

Adolescent Apathy and What Loss of Caring Can Mean ~ Part 2

This week we continue our discussion of more examples of apathy that are commonly encountered along the path of adolescent growth:

Apathy as Indifference

Adolescence can be a very self-centered and socially limiting experience, in the extreme causing young people to lose empathy for others in their preoccupation with self-interest and confinement to their own small social circle of friends. Because healthy personal relationships must work two ways and not just one (the adolescent's way), and because after leaving school the young person must be prepared to function in a larger and more diverse world, lack of empathy and range in personal relationships will not serve the growing adolescent well. Therefore, parents need to insist on mutuality with them and do all they can to broaden experience and enlarge sense of social affiliation while she is still living at home.

Apathy as Cynicism

Life can feel unfair at times. Add pessimism to apathy and cynicism can result, creating an outlook with little hope and a lot of disappointment and anger. Because cynicism makes it difficult to stay motivated, it can be the enemy of effort at a time when summoning the will to keep trying, to try even harder, is what is needed. Although parents should not spare the adolescent this time of struggle, they can offer encouragement and provide perspective by relating some of the trials they went through starting out in life many years ago.

Apathy from Substance Use

At any stage of adolescence when life gets hard, it is tempting to escape from these demands, which is when substance use comes in. The effect of substance use is an altered psychological state. Depending on the dose and frequency, substance use can take the user from sober caring, to less caring, to acting carelessly, to becoming carefree, to not caring at all if intoxication occurs. When regular use of alcohol, marijuana, or other psychoactive drugs becomes established, a loss of normal caring can disable effort. Now apathy erodes ambition, motivation diminishes, and healthy functioning is harder to maintain. Another impact of substance use on apathy is not caring about consequences and engaging in dangerous risk-taking. In either case, parents should push for an assessment of use, and if advised, follow through with getting counseling and treatment.

Apathy from Depression

Significant loss of any kind always carries the risk of a depressive response. It can be a vicious cycle. Depression can breed apathy, and apathy can sustain depression. When the young person loses sight of what used to matter, they may need help reviving their sense of positive purpose in life to restore healthy functioning. Obviously if despondency sounds at all suicidal, parents should get the young person immediately assessed for risk of self-harm and given counseling help.

Apathy can mask a variety of problems. Do not ignore protracted or pronounced apathy in your adolescent. It can signify something serious going on that warrants your attention.

Source: Dr. Carl Pickhardt, author of *Surviving Your Child's Adolescence* and *Who Stole My Child: Parenting through Four Stages of Adolescence*, and many other parenting books.