



## 13. Enhancing Adolescents' Emotion Regulation Strategies

Many teens are drawn to digital media because it is an easy, reliable way to change how they feel (by activating the reward circuitry of the brain)—or, what is referred to as *regulating their emotions*. Scrolling on social media, gaming, or using pornography can feel good, while simultaneously providing an escape from feeling bad. In this way, some teens may begin to rely on digital media as their primary way of managing their emotions, which can be problematic. In fact, several researchers have found that difficulties with regulating emotions predict a variety of maladaptive and addictive behaviors.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>

Therefore, a protective factor against digital media addiction is to build strong emotion regulation skills. Let's talk about what that skill set could look like.

Emotion regulation is a person's ability to monitor, assess, and

modify their emotional experiences.<sup>5</sup> Ask yourself, what do you do to make yourself feel better when you are experiencing an undesirable emotion? Where did you learn how to do that?

There are adaptive or positive ways to engage in emotion regulation (e.g., spiritual practices, social support, relaxation techniques) and maladaptive ways to regulate emotions (e.g., substance use, overuse of digital media, overeating, compulsive shopping). The goal is to help teens learn to change how they feel in adaptive, positive ways that align with their goals and values.

Typically, individuals learn what emotions are and the fact that they can be regulated in the first few years of life, but emotion regulation skills can be strengthened and developed across the lifespan. To aid in the development of strong emotion regulation skills, it is helpful to teach adolescents how to:

- **Identify their emotions** (what am I feeling and where am I feeling it?)
- **Label their emotions** (what word best describes what I am feeling?)
- **Express their emotions appropriately** (how do I best share how I am feeling?)
- **Modify their emotions effectively** (how do I change how I am feeling?)
- **Tolerate distress** (I can handle more discomfort and distress than I think I can)
- **Self-soothe** (I can effectively make myself feel better)

The ability for a teenager to regulate their emotions takes both education and practice. There are several ways in which we can help our teens learn emotion regulation skills. Let's review five of them below:

## 1 Situation Selection

First, we can think big picture and help our teens put themselves in situations that are likely to lead to desired emotions and less likely to lead to undesirable emotions (e.g., help them manage their environment and organize their life in such a way as to increase the probability of positive emotions).<sup>5,6</sup> This means talking to our teens about how they spend their time and who they spend it with—what people, places, things, and activities are most likely to lead to desirable emotional experiences?

## 2 Situation Modification

Even with the best life plans, we are all going to be in situations that are difficult and elicit negative emotions. So, we can help our teens learn how to change their environment or change their current situation to lead to better emotional experiences (i.e., modify their current situation to change its effect on their emotional experiences).<sup>5,6</sup> This may mean helping our teens learn when to leave a situation or how to effectively change their environment when it is generating undesirable emotions.

## 3 Attentional Deployment

Of course, there will be times when it is not within our teen's control to change a situation or environment. In these cases, we can help our teens learn to change what they attend to (or focus on) in order to regulate their emotions (i.e., distract themselves or switch their attentional focus onto something that aligns with more positive emotions).<sup>5,6</sup> This may mean helping our teens recognize that if they can't leave or change a situation, they can determine what they are going to pay attention to that could lead to more desirable emotions.

## 4 Cognitive Change

Although we don't always have control over our environment, we do have control over our thoughts. We can help our teens learn how to think about their thinking—to take the time to ask, what are they saying to themselves? How are they interpreting a situation? What is their internal dialogue? Oftentimes, our thoughts fuel our emotions—so if we want to change our emotions, we can consider how to change our thoughts.<sup>5,6</sup> For example, our teens can learn to ask themselves, how are they interpreting a situation or event? Could it be interpreted differently? By adjusting their interpretation of a situation or changing their thoughts, it can have a meaningful impact on their emotional experiences.

Imagine if a teenager is faced with a challenge, such as a difficult math test, and they have the thoughts: "I can't do this! It's too hard and I can't do it! I am a failure!"—what emotional experience might those thoughts produce? If the teenager could learn to think about their thinking and adjust their thoughts, it can be a powerful tool. Imagine the same teenager faced with the difficult math test. If she can change her thoughts to, "This is really challenging for me, and I might not be able to do it successfully. But even if I don't, I will be OK."—what emotional experiences might those thoughts produce? Changing our thoughts is not lying to ourselves or just "thinking positively"—instead, it is assessing our thoughts and making rational modifications (all of us can handle failing a math test. It might not feel good at the time, but we will be OK. Everyone has imperfections and can learn from them).

## 5 Response Modulation

The last potential means of emotion regulation occurs when a teen is already having a strong undesirable emotion and helping them learn how to change it in the moment. This occurs by employing positive, adaptive, self-soothing strategies that can effectively alter their mood (e.g., deep breathing, listening to music, prayer, walking outside, journaling, talking to a friend, meditation, relaxation techniques, positive self-statements, reading a book, stretching or moving, creating a gratitude list).<sup>5,6</sup> It is important to educate our teenagers about the variety of self-soothing strategies that exist and help them practice to develop self-efficacy. If they feel capable of employing the strategy, they are much more likely to use it in an emotionally-charged situation.

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## References

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