

Resilience in a Time of War Teens



Although your teens may tower over you, they are still very young and can keenly feel the fear and uncertainty of a time of war, especially because terrorism has brought fear so close to home...

Events are uncertain for teens. Their friends' parents, their own parents, or maybe their older friends may be called away to serve in the military. It may seem that their friends' opinions are the only ones that matter, but teens still look to teachers and parents to make them feel safe in a time of war. As your teens hover on the brink of adulthood, you may wonder how you can teach them to move beyond the fears that a time of war brings. The good news is that, just as your teen learns to play basketball or a musical instrument, your teen can learn the skills of resilience -- the ability to adapt well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress.

What are some tips that can help you teach your teen resilience? As you use these tips, keep in mind that each person's journey along the road to resilience will be different and that your own knowledge of your teen will guide you.

10 Tips for Parents and Teachers of Teens in a Time of War

- 1. Talk with your teen whenever you can, even if it seems he or she doesn't want to talk to you.** Sometimes the best time to talk may be when you are in the car together. Sometimes, it may be when you are doing chores together that allow your teen to focus on something else while he or she talks. When your teens have questions, answer them honestly but with reassurance. Ask them their opinion about what is happening and listen to their answers. Don't discount their feelings -- they may say they're afraid or they may express hatred for people from a certain country or religion. They may say things you consider outrageous just to test the opinion out. Encourage them to avoid generalities, and be honest about your own feelings, but leave your teen with messages of hope and encouragement. You might say, "I get a little afraid, too, but I know that we're prepared for whatever happens, and I know we'll get through it." Your teen is old enough to appreciate that you may feel uncertain or afraid as well, but you should leave no room for doubt when you talk about how you will do whatever it takes to keep your teen safe.
- 2. Make your home a safe place emotionally for your teen.** In high school, taunting and bullying can intensify -- home should be a haven. Your teen may prefer to be with friends rather than spend time with you, but be ready to provide lots of family time for your teen when he or she needs it, especially during a time of war. Set aside family time that includes your teen's friends.
- 3. Encourage your teen to take "news breaks."** Constant exposure to war coverage can heighten a teen's anxiety. Your teens may want to stay informed -- they may even have homework that requires them to watch the news. But try to limit the amount of news they take in, whether it's from television, newspapers, magazines, or the Internet. Watching a news report once informs teens; watching it repeatedly just adds to the stress and contributes no new knowledge. When you do watch the news, use it as a catalyst for discussion with your teens about their feelings and fears.
- 4. Realize that the stresses of war may heighten daily stresses.** Your teen might already be feeling extreme highs and lows because of hormonal levels in his body; the uncertainty during a time of war can make these shifts seem more extreme. Be understanding but firm when a teen responds to stress with angry or sullen behavior. Reassure him that you just expect him to do his best.

- 5. During a time of war, map out a routine and stick to it.** High school offers your teen more choices and more freedom. It can be reassuring for home to be a constant, especially in uncertain times. Remember that, even though teens may like change and action in the rest of their lives, they often still want home to remain unchanged, and your teen may be even less able to handle change at home when the world situation is unstable.
- 6. Make sure you take care of yourself.** If you don't, you may have less patience and less creativity at a time when your teen may be testing both as she negotiates the balance between pulling away from you and wanting to feel safe during a time of war. Many people find that turning to a higher power, whether through organized religion or privately, can help. Take care of yourself so that you can take care of your teen.
- 7. Tell your teens that they will be all right.** Engage your teen in planning your emergency strategy and go over what each family member will do in different scenarios. For example, what would your teen do if there's a military emergency and he or she is at school, at home, or out driving? If teens have a cell phone, have a plan for them to call in to a central family number to report their safety. If they have family or friends in the military, obtain as much information as you can about where that family member or friend will be, how long they'll be gone, and how often they'll be able to contact your teen.
- 8. Watch your teen for signs of fear and anxiety he or she may not be able to put into words.** Have your teen's grades suddenly dropped? Is he unusually sullen or withdrawn? He may be feeling the pressure of what is going on in the world around him. If he has trouble putting his feelings into words, encourage him to use journaling or art to express his fears.
- 9. Enlist your teen's help, whether it's a chore or an opinion about a family activity.** Include your teen in your volunteer activities or encourage her to volunteer on her own for something that has meaning for her. Make sure your teen knows how her actions contribute to the entire family's well-being. If your teen knows that she has a role to play and that she can help someone less fortunate, she will feel more in control and more confident.
- 10. Put things into a positive perspective for your teen.** Neither you nor your teen may have been through a war before, but you should tell your teen that wars end. Point out times when your teen has faced up to and conquered something that may have frightened him, whether it was asking someone out on a date or applying for a job. Point out the important things that have stayed the same, even while the outside world is changing. When you talk about bad times, make sure you talk about the good times in the future as well. Teach your teen relaxation techniques, such as thinking positive thoughts or using music to relax himself in a time of stress.

Resilience is a Journey

You can teach your teens resilience. But just because your teens learn resilience doesn't mean they won't have bad times. Bad times hurt, and your teens will have times when they aren't happy. Resilience is a journey, and each teen will take his or her own time along the way, just as each teen acquires the skills of driving a car or negotiates through the dating world in high school in his or her own time. Your teen may benefit from some of these resilience strategies, while other teens may benefit from other strategies. The skills of resilience you teach your teens in a time of war will be useful to them even after war, and they are good skills to have in daily life.

You may feel that you need some help in teaching your teen resilience. If you are feeling stuck or overwhelmed and unable to use the tips listed above, you may want to consider talking to someone who can help, such as a psychologist or other mental health professional. Turning to someone for guidance may help you help your teen strengthen his or her resilience and persevere in a time of war.

**This information is brought to you by NH Operation: Military Kids
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