



# Teenage Emotional Rollercoaster: Coping with Dysregulation

With Dr Russell Woodhead, Thriving Teen Psychology

The teenage years can be an emotional rollercoaster, but it's important to distinguish between normal teen emotions and emotional dysregulation. Emotional dysregulation is when a teenager experiences emotions too intensely, for too long, or reacts in extreme ways.

## Explaining the Teen Brain

During adolescence, the emotional part of the brain develops quickly, but the thinking and impulse controls don't fully develop until around age 25. This creates a gap where emotions can overpower reasoning which can lead to impulsive behaviour.

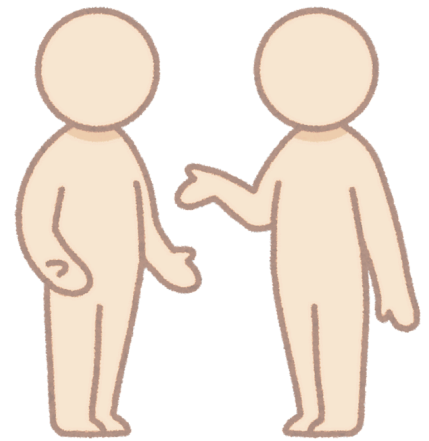
## Emotional Regulation in Teens:

- Teens experience intense arousing emotions due to rapid brain development.
- This can lead to emotional overwhelm, riskier actions and impulsive decisions.
- Teens need these powerful emotions to explore, take risks, and develop independence.
- Emotional dysregulation occurs when teens can't bring themselves back to a balanced state after being overwhelmed.



## Triggers

- **Social Stress:** Teens are highly sensitive to social comparisons and peer dynamics which can overwhelm them.
- **Academic Pressure:** High academic expectations can contribute to stress.
- **Hormones:** Mood swings and persistent sadness may indicate hormonal imbalances.
- **Neurodivergence:** Autistic and ADHD teens may find emotional regulation more challenging.
- **Trauma:** Early trauma can lead to heightened or subdued emotional expression.



### Acting out with Parents:

Teens often act out with parents because they feel safe to express their frustrations. It's a sign of trust, not disrespect. Try not to take it personally.



## Getting Help

**Consistent Issues:** Persistent emotional difficulties across various settings may indicate deeper issues beyond typical adolescence.

**Safety Concerns:** Immediate intervention is needed if emotional issues are overwhelming for you, or there's a risk of self-harm or risky behaviour at home.

**Teen's Perception:** Support teens who recognise their struggles and are open to help.

**Finding Help:** Choose a BACP or HCPC registered professional who is a good fit for the teen and whom they are comfortable with.

**Documenting Issues:** Maintain a diary of emotional incidents to identify patterns and assist healthcare professionals, noting any potential hormonal influences, and new behaviours such as shutting down or shaking uncontrollably.

## Parent Tips for dealing with a Dysregulated Teen



**Understand Emotional Outbursts:** Recognise that strong emotions and conflicts are part of healthy adolescent development that help teens learn about themselves and test boundaries as they move towards independence.



**Stay Calm and Regulated:** Remain calm and in control during your teen's emotional outbursts. Your calm presence helps them feel secure and supported. If managing this is challenging, seek support or have a backup plan.



**Avoid Manipulation Assumptions:** Approach emotional dysregulation with empathy rather than assuming manipulation. Teens often struggle to manage their emotions rather than consciously trying to provoke a response.



**Plan and Prepare:** Discuss with your teen, when they are calm, and develop a specific, clear plan for handling emotional outbursts, including relaxation and distraction techniques. Create a safety plan for high-stress situations.



**Signal Safety and Co-Regulate:** Use gentle touch, soft expressions, and a warm tone to convey safety. Consistently help your teen calm down, teaching them to manage their emotions over time. Approach them afterward with warmth and curiosity to avoid reinforcing negative beliefs.



**Manage Stress and Promote Healthy Outlets:** Teach your teen about the stress bucket model. Help them identify and address major stress sources to prevent emotional overflow. Encourage activities that relieve stress, such as exercise or hobbies.



**Healthy Coping Mechanisms:** Support your teen in developing and using healthy coping mechanisms like exercise, relaxation techniques or talking to friends to 'drain' the stress bucket.



**Balance Control and Autonomy:** While protecting your teen from risks is natural, allow them some autonomy to support their growth. Guide them and help them build skills to regulate their emotions and make sound decisions.



**Consider Neurodiversity:** Be aware that autistic and ADHD teens may face additional challenges with emotional regulation. Approach these challenges with patience and support their individual needs while acknowledging normal adolescent development.



**Emotional Dysregulation & School** Teens often hide their struggles at school, with much distress occurring at home. Developing a collaborative plan with the young person and a trusted school contact can provide crucial support and reassurance, ensuring they have a network of help both at home and at school for moments of distress.

## “ Conclusion

Riding the emotional rollercoaster of adolescence can be challenging, but with the right support, teens can thrive. As Dr. Russell Woodhead from Thriving Teen Psychology highlights, understanding emotional dysregulation can make a big difference. With the right support, teens can build resilience and develop healthier ways to manage their emotions. ”

There are many sessions on the [Let's all Talk Mental Health Hub](#) for you to view on emotional regulation and related issues, including the talk linked below.



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## Further Resources

Youngminds: [Stress Bucket Activity](#)

Dan Siegel - [A Hand Model of the Brain](#)

Dan Siegel - [Brainstorm: the power and purpose of the teenage brain](#)