Helping your Teen through COVID-19

Morgan Richardson, LPC began working with the Laureate Eating Disorders Program in 2012 as a psychiatric technician, which sparked her passion for working in this field. She currently serves as the outpatient therapist for the eating disorders program and also works with residents of Magnolia House, Laureate’s independent living home for women in recovery from eating disorders. She also facilitates groups and provides meal support for the inpatient program and occasionally provides supplemental therapy for inpatients that have a history of trauma. Morgan received her Bachelor of Science degree in psychology from Oklahoma Christian University and her Master of Science degree in community counseling from Oklahoma State University. She is trained in EMDR therapy, which she utilizes to help clients process and find relief from past traumas. Morgan has a passion for empowering individuals and their families in the process of finding healing, strength and purpose in their unique experiences. She pulls from internal family systems, dialectical behavior therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy in her practice.

The spread of COVID-19, media messages and social distancing can have a significant toll on anyone and teens are no exception. Missing out on major life events like graduation or prom, being isolated from friends, which are a crucial component of adolescent life, and fears of the unknown amplify already intense emotions fueled by hormones and adolescent brain chemistry. It is understandable why this is a population in need of additional support during this crisis. Here are four ways to help support and create feelings of safety for the teen in your life:

1. **Validate their feelings.**
   It is completely normal to have fears, worries, frustration and confusion during this time. Having an adult validate that what they feel is okay and normal can gives teens a sense of being seen and understood, which helps them feel safe. Validating their feelings also gives them permission to continue to talk about how they feel rather than “stuffing it down,” which increases anxiety. Although they may be well meaning, comments meant to give perspective such as “In a few years it won’t matter than you missed out on…” only minimize the teen’s current experience and are best to avoid.

2. **Keep a routine.**
   With schools transitioning to online platforms and spring breaks being extended, it is a time where everyone has to be a little more flexible. With that being said, it is important to keep a loose routine to help provide structure. Structure and routine help make a teen’s world more predictable, which in turn makes their world feel safer. I recommend the following components of a loose routine:
   - Wake up time
   - Personal hygiene and getting dressed for the day first thing in the morning
   - Having relatively set meal times
   - Having a time frame for going to bed
3. Foster their creative side.
Creative outlets can be beneficial for many different reasons, including as a way for teens to express their feelings when they don’t know the words. Creative outlets can also serve as a distraction, can result in increased brain activity, and can provide a sense of purpose. One way to foster creativity is by asking “what is something you have always wanted to do but haven’t had the time?” It can be really fun seeing what answers they come up with. A few responses I have heard so far in sessions include planting a garden, starting a pen pal, and painting a wall in their room.

4. Take care of yourself.
Before an airplane ascends the flight attendant will inform passengers on how to respond if there is a loss of cabin pressure. In this speech the attendant will note “if you are traveling with a child, or someone needing assistance, secure your mask first, then assist the other person.” What the flight attendant knows is that you cannot as effectively help someone else, unless you have taken care of yourself first. Taking care of yourself through good self-care practices and attending to your own emotional needs not only helps your own wellbeing, but also models healthy coping to the teens in your life.