

ADOLESCENCE

How to Help Teens Weather Their Emotional Storms

A D.I.Y. snow globe full of glitter is an apt metaphor for the emotional chaos of the adolescent brain.



By Lisa Damour

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Trying to help a deeply upset teenager — perhaps one undone by a social slight or flipping out about an upcoming test — is among the most common and stressful challenges in all of parenting. Amid all that stress, it’s easy for well-meaning adults to make missteps.

More often than not, we jump in with earnest questions or suggestions: “Any chance you did something that hurt your friend’s feelings?” or “Would it help if I quizzed you on what you’ve studied so far?” But, despite our best intentions, these efforts often seem to only agitate our teenagers further.

Even though I’ve got years of training and experience as a clinical psychologist, for a long time I more or less muddled my way through the adolescent meltdowns that inevitably arose at my practice. Lately, however, I’ve managed to improve my approach, and I owe it all to a fateful trip to Texas.

I was chatting with the counseling team at a Dallas girls’ school a few years ago when the conversation turned to how we each handle students who become unglued during the school day.

“That,” said one of the counselors in a Texas twang, “is when I get out a glitter jar.” As I tried to conceal my immediate skepticism, she went off to retrieve one. While we waited for her to return, I sat there thinking that whatever she was bringing back, I hated it already.

First, as a parent with a neatness hang-up and kids who love art projects, I have come to loathe glitter. Second, if there was any psychology behind this, it seemed bound to be a little, well, *poppy*.

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The counselor returned holding a clear jam jar. Its lid was glued on and it was filled with water plus a layer of sparkling purple glitter sitting at the bottom. “When a girl falls apart in my office, I do this,” she said, while shaking the jar fiercely, like an airport snow globe. Together we beheld the dazzling glitter storm that resulted. Then she placed the jar down on the table between us and continued, “After that I say to her, ‘Honey, this is your *brain* right now. So first ... let’s settle your glitter.’”

Mesmerized, I watched the swirling glitter slowly fall to the bottom of the jar. Finally getting over myself, I was ready to acknowledge the brilliance behind this homemade device.

Sitting right there was an elegant model of the neurology of the distressed teenager. Early in adolescence, the brain gets remodeled to become more powerful and efficient, with this upgrade retracing the order of the original *in utero* development. The primitive regions, which are just above the back of the neck and house the emotion centers, are upgraded first — starting as early as age 10. The more sophisticated regions, located behind the forehead and giving us our ability to reason and maintain perspective, are redone last and may not reach full maturity until age 25.

While this process is underway, young people are put in a rather delicate position. Though they tend to be highly rational when calm, if they become upset, their new, high-octane emotional structures can overpower their yet-to-be upgraded reasoning capacities, crashing the entire system until it has a chance to reset.

I have enthusiastically recommended glitter jars to several parents and colleagues knowing that some teenagers will instantly benefit from having a concrete model of emotional distress. That said, I have come to appreciate that a glitter jar’s main utility is in the instructions it provides to those who are caring for the overwrought: Be patient and communicate your confidence that emotions almost always rise, swirl and settle all by themselves.

Not long after I returned from Texas, I ran into a visibly upset sophomore in the lunchroom of the school where I consult each week. She looked stricken, and her eyes were red from crying.

Urgently she asked, “Are you free?”

“Yes,” I replied, turning her toward my office.

Once there, she buried her hands in her face and broke into heaving sobs. Soon, she slowed her breathing and looked at me, even as tears continued to stream down her face. In the past, I would have taken that opening to quiz her about what had gone wrong. In retrospect, I now see this as the verbal equivalent of further shaking the mental glitter jar. Instead, I asked if she wanted a glass of water, or some time alone to let her painful feelings die down. She declined both offers, so we just sat there quietly.

Not a minute had passed before she relaxed completely. Then she volunteered that she had done poorly on a test that morning and had fallen down a rabbit hole of worries about what a bad grade might mean for her future. Now, with her glitter nearly settled and her mind more clear, she regained perspective on the situation. Within moments she decided that the low grade probably wasn’t such a big deal, and if it was, she’d figure out how to make up for it in other ways.

This is not to say that letting glitter settle is the solution to all teenage problems. But I have found it to be a better first response than any other. Every time I stop myself from trying to figure out what made a teenager upset, and focus instead on her right to just *be* upset, I find that doing so either solves the problem or helps clear the path to dealing with it.

It’s critical to recognize that when we react to psychological distress as though it’s a fire that needs to be put out, we frighten our teenagers and usually make matters worse. Reacting instead with the understanding that emotions usually have their own life cycle — coming as waves that surge and fall — sends adolescents the reassuring message that they aren’t broken; in fact, they’re self-correcting.

So, when you next encounter a young person in full meltdown, take a deep breath and think to yourself (Dallas accent optional), “First ... let’s settle your glitter.”

Lisa Damour is a psychologist in Shaker Heights, Ohio, and the author of “Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions Into Adulthood” and “Under Pressure: Confronting the Epidemic of Stress and Anxiety in Girls.” @LDamour • Facebook

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