

Empowering Parents to Intervene: How to Address Executive Dysfunction in Adolescents

There is a rising trend of overwhelming depression and anxiety seen in teens who experience suicidal ideation. This may cause a form of paralysis that prevents them from functioning, or in other words a behavior called Executive Dysfunction. A common misconception is that teens are being dramatic and lazy, when it could be a symptom of a deeper emotional problem. Here's a breakdown of what this can look like and how parents and caregivers can provide support.

Rising Anxiety & Depression

Youth, especially teens are experiencing heightened levels of anxiety and depression, which can be so overwhelming that it impairs their ability to function effectively in their daily lives. This often manifests as Executive Dysfunction, like an inability to attend school regularly and self isolating.

Paralysis Due to Overwhelm

Teens are becoming so inundated with these feelings and behaviors they become paralyzed and unable to actively engage in their lives. It is a freeze response that should be differentiated from 'normal' teenage rebellion.

Isolation as a Coping Mechanism

When overwhelmed, children may retreat into isolation as a way to self-soothe and cope with their emotions. This isolation can exacerbate feelings of fragility and intensify the dysfunction they're experiencing.

Overwhelm for Parents

Parents and caregivers may find it challenging to navigate their child's intense protests against certain activities or responsibilities. This intensity can be unsettling and overwhelming for parents, leading them to back off which inadvertently reinforces the dysfunction.

Vicious Cycle

The cycle of dysfunction is perpetuated as parents become unsure of how to respond to their teen's behavior. This uncertainty reinforces the child's fragility and exacerbates the underlying issues.

How Can Parents & Caregivers Respond?

Step-Up Don't Back-Off

- Validate the emotions and address the behaviors
- Don't assume laziness is the issue
- Reassure: "We are in this together"

Teach Them Core Skills

- Understand their skill deficits
- Reward progress, Give Positive Feedback

Cooperative Communication

- Set realistic goals - break things down into manageable steps
- Negotiate - be reasonable
- Use logical consequences rather than punishments
- Encourage healthy coping mechanisms to manage anxiety
- Give your child space when needed but don't allow them to self isolate for prolonged periods

Underlying Issues

- Seek professional help if needed
- Consider seeking a diagnosis like ADD/ADHD, Anxiety, Depression; this helps the teen feel like it's not their fault and there is something they can do about it