

## The Teen Brain and What to Do About It -Recovery for teens

COSA Convention Presentation, May 2022, Martha Jean and Julana S.

According to the article “Teen Social and Emotional Development” at [udel.edu](http://udel.edu) there are five major emotional and social milestones during adolescence: Establishing an identity, establishing autonomy, establishing intimacy, becoming comfortable with one’s sexuality, and achievement. Participating in their own recovery group can provide teens with enormous guidance, tools, and opportunities to practice healthy life behaviors and achieve these goals.

Teens today deal with issues we don’t as adults and that we didn’t when we were teens. Just as we feel the compassion and understanding of being with others who have had similar experiences when we attend our own meetings, teens also need to feel that. And it’s something we as adults sometimes can’t give them. The equal-power dynamic of peer-to-peer relationships is not found in a parent or therapist to child relationship.

Like us adults, teens want to know they’re not alone in their experiences and feelings. They want to know they are OK, that they’re going to be OK. Being with peers who have had similar experiences can provide enormous relief for those feelings. According to [insighttreatment.com](http://insighttreatment.com), when they experience not being alone it makes it “more likely that they are willing to open up and discuss what is happening to them, giving them a better chance at recovery”

Teens are in the prime of their life-defining years. Teens are in the midst of forming and practicing what their future social groups will look like. People want to feel like they fit in, like they belong, but this is especially acute in the teen years when they are breaking away from the family structure and developing their own identity.

Peers are a very strong influence on teens and a teen will often adopt the behaviors and mannerisms of their peer group. This includes laying the groundwork for how they’ll live their lives. Will they develop support systems or isolate, reach out for help or stuff their feelings?

Early in my own recovery, my SA husband and I were separated but we were “working” on our relationship and our own recovery. During that time, he took our then 9-year-old and two younger siblings to a fair ground where they met a “lady friend” of his. Nothing blatant happened between the adults but my daughter knew what was going on. But he told her not to say anything to me. She kept the secret like her father told her to and this little nine-year-old girl carried the guilt and shame of her father for another eight years before her maturity and my own recovery reached a point she felt she could tell me the secret she’d been carrying so very long. I believe having her own support system, apart from me, would have allowed her to release that guilt and shame, whether she told me about it or not.

What healthy sexuality is and what it’s not is a topic with tremendous pull in different directions. From what parents teach intentionally and directly without shame to what they teach without knowing it, from what social and commercial media tells them to what their friends are telling them, teens are bombarded with confusing messages about what their own sexuality is and what it “should” be.

Being in their own recovery group provides a structure for teens, within the guidance of the 12 steps and with the experience, strength, and hope of more experienced members (the facilitators) to intentionally teach each other how to grow their healthy behaviors. Meetings provide a sounding board where teens can hear a range of perspectives and tools to help deal with situations and provides a safe place to practice these tools and behaviors. Being with others in a similar struggle and those who have grown beyond it provides members with the power to move forward with their own struggles and situations.

According to the article “What Teens Gain When They Contribute To Their Social Group” at [greatergood.berkeley.edu](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu), the “social brain”—the intricate network of areas in the brain that activate in social interactions—matures rapidly during the adolescent years. This development increases young people’s ability to understand the feelings and perspectives of other people and allows them to see themselves through the eyes of others, allowing them to get out of their heads and expose blind spots to their own behaviors and worth.

Teens want to belong to something bigger than themselves. Teens want to shape their world, want to be a positive influence. According to [greatergood.berkeley.edu](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu), “adolescence is a sweet spot for contributing to others. Neuroimaging studies show that the neural networks that change most significantly during adolescence are the same networks activated by contributing to others. Also, the part of the adolescent brain that is involved in risk taking is part of the reward system. This reward systems can be tapped in to for positive behaviors and experiences, such as helping others, too.

Giving benefits the giver. According to the research done in the Berkely study, adults who contribute to others have improved moods, lower stress, and fewer health problems. This applied to adolescents as well. When we share our own experience, strength, and hope, we are hearing and internalizing that same message. According to “Building Teen Confidence: The Benefit of Sharing Experiences” at [yourteenmag.com](https://yourteenmag.com) In an experiment done at the University of Texas, it was shown that the act of writing about overcoming adversity for younger students had the biggest positive impact on the writer.

As adults in recovery, none of the benefits shared in today’s session are new. We have seen our own lives benefit from giving and receiving experience, strength, and hope. Just as we serve the recovery of others best by working our own recovery, teens also benefit from having the support to focus on their own recovery, too.

[https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what\\_teens\\_gain\\_when\\_they\\_contribute\\_to\\_their\\_social\\_groups](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_teens_gain_when_they_contribute_to_their_social_groups)

<https://www.udel.edu/academics/colleges/canr/cooperative-extension/fact-sheets/teen-social-and-emotional-development/>

<https://yourteenmag.com/family-life/communication/building-teen-confidence>