How To Help Your Troubled Teen

Highlighting the signs for recognizing when a teen is in crisis

Outback

THERAPEUTIC EXPEDITIONS
Contents

Overview ............................................. 6
Helping Your Troubled Teen ....................... 6
  Troubled Teens: Knowing When to Worry .......... 6
  Your Teen May Be in Crisis: Now What? ............ 8
  Safe and Effective Treatment Options .......... 8
  Wilderness Works: Why? ....................... 10
  What Wilderness Therapy Offers ................. 10
  What to Look for In a Wilderness Therapy Program .... 13
Conclusion ........................................... 14
Resources ........................................... 15
In this white paper, we highlight the signs for recognizing when a teen is in crisis, and provide an overview of treatment options. We focus on wilderness therapy, because it represents a full behavioral and clinical intervention.

This white paper is written for parents and guardians of troubled teens, with the intention of providing solutions and resources for families of adolescents struggling with behavioral, psychological or emotional challenges.

Helping Your Troubled Teen

Adolescent rebellion in America has been more the rule than the exception. Attitudes change over time, however; today’s nuclear families are far more progressive than they were in James Dean’s day. Both parents often work; children are embraced as equal members of the household, rather than treated like little soldiers to be obediently shaped.

This emphasis on letting children be who they are, which has become prominent in the last few decades, gives young people space to breathe and grow. A pitfall, however, is that this approach can result in parents overlooking signs of deep pain and crisis in their teenaged children.

• Troubled Teens: Knowing When to Worry
• Your Teen May Be in Crisis: Now What?
• Safe and Effective Treatment Options
• Wilderness Works: Why?
• What Wilderness Therapy Offers
• What to Look for in a Wilderness Therapy Program

Troubled Teens: Knowing When to Worry

If your teen is exhibiting certain signs or behavioral issues, their struggles may go beyond standard adolescent turmoil. Depression, substance abuse, learning difficulties, and low self-esteem are often problems your teen cannot handle on his or her own. As a parent, you know your child better than anyone else. It may be time to seek outside help for your son or daughter if you’ve noticed some of these behaviors:

**DISENGAGEMENT FROM SCHOOL** - if your teen suddenly loses interest in subjects they used to enjoy, it could indicate emotional disturbance or substance abuse. If your straight A’s and B’s student starts to flail academically, this is an indication that he or she needs help - likely beyond tutoring.
AVOIDING OLD FRIENDS - If your child is avoiding peers with whom they have always shared interests, it could indicate a radical change in behavior. This is often linked to more serious substance experimentation, depression, or mood disorders.

PROMISCUITY - If your child is engaging in unsafe, unhealthy sexual behavior, this is often a symptom of underlying anxiety, depression, or other psychological pain.

VIOLENCE - Involvement in physical conflicts is a sign that your child does not have appropriate coping strategies for their day-to-day life, and needs help.

SELF-HARM - This includes cutting, burning oneself, or being obsessive about food intake, in addition to more dramatic gestures like talking about suicide.

CHANGES IN EATING PATTERNS - Avoiding food, emotionally eating, hoarding food, binge eating, or extreme weight loss or weight gain can indicate an underlying emotional disturbance. These can be deadly if left untreated.

EXTREME DISREGARD OF PERSONAL HEALTH AND HYGIENE - Lack of self-care, such as infrequent showering or brushing of teeth, can result in social alienation and may indicate depression or developmental issues.

DRAMATIC CHANGES IN SLEEP PATTERNS - Excessive sleeping, or not sleeping enough, is often an indicator of depression. It has also been linked to problematic electronics use.

OVERUSE OF ELECTRONICS - We all need to use the internet and computer on a daily basis, students in particular. However, some adolescents are especially vulnerable to video game, smartphone, and internet addiction. For these individuals, it is a distraction that can become an all-consuming addiction. This can disrupt school and devastate peer and family relationships.

HABITUAL ALCOHOL OR DRUG USE - Some experimentation is normal for teenagers, but when substance use becomes a frequent, regular escape, there is a deeper problem that is not being addressed.

VERBAL, EMOTIONAL, OR PHYSICAL ABUSE WITHIN YOUR HOUSEHOLD - If your teen engages in bullying behavior, name-calling, yelling, or blatant disregard toward you or other members of your household, this may indicate that your child is in crisis. While all teenagers push boundaries, this type of behavior is not acceptable and indicates that your child may need a lifeline.

If your teenage child is displaying some of these red flag signs, there could very well be an underlying cognitive, emotional, or psychological issue that needs to be addressed. If you suspect that your child is in crisis, it is time to take the necessary steps to get help.
Your Teen May Be in Crisis: Now What?

Young people are especially vulnerable to a number of emotional, behavioral, and learning difficulties. Depression, anxiety, ADHD, and substance abuse, while all too common, can easily fall outside the range of routine teenage problems.

This can affect the dynamic of your family in a dramatic way. If a serious problem is occurring with your teen, it has almost certainly tarnished your relationship with them. If your troubled teen is not an only child, then their issues are most likely affecting their siblings as well, particularly any younger siblings. Additionally, this takes a toll on a marriage or parenting partnership.

**THE FIRST STEP IS TO IDENTIFY WHAT IS REALLY GOING ON WITH YOUR CHILD.**

Most problematic behaviors are symptoms of an underlying emotional issue; this needs to be addressed so that healing and progress can begin. There are a few ways to go about this:

**Behavioral Intervention.** This approach involves modifying problematic behaviors by interrupting them, often by removing your teen from their current environment and placing them in a setting where external factors can be controlled. This allows for clearer cause-and-effect understanding by your child. The focus is on natural and logical consequences, rather than imposed, arbitrary ones.

**Clinical Intervention.** This entails your troubled teen being assessed by a mental health professional in order to evaluate what is driving problematic behavior in order to improve their mental and emotional health. Clinical treatment will typically be recommended and will follow established guidelines, providing tools so that your teen may start maintaining progress independent of therapy.

The course of treatment for either (or in some cases, both) of these options will depend on exactly what issues your teen is struggling with. In either case, seeking professional care is the best way to obtain the help your teen needs. Speak to your family physician about what's going on with your child; they will be able to refer you to an appropriate mental health professional or treatment program.

Actively intervening on your child's behalf when you notice them spiraling downward is an act of love. It may be extremely difficult at the time, and your child may not understand at first, but doing the right thing for your child may not be the easy thing. There will come a time when he or she will thank you for getting them the support they needed. It is important to find the right treatment for your child, and for you and your family to believe in what you are doing. There are a number of safe and effective ways to approach treatment for your teen in crisis; whatever option you select, it's important to find what works best for your family.

**Safe and Effective Treatment Options**

Everyone has their own story, and the treatment you seek for your troubled teen will depend on the particular struggles that he or she is facing. The methods listed below, when practiced by an accredited professional, can all be highly effective in modifying behavior. In many cases, a combination of methods may be optimal.
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: CBT involves a one on one relationship between patient and therapist, but goes beyond the scope of traditional talk therapy. It is a structured method that involves examining the thought processes that drive undesirable behavior. We often do things because of thought distortions and beliefs we are not aware of; Cognitive Behavioral Therapy brings these thinking patterns to light and examines whether they are healthy and realistic or (as is often the case) irrational. Once the patient has awareness of the underlying beliefs that drive their behaviors, change becomes much more approachable and less scary. They are able to replace undesirable behaviors with more healthy perceptions; this leads to healthier behaviors.

Logotherapy: this method focuses on a belief that all human life has meaning, and that strength can be drawn from the intrinsic human worthiness in each of us to find a clear sense of purpose. The technique involves ongoing dialogue between patient and therapist. The results can be highly effective in treating depression, anxiety, and behavioral issues.

Hypnotherapy: this involves the patient undergoing hypnosis. Often utilized in conjunction with other types of therapy, hypnotherapy can be effective in creating behavioral change because it allows for direct communication with someone’s subconscious desires and beliefs. Because the state of hypnosis leaves the patient so suggestible, a skilled hypnotherapist can request desired behavioral changes and encounter less resistance than with traditional talk therapy.

Biofeedback Therapy: this treatment method involves connecting sensors to the body in order to understand how the mind influences the body. Once this connection is clearly understood by the patient, biofeedback allows him or her to learn control of autonomic functions (e.g. heart rate, breathing rate) with thought. This type of therapy can be effective in treating anxiety disorders.

Occupational Therapy: young people with learning differences may benefit greatly from this type of therapeutic approach. Based on a patient’s particular challenges, Occupational Therapy focuses on mastering everyday activities and life skills. This improves overall functioning.

Educational Therapy: this type of interventional approach can be invaluable to young people with learning disabilities, particularly if they have not been diagnosed yet. Educational therapy focuses on identifying an individual’s learning challenges by accommodating the way the patient interprets information, and tailoring teaching methods to them as an individual.

Wilderness Therapy: this approach involves removing young people from the negative influences present in their everyday life. The treatment centers around natural consequences and taking full accountability for the poor choices that have led to this point. This leads to personal empowerment and greater self esteem: participants learn autonomy and responsibility, as well as developing psychological insight and improving physical health. This method is especially effective for troubled teens, as it focuses on providing compassionate support while promoting self efficacy.

In some cases, therapy alone is insufficient to effect long-term change. For many troubled teens, a combination of behavioral and clinical interventions is required. While all of the treatment options listed above can be helpful, wilderness therapy provides the most comprehensive behavioral and clinical intervention while integrating multiple therapeutic techniques.
Wilderness Works: Why?

Wilderness therapy has a number of unique features compared to other types of treatment for troubled teens. When combined with proven therapeutic methodologies, the benefits are quantifiably dramatic.

THOUGHTFUL, INDIVIDUALIZED TREATMENT

Wilderness therapy is not a "one size fits all" approach to helping your teen. While any credible wilderness therapy program will provide an individual treatment plan for your child, it is also important to consider that there are different models of wilderness therapy. One may be the best fit for your child.

TYPES OF WILDERNESS THERAPY

Adventure-Based Wilderness Therapy

This model involves therapy that is integrated with a variety of high-impact, challenging physical activities that push your child and teach them that they can accomplish goals they previously thought were impossible. Teens routinely go outside their comfort zone. While maintaining a safe, therapeutic environment, this type of treatment is dynamic, exciting, and replaces unhealthy behavioral patterns with healthier ones. Treatment is divided between excursions and time spent at a base camp. The accomplishment of lofty goals leads to self-sufficiency and autonomy. While effective, an adventure-based model may not be ideal for all individuals; especially those who are obese, struggle with entitlement, may be a threat to themselves, may try to run away, or suffer from chronic health issues.

Nomadic Wilderness Therapy

The nomadic model of wilderness therapy is an intensive treatment program based around the development of primitive wilderness skills. Lower-impact physically than adventure-based therapy, students in this treatment model may spend months in the wilderness, hiking and learning to build their own shelters and tools for day-to-day living. Because students' sleep schedule is naturally set by the sun in nomadic models, it is common for their circadian rhythms to realign; this provides enormous emotional and psychological benefit. Healthy physical and behavioral habits are established and developed away from the distractions of the outside world, and these skills are carried home at the end of treatment. Teens learn self-sufficiency and the impact of natural consequences in a safe, therapeutic environment. This intentional detox from day to day life provides the clinical team on site with a rare window to provide innovative and comprehensive assessment of the individual.

Both of these models provide a powerful therapeutic experience, and neither is inherently better than the other. Every child is different, and these different approaches offer options. As the parent of a troubled teen, you know your child’s limitations, abilities, and inner desires. One of these types of wilderness therapy will be a more perfect fit.

What Wilderness Therapy Offers

Over the past ten years, wilderness therapy has become one of the leading interventions for treating troubled teens because of how effective it is. As an alternative to punitive measures like boot camps, and a happy
medium between outpatient talk therapy and residential treatment, wilderness therapy provides a profound experience and has much to offer.

**BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION**

By removing troubled teens from the environment in which they are struggling, wilderness therapy achieves a comprehensive behavioral intervention. Providing this distance from the social and academic stressors of everyday life allows young people to recalibrate on many levels. The peace found in the wilderness setting contributes greatly to the therapeutic process. These types of programs involve group expeditions, camp chores, and daily tasks which allow teens to develop work ethic and coping skills for normal life challenges, but in a protected, low-risk environment. Teens are able to bring these skills and tools back with them when they complete the therapy program.

**WILDERNESS HAS A POSITIVE EFFECT ON SELF-CONFIDENCE, AUTONOMY**

Wilderness therapy programs necessarily involve some level of physical activity. This is therapeutic in itself; teens often accomplish objectives they have never had to deal with before. For example, they may scale a nearby mountain or build a personal shelter. This hands-on skill building leads to increased self-confidence and autonomy, as well as improvements in physical health.

**NATURAL CONSEQUENCES IN THE WILDERNESS**

Interacting with the wilderness has inherent consequences - cause and effect. Many troubled teens have spent most of their lives resisting consequences imposed by authority figures. This is not a healthy way to move through life, as troubled teens grow into adults who will ultimately have to deal with the ramifications of their choices. The wilderness therapy environment teaches this lesson in a gentle way; if a participant chooses to set up their sleeping shelter in a haphazard manner, for example, they may find that they get rained on and have to fix it in the middle of the night. These kinds of choices provide immediate and direct consequences, which can then be compared to ways that the participant may have enacted similar behaviors while at home.

**CLINICAL INTERVENTION**

In addition to the general skill-building that wilderness therapy programs offer, any true wilderness therapy program will offer sophisticated clinical support. The programs are often designed for teens suffering from a psychological disorder (depression, anxiety), learning difference, addiction, or behavioral or emotional challenge. These medical and mental health issues require specific interventions.

**COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT**

Wilderness therapy provides an ideal environment for comprehensive and holistic assessment. Teens in wilderness therapy programs don’t have access to drugs, video games, negative friend groups, stressors that may have developed within the family, and other distractions that often mask core issues. Because of this, a treatment team will get a rare glimpse into the psychological, emotional, biological, and social strengths and weaknesses that your child possesses. They will also be able to get a very clear understanding of your child’s
inner resources, cognitive distortions, defense mechanisms, and unhealthy coping strategies your son or
dughter has developed.

**INDIVIDUAL TREATMENT PLAN**

A credible wilderness therapy program should provide an individual treatment plan for your child; a therapeutic
plan tailored specifically to his or her challenges, strengths, and goals. A therapist will develop this in
collaboration with you, your child, professionals who have treated your child up to this point, and your child’s
historical records.

**EXPERT SUPERVISION**

Your child’s treatment should be overseen by a psychologist or licensed therapist who meets regularly with
your child and monitors their progress. Additionally, this type of program will be staffed by trained field guides
who offer continuous support, insight, and feedback to the participants to aid them in reaching their treatment
goals.

**CLINICALLY PROVEN RESULTS**

In this way, wilderness therapy provides highly effective care and long-term treatment solutions for troubled
 teens. In multiple empirical studies conducted by Keith Russell (of the Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare Research
Cooperative) since 2005, teens suffering from a variety of behavioral issues (e.g. substance abuse, anxiety,
depression) overwhelmingly reported improvements in anxiety levels and depression, and did not backslide
into substance abuse. These results were maintained at check-ins six months after the end of treatment.

Although wilderness therapy is a relatively new treatment option, the clinical and academic response to
wilderness therapy is overwhelmingly positive. In addition, there are multiple regulatory and accrediting
organizations to ensure that wilderness therapy programs provide current, safe, and effective treatments. “. .
.Wilderness and adventure therapy agencies have formed the Outdoor Behavioral Health-care Industry Council
(OBHI; see www.obhic.com). This industry is advocating the use of Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare as the name
for agencies that provide therapy in the context of wilderness and adventure” (p. 13, Taniguchi et al., 2009).

**WILDERNESS HEALS**

Wilderness therapy programs have swiftly become one of the most effective treatment options for troubled
teens, which is why so many professionals are supportive of this approach. This type of therapy is so helpful for
so many different types of adolescents, because of the many unique and profound benefits it offers.

Living in the wilderness boosts self-esteem. There are a lot of things for your child to worry about: fitting
in, wearing the right clothes, saying the right thing, hanging out with the right people. All of this fades away
when your child has seven hours to climb a mountain, or knows how to build his or her own shelter, or is
cARRYING everything they need on their back in a backpack that they constructed with their own two hands.
Accomplishing measurable, worthy, difficult goals can go a long way toward putting teenage problems into
perspective.
Wilderness therapy allows your child to “unplug” and learn who they really are. In the digital age, so many of us are always online, and your teen is likely no exception. Our culture's obsession with television, social media, and staying “connected” can get in the way of forging meaningful relationships. It is rare that we have the opportunity to show our authentic self to someone else. Wilderness therapy is entirely focused on uncovering one's authentic self. It provides a beautiful process in which teens can strip away their avatars, social media personas, and favorite video game characters to find who they truly are hidden beneath. For your child, who is no doubt already grappling with who they are becoming, the opportunity to explore this without digital distractions is incredibly meaningful.

Wilderness therapy leads to deep human connection. In wilderness therapy, your teen focuses on self-discovery, in a group of teens who are struggling with similar challenges. As they embrace challenges as a group, they will forge meaningful relationships with each other and with their therapist and field guides. They will be seen in a way they have never been seen before. These very healthy, meaningful relationships are pivotal for young people, and will provide a model for their relationship with you, the rest of the family, friends, and loved ones for the rest of their lives.

What to Look for In a Wilderness Therapy Program

Not all wilderness therapy programs are created equal. If you are considering this treatment approach for your troubled teen, then you understand the powerful benefits this type of program can offer. To help your child thrive, succeed, and grow, make sure when evaluating a wilderness therapy program that they can deliver.

A credible wilderness therapy program should be able to offer your child academic credits. Sending your child away is difficult, as it will interrupt your life and theirs. The type of intervention provided by wilderness therapy may be best executed over several months, and that means that your child will miss school. The most reputable wilderness therapy programs partner with accredited educational certification programs to ensure that credits are provided, and that they will transfer successfully when your teen goes back to school.

A wilderness therapy program should ensure that your teen has access to medical care, and is regularly examined. Since treatment taking place in the wilderness is a completely different environment for teens, a well-organized wilderness therapy program should offer your teen access to a doctor or RN. They should also see to it that your child receives medical exams at regular intervals throughout the program (e.g. once per week) to ensure that he or she maintains good physical health.

A wilderness therapy program should foster family involvement. The most effective wilderness therapy programs involve you and your family. After all, the purpose of enrolling your teen in this type of program is to give them the resources they need to come home and be a healthy member of your family. Look for a wilderness therapy program that facilitates family involvement, offers family support, and looks to deepen the relationship between you and your child.

A wilderness therapy program should offer your teen an individual treatment plan overseen by a professional. A reputable wilderness therapy program should involve direct treatment for your child from a licensed professional therapist. Part of this treatment will include a comprehensive evaluation and subsequent treatment plan developed by a therapist. Your child, like his or her problems, is unique. Make sure that they are enrolled in the type of program that will really see them, and know how to help.
Conclusion

Life is very complicated; there are many problems that have no easy solution. We owe it to ourselves and our families, however, to face these problems head-on, and to provide the support that our family members need. The most important thing you can do for yourself and your troubled teen is to acknowledge what is really going on. In this white paper we covered a number of treatment options for teens who are grappling with behavioral, psychological, and emotional difficulties and need intervention. We believe in the power of wilderness therapy, because we have witnessed the profound way it changes lives and reunites families. Whatever path you choose, we wish you health and peace along your journey.
Resources

The Attributes of Effective Field Staff in Wilderness Programs: Changing Youths’ Perspectives of Being “Cool” (Taniguchi, Widmer, Duerden, and Draper 2009).

http://www.obhrc.org/

http://www.obhic.com/

This white paper was sponsored by Outback Therapeutic Expeditions. Outback offers nomadic wilderness therapy in a safe, controlled setting for adolescents dealing with a range of behavioral, emotional, and psychological issues.

ABOUT OUTBACK THERAPEUTIC EXPEDITIONS

Outback Therapeutic Expeditions offers a unique therapeutic experience based on a nomadic and primitive skills model. The soothing rhythms of life in the wilderness provide a catalyst for authentic and lasting change. Each child is matched with a licensed therapist and receives a comprehensive individual treatment plan. Clinical studies confirm that our methods create long-lasting change and emotional healing.

Living in small groups away from the distractions and influences of the outside world, students are able to focus on themselves and the choices that brought them here. The insights and skills that they develop are carried with them when they return to the outside world.

Our Roots and Wings program carves an integral role for each teen’s family as they work through the misunderstandings and pain that brought them to this point. Our three-day Family Expedition allows parents and siblings to join the student in the wilderness for powerful, intensive family therapy. At Outback, we believe that the family is vital to the healing process and plays an important role in bringing about positive change for each child.