

DEAL WITH IT

DEAL WITH IT

WE'RE TEACHING THIS

So what's trending on Netflix this week? Maybe TV isn't your thing, but I'll bet you've got a time vortex. Maybe yours is a gaming system. You log on for just a few minutes and then, somehow it's midnight. Maybe you throw on headphones and just space out listening to Spotify, or maybe you stare at your phone and scroll without even really looking at what people post. We all have a favorite distraction—something we get lost in. And while there's nothing wrong with taking a break, you've probably also discovered that it's more tempting to reach for something fun when you're facing something that

isn't. We all have a tendency to avoid something difficult by doing something easy. Or we escape something painful by running toward something that feels good. Or we hide something that hurts by pretending it isn't there. But maybe you've also noticed that none of these strategies really work. In fact, sometimes our favorite escapes can leave us feeling more stuck than before. In this series we'll look at three ways we're all tempted to skip out on the real life that God has for us. As we do, you may just find God's inviting you to stop avoiding it, escaping it, or hiding it and just . . . deal with it.

THINK ABOUT THIS

By Dr. Chinwé Williams

We've all been there. We've all encountered struggles that felt bigger than us. And we all develop our own ways of managing emotional pain, shame, and regret. When faced with difficult circumstances, it's very normal to look for ways to cope.

Over the years, parents have verbalized their uncertainty regarding how best to assist their teen as they navigate the ups and downs of life. But there's no simple response. Quite frankly, as a therapist who frequently works with adolescents, I get it. Being a teen today is tough. Teens face increasing expectations: managing multiple schedules, demanding academic loads, and competitive extracurricular activities. And above all, discovering who they are and how they fit in

with their peer group and the larger world. And all of these expectations *can* and *do* cause internal pressure. Some teens are able to successfully navigate these waters. Others may flail or buckle under the pressure. It's a normal human experience to want to escape reality.

It's actually a great idea to take a break and decompress for a few hours in order to allow your brain to reboot and refocus. Attending a concert with friends, listening to music, going for a hike, and laughing at a hilarious video are examples of healthy ways to take your mind off of a stressful day. But what happens when these distractions morph into things that are not so healthy? Or are, perhaps, even destructive?

Harmless distractions often lead to prolonged engagement with those things, like video gaming, online shopping, hours on Instagram or Snapchat, and Netflix binge-watching. These escapes wouldn't be so bad if they didn't coincide with finals week. And then there are the more dangerous situations, like when a teen begins experimenting with drugs, alcohol, and sex to numb complicated feelings.

When any of these behaviors become a way to DISTRACT, NUMB, or AVOID facing hard circumstances or prevent others from seeing our real selves, it can lead to feeling stuck and disconnected, which can cause us to spiral into more destructive behavior.

What's the remedy when our teens feel stuck or disconnected? *Engagement.* As a therapist, I love introducing my teenage clients to creative strategies that will help them address the problems that seem insurmountable. Yes, that sometimes means embracing a new challenge or doing something they dislike—like confronting the real issues. **But the more we can teach our children to deal with (and not run away from) life's challenges, the better they will realize their own unique capabilities,** which fosters resilience and a sense of autonomy.

A parent's task in helping avoidant teens is further complicated by the contradictory impulses of teens. They want us around, and at the same time, want us to go far away. The research is, however, clear. Parents are powerful pillars of influence in their teens' lives!

Below are five ways that will help you recognize when your teen may be feeling stuck, as well as ways you can help them get unstuck.

1. **Watch for warning signs.** Some "stuck" teens will display difficulty concentrating and low motivation. They may be irritable, negative, easily frustrated, or prone to outbursts. Some overachieving "stuck" teens may be highly sensitive to criticism and begin to withdraw from family and friends. Since some of these signs are a part of normal adolescent development, it's important to note what appears to be a departure from your teen's typical pattern of behavior.
2. **Initiate the conversation.** Demonstrate casual interest by asking questions and reflecting on what you've heard. Teens can tell the difference between questions that show interest and ones that simply appear nosy. Be present but not intrusive. One conversation starter could be: "It's normal to feel overwhelmed. I know that you want to do well (in

school/sports/making friends), so I'm sure that you might feel some pressure at times. You're not alone. I'm here if you ever want to talk about it." Your teen may not open up initially. The key, though, is making yourself available for when they're ready.

3. **Be open.** Sharing your own struggles with distractions and avoidance may help your teen better cope with their own situations. For many parents the thought of disclosing their own teenage antics is a nightmarish proposition. However, research suggests that parents who have an open, warm, and nurturing relationship with their children can help them buffer stresses that can otherwise be destructive. Your teen may not show deep interest or ask many questions. Don't worry . . . they are listening.
4. **Stay tuned in.** As a therapist, I can't emphasize how important it is to plug in to your teen. What does that mean? Get to know their musical tastes, favorite artists, and even purchases. Know the names of their friends and their enemies. Regarding social media, I'm an advocate of intermittent parental monitoring. This one is tricky—teens also need some degree of privacy—but it's a parent's responsibility to know what's going on. The content you discover may clue you in to ways to better connect with your child, or it may alert you to signs of stress. As parents, we must plug in to this important aspect of teen social life. Don't tell my teens I said that.
5. **Seek Professional help.** Part of our job as parents is to help our children find resources to be successful. Those could include a school counselor, therapist, or trusted church leader. Remember that there are many avoidant behaviors that are simply a part of adolescence. It's helpful to consult with a professional who can assess the severity and offer assistance. One technique that I like to teach is "mindfulness"—it's ideal for decreasing distressful thoughts. The ability to disrupt a cycle of negative thinking is crucial for optimal mental health and can help teens to plug in, to get "unstuck."

Whether or not they tell you or show you, your teen values your engagement. What are some ways that you can engage with your teen this week?

Dr. Chinwé Williams is a licensed counselor in Roswell, GA. For more from Dr. Williams and other resources for parents of teenagers, visit TheParentCue.org.

TRY THIS

Whether your teenager is facing a challenge right now or whether you just know they will in the future, one thing we can all do to help our students cope with challenges is to model the way.

We can show them what it looks like to face a challenge instead of avoiding it.

Think about one area where you're tempted to avoid or escape instead of "dealing" with it. Maybe you'd rather shop online than think about work. Or maybe work is the escape for a complicated situation at home. Maybe it's easier to scroll through the news than to look at your budget.

It doesn't have to be something serious or dangerous—just one way you are personally tempted to put off dealing with real life. **This week, share that with your teenager.**

Maybe in the car you say . . .

- *Hey, you're not going to believe this, but I just deleted the Facebook app from my phone. I would catch myself scrolling every time I was mad just to avoid having a conversation.*
- *Hey, I know this probably sounds crazy to you, but I just realized I've been staying late at work because it means I won't have time to go to the gym. Today I'm setting an alarm to leave on time so I can work out.*
- *Hey, I don't know if you've noticed, but I have a bad habit of _____ to avoid dealing with _____. So I've decided to start working on that by setting up an appointment with a mentor/counselor/doctor/coach.*

It may feel a little awkward to admit feeling stuck in front of your teenager, but when you do, you're giving them the tools and the courage to move forward in whatever they're facing.
