

# Leave Me Alone! You Never Understand Me! Dealing With the Changing Moods of Teens

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You walk into your teen's bedroom. Your teen is listening to music and does not acknowledge that you are there. You try to open up conversation, but elicit no response. Because this happens frequently, you turn off the music without asking permission. Your angry teen sits upright and demands, "What do you want?" You think to yourself, "Well, that's a great start."

Times are changing in your house. Your bubbly, talkative 6<sup>th</sup> grader is quiet and gloomy at times. You feel shut out and shut down, unable to reach him/her at critical times when your instincts tell you that your teen needs someone to talk to. How should you behave with your teen at these times?

**Walk a mile in your teen's "Doc Martins."** What makes *you* moody? Funny thing, but the same things that bother you, probably bother your adolescent:

- I feel like a failure today because \_\_\_ happened.
- I worry that I cannot accomplish all the things expected of me.
- I feel unloved or unappreciated by my friends or family.
- I worry that I am never going to amount to anything.
- I feel *so controlled* by others.

## Do's and Don'ts When Your Teen is Moody:

### **Don't match your teen's emotional state by getting angry or impatient yourself.**

- In therapy, people are often told that it is unnecessary and upsetting to take responsibility for others' feelings. Nor should you feel responsible for your teen's emotional state. A calm and matter-of-fact response models good coping with the reactions of others.
- Many parents treat their children as if it is inappropriate for them to get mad. Say instead, "I understand that you may be upset. I might be, too." This is good to say when your teen is upset with a rule or limit you have placed. We should all be allowed to be respectfully disappointed.
- Your teen may feel as if you are trying to control the situation.

**Don't demand that your teen talk.** Not only is impossible to enforce, but it makes you look like a drill sergeant. When was the last time you had a deep conversation with a drill sergeant? Honest, open communication requires you to respect a teen as much as you expect the same.

**Don't mind-read your teen's thoughts.** Example: "You're upset because you didn't get your way." Remember how insulted you feel when others tell you what you're feeling or judge your motives.

**Don't label or minimize your teen's feelings.** "You're so touchy and moody all the time!" or "You get so upset about the silliest things." "Sometimes, you're just a crybaby!" These sorts of comments are harmful and are a primary reason why teens stop communicating openly with parents. In short, they feel judged before they even open their mouths.

**Don't comment on a teen's demeanor or facial expression in a belittling or irritated way.** "You have such a bad attitude." "You always have such a sour expression on your

face.” It is preferable to highlight what their demeanor indicates to you. “You seem down right now.”

**Don’t offer food as a resource in times of strain.** The message that food can solve emotional problems is simplistic. Humans are complex beings, and food does not solve *any* complex problem. This may seem condescending and lazy to a teen who has a tough problem to work out.

**Don’t spend time cajoling your teen to try to change his/her mood.** Again, your young adult has complex issues to work out just like you. Adolescents will often hang onto a bad mood while their families clown around trying to pull them out of it, as if to say, “My feelings are important. You cannot take them away with simple stunts!” If your teen responds to humor and friendly teasing, this can be helpful, but watch out if your teen becomes irritated.

**Don’t change your household around and cancel plans in order to support a moody teen.** That kind of power is almost irresistible to most of us. The message you want to send is that *each* person is responsible for managing their emotions. Your boss doesn’t stop work on a day that you’re in a touchy mood!

**Instead of the above, try these openers that really work:**

**Say what you see** –it’s called reflective communication:

- “I notice you’re a little quiet.”
- “You didn’t amuse us at dinner like you usually do.”
- “You’ve been in your room all day.”
- “You don’t seem like yourself.”

**Polite Inquiry** - this a gentle probe that respects a teen’s personal space: “Is something wrong? Would you like to talk about it with me?” - (*stony silence follows*) - Parent reaches out silently to touch in some harmless way: a hug, a hand on the knee, an arm around the shoulder. - (*continued silence*) - “It doesn’t seem like you’re ready to talk with someone right now. Would you prefer me to let you be?” - (*teen nods*) -Cheerfully, “Okay, I’ll be in the kitchen if you decide you want to talk.” Two hours later—“Are you okay? (*silence*) “You might feel better if you talk to someone. It doesn’t have to be me. Why don’t you call a friend?”

**Give ideas for coping with feelings:** “What can I do to help you control your mood? Would you like to get outdoors with me or run an errand? Sometimes, I have to get a break from my problem so I can come back to it with more clear thinking later.” “Are you sure that time alone is helping you feel better? You may want to switch plans now.” “If you can share what’s going on, I promise I will listen, not lecture.”

**Praise your teen’s coping whenever you can.** Letting your teen know what mature coping looks like is as valuable as correcting poor coping. “You handled your brother’s teasing very well.” “You got over your bad day pretty fast! Good job.” “You kept your cool while we were talking about curfew. Nicely done!”