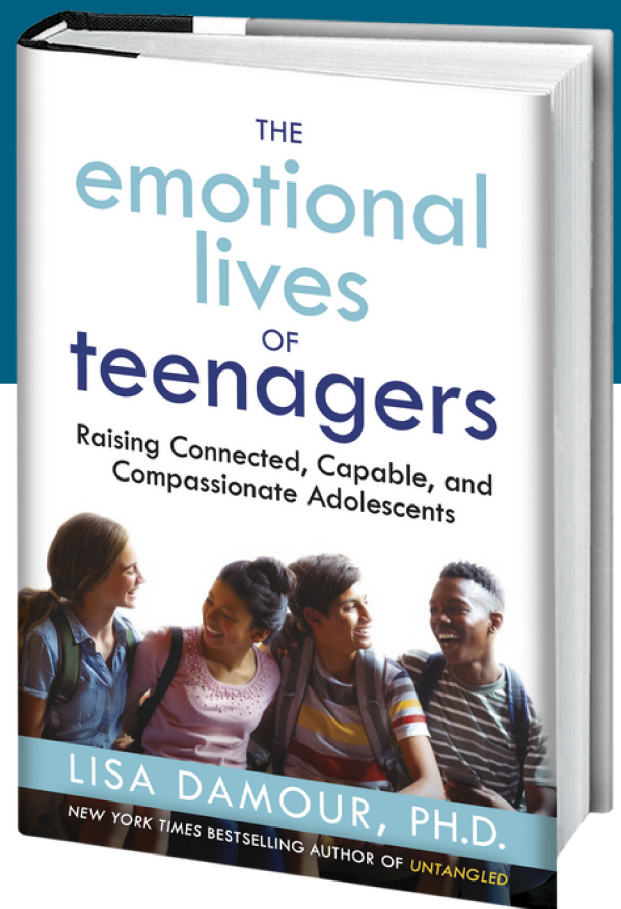


the emotional lives of teenagers

discussion
guide for
educators

Lisa Damour, PhD



Untangling family life.



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INTRODUCTION

- How has your school responded to the crisis in adolescent mental health? Have you added programs or lessons? Have you made changes to the staffing, personnel, or your professional development programming to address the shifting landscape of mental health concerns?
- Students and their parents can, at times, operate with the unhelpful assumption that being mentally healthy means feeling good. As educators know, distress is an unavoidable aspect of life, especially during the teenage years. How has, or might, your school help students and their parents come to understand that negative emotions are:
 - an expectable part of healthy development and
 - very rarely a sign of a significant mental health concern?



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CHAPTER ONE

ADOLESCENT EMOTION 101: GETTING PAST THREE BIG MYTHS

- What programming, if any, does your school provide to teach students about emotions and how they operate?
- How, if at all, does your school talk with students about risk-taking behavior? How might the information in this chapter on hot and cold reasoning inform or change the programming provided to adolescents on decision-making in risky situations?
- What steps, if any, does your school take when potentially upsetting content is assigned in class? Have you or your colleagues heard from students or parents that assigned content is unduly distressing? If so, how has that feedback typically been addressed?
- Chapter One offers three criteria that can be used to evaluate a teen's overall mental health:
 - having emotions (even intense, negative ones) that tend to fit and be proportional to the circumstances
 - turning to harmless strategies to gain emotional relief
 - employing defense mechanisms that ease psychological pain without distorting reality
- Who in your school community would benefit from becoming more familiar with these criteria? Students, faculty/staff, parents, or all of the above? What steps could be taken to make that happen?



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CHAPTER TWO GENDER AND EMOTION

- How well do the broad patterns of gendered behavior around emotion fit with what you observe at your school? When upset, are the girls inclined to talk about what's wrong; are the boys more likely to seek out a distraction? Are girls reluctant to express anger and boys reluctant to be vulnerable? Who breaks from these patterns, and how do school adults and peers respond?
- How does the adultification of Black teens play out in your school environment? Are your Black students more likely to be perceived as dangerous, hostile, or sexual than their white peers? What steps can you take as school community to address the harmful forms of implicit bias faced by your Black students?
- In which grade(s) does sexual harassment begin at your school? How do adults become aware of it and how do they typically handle it? If we consider the faltering self-esteem of middle-grade boys to be (partial) explanation for the onset of harassing behaviors, what novel interventions might adults consider implementing?
- How does your school work to protect the emotional health of students who do not fit the traditional gender binary? How does your school respond when students who express a non-traditional gender identity at school do not want their parents to know?



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CHAPTER THREE

SEISMIC SHIFT: HOW ADOLESCENCE PUTS A NEW SPIN ON EVERYDAY LIFE

- What programming does your school provide to guide students' use of social media and digital technology? How is this programming received by your students? What changes or improvements would you make based on the content covered in this chapter?
- How do the adults in your school tend to respond when students criticize school rules, policies, or procedures? Does the response from adults differ based on the race, ethnicity, or gender identity of the student(s) bringing the complaint?
- What programming, if any, does your school provide to guide students as they enter the romantic world? How does your school address topics related to sexual health (including pornography)? Does your school educate students about what makes for healthy or unhealthy relationships, whether those relationships are platonic or not?
- How might the "school-as-mandatory-buffet" metaphor influence how you talk with students about the aspects of school they dislike? Teachers must, at times, serve up content that students would not otherwise choose to consume. At these times, what can teachers do or say to best support their students? What are the limits of the "school-as-mandatory-buffet" metaphor?



CHAPTER FOUR

MANAGING EMOTIONS, PART ONE: HELPING TEENS EXPRESS THEIR FEELINGS

- What is your initial reaction to the framework presented at the start of this chapter: That emotion regulation involves two complimentary processes – finding ways to express feelings and, when needed, finding ways to bring them under control?
- How do adults in your school tend to respond when students express their feelings verbally? Are the adults able to listen intently and offer empathy, or are they quick to suggest solutions? What barriers might keep a school adult from being able to engage meaningfully when a student articulates a painful emotion, and how might those barriers be addressed?
- What opportunities does, or might, your school provide to help teens express emotions non-verbally, such as making music, engaging in physical activity, or channeling feelings into creative activities?
- What unhealthy strategies for emotional expression have you seen students employ? What have you found to be the most effective ways to respond when students express emotions in ways that are harmful to themselves or others?



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CHAPTER FIVE

MANAGING EMOTIONS, PART TWO: HELPING TEENS REGAIN EMOTIONAL CONTROL

- We often assume best to help teens manage painful feelings by expressing them. This chapter, however, contends that teenagers are often helped by strategies—such as distraction, seeking comfort, controlled breathing, and changing thinking or perspective—designed to bring painful feelings under control? What is your reaction to this approach? When might it feel most helpful in a school context? When might it be problematic?
- Adequate sleep is critical for healthy emotional regulation, but when it comes to teens and sleep, schools tend to be both “arsonists” and “firefighters.” Heavy academic demands can make it hard for adolescents to get enough sleep, yet caring schools often urge their students to try to sleep more. How does your school address this tension? What steps has your school taken, or might it take, to help students get more sleep?
- Being around teenagers can stir up intense feelings in adults. What aspects of educating teens are most challenging for you, and how have you managed your emotional response? Has your work as an educator changed your perspective on events from your own teen years? If so, how?
- What unhealthy strategies have you seen students employ to regain emotional control? What have you found to be the most effective ways to respond when students control emotions in unhealthy ways?



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CONCLUSION

- Has reading [The Emotional Lives of Teenagers](#) changed how you regard and respond to your students' emotions? If so, how?
- What questions do you still have about the emotional lives of teenagers, or about adolescent psychological development in general?

