

# Teenagers and Back-to-School Stress

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Heading back to school is always a big event (even if teenagers are too cool to admit it). This fall the kids are joined by many parents heading back to the office, making for big changes for families. And for teenagers, it will mean a return to school-related activities and expectations suspended during the pandemic.

Some will be exhilarated by the return to something like normalcy; many will have challenges.

## Returning to the old norms

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First, we're going to see a lot of kids complaining about fatigue. It will take more energy to do things that used to be automatic, notes David Anderson, PhD, a clinical psychologist and Director of School and Community Programs at the Child Mind Institute. "We are hearing from every corner of humanity that a return to those old routines and norms feels so much more tiring than it used to. People are saying, 'I can't imagine how I took a train to commute every day to work.'" We can expect teens to be having a similar reaction to the prospect of a full day of in-person classes.

While remote learning had many drawbacks, it was also more comfortable in ways some teens are loathe to give up as they return to school. “We’ve heard from teenagers a lot that they’ve enjoyed being able to wake up in their pajamas, roll out of bed and jump into their classes, and that’s been to some degree easier,” Dr. Anderson adds.

## **Social stress**

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One of the biggest sources of stress in the fall will be all that personal interaction, both with teachers and with other students. Kids are out of practice, and there’s going to be some discomfort involved with having to perform socially, even for those who haven’t been socially anxious in the past. They’ll have to get used to the old social expectations again — spontaneous hallway chats, answering people’s questions, having conversations they don’t really want to be having.

Teenagers who were already experiencing social anxiety may find themselves more nervous than ever, Dr. Anderson says — back in school, there’ll be no equivalent of turning your camera or your microphone off.

Parents and teachers will want to validate the challenges — you may be wishing you could turn your mic off, too — but express confidence that things will get easier. “We’re trying to steel everybody and build up their courage to get back into those situations, and to understand that there are going to be advantages and disadvantages to this return or we’re all going to kind of ride it out together,” notes Dr. Anderson.

## **Reconnecting**

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Another challenge is that some students have become disconnected from school — it just didn’t seem that real — during periods of distanced learning, and they’re now questioning the whole system. Expected to return full-time, adds Dr. Anderson, “more and more are asking ‘What’s the meaning of school, and why am I being sent there, if so much of this could be delivered in a different way?’ ”

Reconnecting to being a part of a school community will take time and work. Getting involved in activities that kids find rewarding, many of which have been suspended, should help, our experts suggest.

## **The advantages of in-person**

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Students who aren’t keen on going back to school full-time may have lost touch with what they are missing, Dr. Anderson notes. Leaving home and traveling to a school building full of teachers and other students may allow them to be present in the experience in a more focused way. “For teenagers, it could actually be refreshing to be back in class without

instant text messages popping up from your friends, notifications, a reminder from your mom that when you get done with class you've got to do this other thing," he suggests. "Those boundaries make a difference."

And it may be refreshing to not be staring at your own image on Zoom, he adds. "As convenient as it is to roll out of bed and go into class, it may be helpful, at a self-conscious stage of development, not to have to see yourself on a screen and be checking out your appearance eight hours a day and worrying about whether your mic is on."

And, of course, being in-person means being with friends. "At the same time, what we've seen is teenagers who tend to underestimate just how much of a mood boost it is to see their peers again, to be able to hang out in the hallway, to be able to have lunch with people again."

## **Asking for help**

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One thing that's been a problem during the pandemic has been that it made it harder for kids to advocate for themselves and get support when they need it. Whether or not they have anxiety, most teens aren't keen on setting up a Zoom meeting to discuss a problem, Dr. Anderson notes. "It's much easier to ask for help in person after class or in a casual meeting in the hall.

And students with learning challenges reported feeling shame and stigma because they had to formally ask for help, instead of being able to avail themselves of regular after-school support. "So, I think for a lot of kids who might struggle with learning, there's going to be great comfort in being back in a school environment where some of these things are just available to you rather than feeling like you have to consistently advocate or ask for them."

## **Kids with ADHD**

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For kids with ADHD there have been advantages and disadvantages to remote learning. For those who struggle to stay organized, working from home simplified things. Not being distracted by friends when they're supposed to be writing down assignments and not having to move from class to class made it easier to focus and keep track of their things.

"With good coaching at home, some have been able to really organize their workspace to make it free of distraction and to make it so that during the course of the school day, they actually have all of their materials easily accessible; they actually can be focused," observes Dr. Anderson. For kids who saw the benefit of learning in a more organized way at home, they may be more inclined to adopt some similar strategies to keep them organized at school, too.

Another remote learning advantage for those on ADHD medication was being able to start homework immediately after class, which means they're still getting the benefit of their medicine, rather than having the medicine wearing off by the time they arrive home and settle in to try to do their homework.

On the other hand, for many teenagers with ADHD, "being in class helps them focus because it's more engaging and stimulating, and there's discussions to be had, and experiential learning that can happen," says Dr. Anderson. "And to be sure, some have felt bored and found it more difficult to engage in virtual education." For them, the return to school should help them re-engage.

## **Kids with depression**

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One category of teenagers who should especially benefit from the return to in-person schooling are those who struggle with depression.

Depressed kids often don't feel activity can be rewarding, so they lack motivation to do things, even engage with their friends. "The wonderful thing about school is that, for teenagers who might be struggling with depression, the decision to get out of bed and leave the house isn't left to you," says Dr. Anderson. "And once in school, seeing your buddies can actually cause somewhat of a mood boost."

In fact, one of the frontline treatments for teenagers struggling with depression is what is called "behavioral activation," which means scheduling potentially mood-boosting activities even if they don't feel all that motivated to do them. The return of activities cancelled during the pandemic —afterschool clubs, school plays, sports, music classes — should help ensure that teenagers who are struggling with depression have activities that they might enjoy during the day.

## **Healing for the whole school community**

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For those who are most concerned about whether teenagers have fallen behind in learning, Dr. Anderson argues that it's important to think about learning and development of the whole child.

"When we say, 'we've fallen behind,' it's true that we may have not delivered on time certain academic concepts that we believe to be foundational for the education of our youth. But if we consider the entire scope of development for youth, it's that we're trying to help kids get the knowledge they need to be successful later in life, alongside the ability to work with their peers, the ability to feel like they can care for themselves and bring their best self to the work that they're doing."

Even if kids are starting behind where they'd usually be at the beginning of this year, their classmates will all be in the same boat. Parents can be ready to advocate for extra support and structure if they notice their child is struggling when school starts again, and at the same time they can reinforce the importance of resilience, which is a major lesson we all learned from the past year.

### School, Teenagers



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