

Why Teens Need a Break This Summer

The pandemic has been the psychological workout of their lives. The next few months can be a time of recovery.



Credit...Yifan Wu

By Lisa Damour
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In the more than two decades I've spent as a psychologist working with adolescents, I have never seen teenagers so worn down at the end of an academic year as they are right now. Whether classes have been online, in-person or hybrid, young people are dragging themselves to the finish line of a [frustrating, depressing](#) and, for some, [unbearably isolating](#) year of school.

But now, with the number of new infections headed down and vaccinations widely available to ages 12 and up, most teenagers in the United States can anticipate a truly post-Covid summer. What should they look to make of it? For me, the answer is not "recover lost ground," or even "put the past year behind them." With the stress and constant adaptation of the pandemic now largely in the past, young people can enjoy the payoff of converting that experience into increased maturity and psychological strength.

To that end, it's important to remember that building psychological muscle is a lot like building physical muscle. Any kid who has spent time in a gym knows that you gain strength when a period of exertion is followed by an interval of sufficient recovery.

For most teenagers, the pandemic has been the psychological workout of their lives. To put that workout to use, they need time for recovery so that they can enjoy [increased emotional resilience](#) by fall. For adults on board with that plan, here are a few guidelines to help.

Give teenagers room to process what they've been through.

For adolescents, as for many of us, the pandemic has been characterized by deep feelings of loss. They've missed sports seasons, holidays with grandparents, milestone birthday parties and other plans that are beyond rescheduling. Some have stepped back from friendships that won't be rekindled. Many have had to experience the deaths of people dear to them.

As adults, our loving instinct might be to steer our teenagers away from dwelling on the anguish of the pandemic and toward taking advantage of the now brightening future and expanding opportunities. But we should remember that grieving, though a painful process, ultimately helps us move forward when allowed to run its course.

Teenagers may do some of their most productive grieving in the company of their friends. Colin Mooney, 15, of Highland Heights, Ohio, recently got together with several peers whom he hadn't seen in person since their eighth grade year was derailed by lockdown in March, 2020. Sitting in a circle in one friend's backyard, they talked about what they lost, including "our field day, our graduation and a special Mass where each eighth grader passes a candle to a seventh grader to make them eighth graders." Talking through what they'd all missed offered much needed closure. "Sharing as a group," he said, "really helped ease our minds and remember that everyone was going through the same thing."

Other adolescents may mourn in a more private fashion. Arielle Green, 15, of Brooklyn, N.Y., writes poems to make sense of her feelings. Her recent poetry has centered on "how the pandemic sucks, and how things are still going on in the world that are really horrible." She said that her poems offer a way "to let it all out."

However your teenager goes about it, expect grief to be part of the summer. Give adolescents time and space to come to terms with the impact of Covid-19 on their lives so that they can, over time, savor what remains and embrace what lies ahead.

Be open to negotiating the "must dos."

As with any summer, there will be some non-negotiables when it comes to how young people spend their days. Teenagers may need to get jobs, take over chores or brush up academically. Required activities can certainly be part of a recovery-focused summer, but when possible, let teens have some say in the details.

Ava Vestergaard, a 17-year-old senior at Sunset High School in Portland, Ore., needs to earn money for college, but she's really hoping for the kind of job that will help her fill her emotional tank after a draining academic year. "When there's a job I like, I enjoy the work and getting to know my co-workers." For her, a job that's gratifying might be worth much more in the long run than one that pays a few dollars per hour more but offers little of what she finds restoring.

And, of course, ambitious, self-improving pursuits can also fit the bill, so long as they're more wanted than mandated. Ezekiel Salama, 17, of Shelbyville, Ky., can't wait to attend the Governor's School for Entrepreneurs, a selective summer program for teenagers in Kentucky. He's expecting his constructive summer plans to leave him fresher than ever for the coming school year.

That said, everyone has different emotional settings. What energizes one person might leave another spent. Should an adolescent be fortunate enough to have some choices about how she spends her summer, adults may be able to help by tuning in to how much, and what, she wants to do. If you can tell that your teenager is genuinely eager to learn a new language, start a business or write a novel, stay out of her way. But if you get the sense that she's crafting a punishing improvement regimen in an anxious attempt to compensate for a stripped-down school year, you might invite her to reconsider this approach so as not to risk returning to school feeling more depleted than she left it.

In a similar vein, parents may have their own concerns that their teenager has fallen behind academically this year. But if the school hasn't called for an intervention, it may be best to let it go.

Don't let guilt ruin restoration.

Given how much the pandemic upended expectations for what adolescents were supposed to be achieving, teenagers themselves might feel uneasy about the idea of making recovery a priority this summer. "Covid was a lot of doing nothing," said Kari Robinson, age 14, of Evanston, Ill. "I think I might feel a little guilty if I use my summer freedom to relax." Help your young people see past this way of thinking. The point of recovery is not to relax, but to grow. And if downtime is soaked in guilt, that growth is going to suffer.

Don't underestimate the value of whatever they turn to — even if it's "just hanging out" — as they go through the quiet work of rebuilding themselves.

There aren't many upsides to having a virus wreak havoc with one's adolescence, but on that very short list might be coming to appreciate the growth-giving practice of following stressful periods with deliberate recovery. This may be especially true at this moment in time, and it's also how we want young people to be thinking about stress, recovery and growth long after the pandemic is over.

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