I just felt disappointed that it would be cancelled. Then weeks passed, and I began to worry about work. My school set online work; just links and videos to watch. My mum has passed away, so I live with my 10-year-old brother and my auntie, who is like my mum. She works in a care home; going to work was good for her mental health but it was stressful for everyone – the focus on death and disease, the increased fear. I had to learn to cook and teach my little brother his school work, but all he wanted to do was play computer games!

When GCSEs were actually cancelled, I felt so frightened, I couldn't sleep. My grade predictions based on

my mocks were OK but I knew I could do better. I lost a lot of motivation. I should have spent more time learning, but I was on TikTok and FaceTime, talking to my friends. Social media saved our friendships! The medical summer school was virtual and cut to three days. I could not get any work experience and I've lost count of how many jobs I've applied for. I was going to start driving lessons when I turned 17 but that couldn't happen, and I don't know when I'll get to it.

I did well in my GCSEs, but my inner feeling was that it wasn't my best work. I'd been stripped of my chance to prove myself.

This has changed me. I know now that mental health is actually real! I've seen friends come back who are smoking and doing drugs when they never did before. Now we're in a second lockdown, you don't know what will be cancelled next. As a young person, you start thinking, 'What about us?' Does the Government even care? That hope and positivity I had in March? It's not back. I'm still trying to find that motivation."



PAUL GROVER; CLARA MOLDEN; JAY WILLIAMS; GETTY IMAGES

▲ Success Imafidon has missed out on medical school work placements

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'Volunteering at a food bank stopped me feeling bored'

Ben Osmond, 14, Weston-super-Mare



"Learning at home, finding the motivation for school work was 100 per cent harder than in class with a teacher. During lockdown, I worried a bit about falling behind but now we're back in lessons, I'm really feeling aware of how much I missed.

Computer games helped a lot by distracting me and giving me goals to achieve. My sleeping patterns definitely changed. I'd usually go to bed at midnight and wake up at 11am.

I missed playing rugby – the excitement of the game, and of winning. Volunteering for a food bank for my Duke of Edinburgh award turned out to be a good distraction. It gave me something to work towards and stopped me being bored. We had a

▲ Ben Osmond feels he missed a lot of work in lockdown

donation box outside our home and once a week, my mum and I would also pick up donations from people's houses too. The amount people gave was staggering – we'd get about eight to 15 crates of food each week to take to the food bank. Doing something to help made me feel a lot more positive.

I'm not scared of Covid-19. I expect I'll probably get it, but I feel like the media has been exaggerating in terms of its effect on most people. At school, the teachers try to enforce restrictions and we kind of try to ignore them. I'm in Year 10 now and the Year 11s all seem pretty confused about what exams they are taking and how it's all going to work – so we'll probably all be just as confused next year, when it's our turn."

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BE A ROLE MODEL

"The way we behave is far more influential than anything we can say or do," says Julia Samuel. "If we're highly anxious, internet crazy with poor impulse control, then we're not showing resilience. If we're finding ways to carry on, work, exercise, have fun – even if it's just watching a film or dancing in the kitchen – connecting with friends and family, they see it's possible."

Grew agrees. "We've all been under stress – our jobs, our marriages, our finances," she says, "and stress levels at home are contagious. Teenagers absorb it." Keeping a daily structure – for us and our teens – is so important. "Ruminating, staying on tech late at night, erratic sleep has such an impact on mood, anxiety and depression," says Grew. Instead of nagging, model good habits and share the research into why it matters. "Send a podcast, forward an article, share a book," says Grew, who recommends showing teenagers Matthew Walker's *Why We Sleep* (Allen Lane).

PROTECT THEM FROM ONLINE HARM

If teenagers are using social media to talk to their friends and to play games with them, Samuel advises no limits. (Remember teenage brains are hard-wired to be sociable, and this is often important for the success of their future relationships.) But if they are whiling away the hours on Instagram looking at better lives, better bodies, better everything, then a frank talk could help.

Ask your teen if there are accounts that leave them feeling worse and more anxious? Would cleaning up their feeds improve their mood?

Grew warns parents to be vigilant that their teenagers haven't turned to



▲ Be vigilant and keep talking to your teens about their online lives



▲ Show them the way: the way we behave matters more than what we say or do

excessively risky online behaviour – watch for problem areas like gambling and grooming.

"The pushing of boundaries is a vital part of teenage behaviour and, unfortunately, online activity is one of the only means to do this at present," she says.

TALK THINGS OVER

"When it comes to what they've lost, open and honest communication is so important," says Samuel. Walking and talking is more effective than a sit down chat so taking a walk together is a good starting point.

"You can open by talking about your own disappointments, how the latest restrictions have impacted you, while also showing that it hasn't broken you," says Samuel. "When your teen talks to you, acknowledge their losses, allow them to feel the pain, fury and frustration." Then, build hope. "They need realistic hope, so talk about what's achievable," says Samuel. "A plan for Christmas, treats, Christmas presents, physical challenges.

"When we feel low, we shrink, so how can we feel strong? Try to build some things you can do. A winter wild swim? A cycling challenge?"

RESPECT THEIR AUTONOMY

"Let your teen feel heard and validated," says Grew. "Then steer the conversation to choices in this current situation – Easter holidays, or placements or part-time jobs, future parties.

"We can't plan with certainty – but in a way, that's life, so try and help them become flexible thinkers, with Plan A, Plan B, Plan C. Young people might find it hard to picture the future – that's the stuck feeling – so help them picture many futures."

RELAX ABOUT GRADES

"Many teens will be anxious about what they can achieve at school after so much missed learning," says Grew. "Ask them about their expectations and talk about yours. If you realign goals to be more realistic, show that slipping a grade isn't the end of the world, you can reduce the fear of it. Then, there's more room for the positive, motivating chemicals again." If your teen isn't in a critical academic year, Samuel suggests: "If their trust in the system, school and authority is damaged, discuss their favourite subjects, and ask them to work hard in those. Bother less about the rest."

For some teens, real positives have emerged from this horrible year, says Jenny Langley, a mental health trainer with the Charlie Waller Trust. Some young people have reported that the closure of schools, cancelled exams, extra sleep in the morning (which is far more in tune to teenagers' natural rhythm) and escape from peer pressure have provided a welcome break.

For Orla, it's true that there have been good things. One is her jewellery business, which she launched on depop.com in lockdown. With time on her hands, she ordered a jewellery making kit, sourced trinkets from abroad, then made earrings and necklaces, uploading pictures on to her page.

Fantastically, the orders came – at its height, she was making more than £100 a week. "I found out how to grow a business and provide customer service," she says. "It made enough to buy a new phone – and showed me school isn't the only way to learn." Any individual passion project can be invaluable, says Samuel. "My granddaughter has bought a sewing machine and made some fantastic shorts. Whether it's writing songs, blogging, vlogging, finding a way to create in a time like this is great for efficacy, pride and resilience."

Orla also benefited from time to herself. "Being forced not to socialise, to stop comparing myself has probably made me more self-confident," she says. "With all the pressure gone, you get to know yourself better. You can dye your hair, cut it yourself, wear what you want, without fitting in."

If she can take what she's learnt – that school isn't everything, that she doesn't have to "fit in" and that change happens all through life but life goes on, then perhaps there'll be some positives when this is over. And it will be over – that's the key message to give our teens. "In March when the first lockdown happened, we were galvanised but, now that Blitz mode is depleted, there's a feeling it'll never be different," says Samuel. "That's always how it feels in the thick of it. It's darkest before dawn. You have to ignite hope."

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► Stan Price (l) and her brother Eli have both endured lockdown anxiety

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▲Teens have been stuck indoors for most of 2020