the neurodiverse network

Connect Before *Correct*

A Parent's Guide to Raising Neurodiverse Teens

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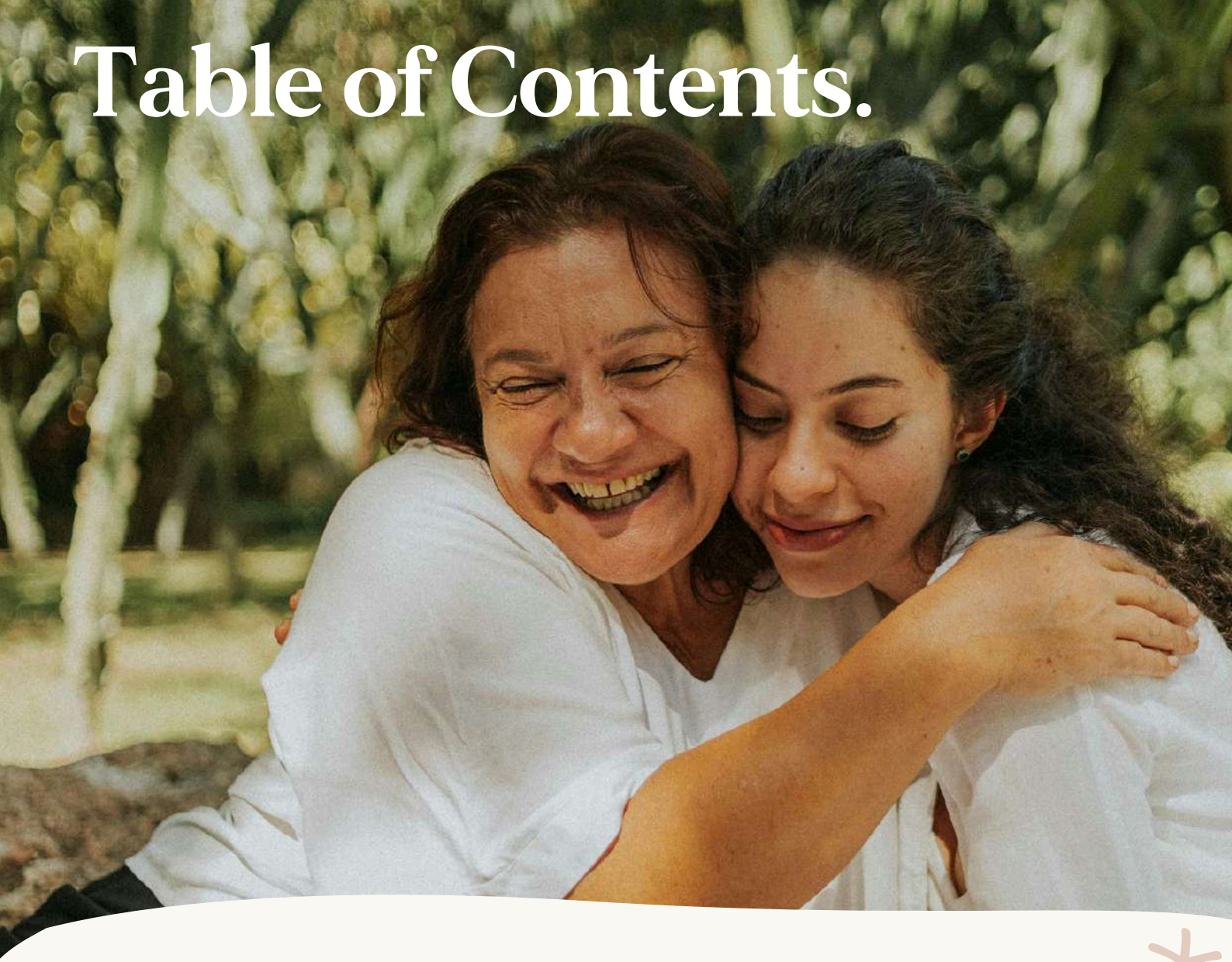

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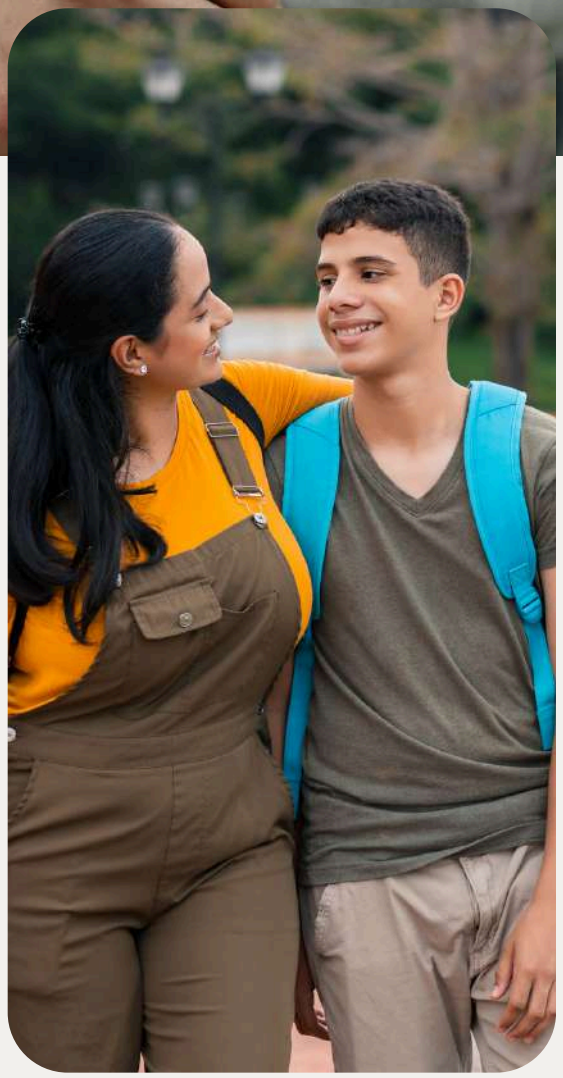
You're already doing better than you think.



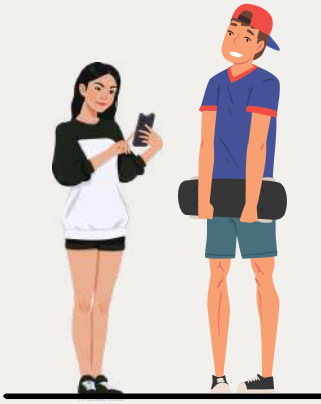
Parenting a teen can be exhausting. Parenting a neurodiverse teen through the stormy years of adolescence can feel impossible some days.

You're here because you care. You show up even when you're frustrated. You worry even when they roll their eyes. You want connection more than control. That already puts you miles ahead.

This booklet isn't about perfect parenting. It's about better parenting, the kind that keeps the door open even when things get hard. The kind that teaches, not punishes. The kind that walks beside your teen without carrying them. Being the Lighthouse, not the Liferaft.

You don't have to remember all of this. Just pick one thing to try. Come back when you're ready for more.

Why is this so hard? Understanding the teen brain.



Before you fix anything, understand this:

This isn't necessarily a discipline problem. It's a development problem.

What's Actually Happening in Your Teen's Brain

Brain changes in teens make them:

- More impulsive — the accelerator develops before the brakes
- More emotional — heightened responses to everything
- More susceptible to risk-taking behaviour — consequences feel distant

And here's the critical part for families dealing with neurodiversity:
The need to belong makes symptoms of neurodiversity, particularly ADHD — heightened during these years. Resistance increases. Attention struggles. Engagement becomes harder. Behaviour spikes get bigger.

Teenage Boys Specifically
Teenage boys often become more aggressive during these tumultuous years. Their bodies and brains are rewiring faster than their coping skills develop.

Why is this so hard? Understanding the teen brain.

The Friendship Trap

Neurodiverse teens are especially vulnerable to developing negative beliefs about themselves. They've often had more failures and more criticism than their peers — which can veer them toward friendships with other misguided, at-risk teens, where they finally find acceptance.

In that group they get to feel more successful, and they don't have to worry about being too loud or too intense.

Belonging is the driving force. Relationships, acceptance and their sense of belonging are the most important thing to a teen — their friends and that acceptance drive everything they do.

What This Means For You

- When they're resistant, it's not always defiance — sometimes it's dysregulation
- When they pull away from you, it's not rejection — it's the need to belong elsewhere
- When they make bad choices, it's not stupidity — it's an immature brain in high-emotion moments

You cannot reason with a flooded brain. You can only wait for calm, then teach.

The 6 pillars of connection based parenting.

PILLAR 1: PAUSE WHEN THINGS GET HARD

If emotions are high, stop talking. Don't lecture, teach, negotiate or try to win. Regulate yourself first — don't get drawn into their storm.

Your toolkit:

- Take a breath
- Give space
- Keep words to a minimum
- Offer simple choices
- Come back when everyone's calm

The script:
"I love you. I'm going to give you some space. We'll talk when we're both calm."

The power is in the pause. Brains learn when they're calm and regulated — not mid-storm.

PILLAR 2: LIGHT UP FOR THE GOOD STUFF

We're most energetic when things go wrong. Lectures provide wonderful connectivity over what's going wrong. Flip the scales.

Deeply celebrate when things are going right. Kids seek connection in any way they know how — it's not attention-seeking, it's connection-seeking.

Intense children often crave intense levels of closeness. We're never too busy for a problem — shift to never being too busy to notice when they're doing the right thing.

Like a new toy that lights up: be the parent who lights up for the good stuff, not just from the other end of the house when something goes wrong.

But here's the hard truth: If you cannot see anything good in your teen, no parenting program will change your relationship or their behaviour. Even the most challenging teen has moments where they're doing the right thing. Find them.

PILLAR 3: LOOK BENEATH THE BEHAVIOUR

Behaviour is communication. If they could they would. Before assuming defiance, ask:

COGNITIVE

- Are the steps visible, clear and realistic?
- Do they have the skills?
- Do they need a visual or scaffold?

CHEMICAL

- Is their body fuelled, rested and regulated for this moment?
- Are they hungry, tired, or overwhelmed?

SENSORY

- Is the environment adding load?
- Noise? Light? Temperature? Smells?

Executive functioning challenges get misread as laziness, not listening, or not caring.
Their brain may be struggling to manage — especially when tired, stressed or overloaded.

Signs your teen might be overwhelmed:

- Increased irritability or emotional reactions
- Withdrawal or shutting down
- Difficulty following instructions
- Increased restlessness
- Sudden exhaustion after school or outings

Help the nervous system feel safe: Movement, heavy work, headphones, music, fidget tools, lower lights, reduce background noise, change into comfy clothes.

Yes, If Thinking: Before assuming they won't, ask: can they — with the right scaffolding?
If you want them to make their own lunch and they're capable: yes, they can do it — if I make it easy to find the ingredients. If the cheese is cut and ready in a container.

The question shifts from "why won't they?" to "what would make this possible?"
Ensure they have the skills. Then support and scaffold. Don't do it for them.

PILLAR 4: WARMTH & STRUCTURE

Teenagers need BOTH. Connection does NOT mean no boundaries.

WARMTH: "I love you. You belong here. We are connected."
STRUCTURE: "There are boundaries. I will keep you safe. I will be predictable."

Keep expectations clear, simple, reasonable and consistent. Give choices wherever possible. Talk about the behaviour — not the person. There is a problem to solve, not a child to blame.

Drop the manners that invite negotiation: Instead of "Can you please take the recycling out?" (which invites "no") Try: "It's time to take the recycling out."

Over functioning warning: When we over function for our kids, they under function. Walking alongside is not doing life for them. Every mistake is a lesson. Every consequence is data. Our job isn't to protect them from life — it's to prepare them for it.

PILLAR 5: LISTEN & VALIDATE BEFORE SOLVING

Understanding comes before solutions. Reflect back what you hear/see. Their feelings are real, even when you see things differently.

Instead of: "Why are you behaving like this?"

Ask:

"What's going on underneath this?" / "Tell me more."

They may be saying: This is too hard. I'm anxious. I don't understand and I'm overwhelmed. I need connection or control.

Try:

- "Tell me more."
- "That sounds really hard."
- "Have I got that right?"
- "What do you think is going on?"
- "I can see this had made you angry tell me why?"
- "You seem frustrated what's going on?"

Validation is NOT agreement. You can understand how they feel without agreeing with their view or way of expressing it.

LISTEN → VALIDATE → STAY CURIOUS → RESPOND

Curiosity means asking questions without criticism or coercion — and teaching only when they're ready and regulated.

Don't jump straight into solution mode. Reflect back first, so they know you're really listening. Then help them find their own solution through questions.

When they use good strategies, ask how it felt and what difference it made.
Open questions get more information and make a teen more willing to open up.

PILLAR 6: REPAIR MATTERS

We WILL all get it wrong. Own your part:

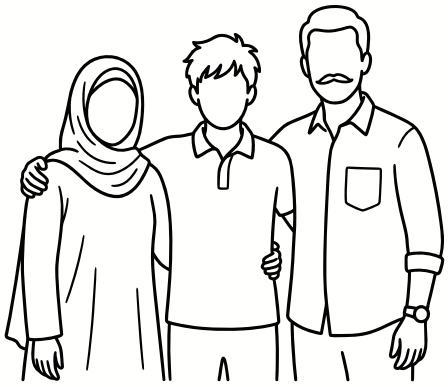
"I didn't handle that well. I'm sorry. Let's try that conversation again."

“I’m feeling really frustrated right now I need time to calm myself. Let’s come back to this at another time.”

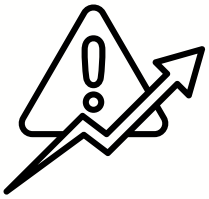
Repair teaches:

- Relationships can be safe
- Conflict can be repaired
- People can make mistakes and reconnect

"The goal isn't a teenager who never struggles.
The goal is a teenager who knows they have a safe place to come when they do."



THE ESCALATION CYCLE - AND HOW TO BREAK IT

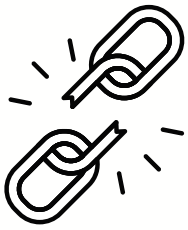


Sound Familiar?

You make a request. They ignore you. You request louder. They bite back. You yell about their disrespect and all that you do, blah blah blah. They yell back at you. You yell random consequences. They storm off...
And they cycle **goes on and on.**

Our teen often matches our tone. So, if you go in guns blazing — expect a tsunami to come back at you.

Be the Break in the Chain

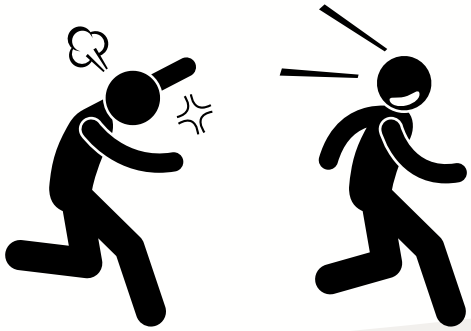


What can you do instead?

Take a step back. Slow things down. If needed, take a break and come back to it later — with curiosity, not demands.

There's also the second cycle: our teens pull away because they no longer want to hang out with us, we pursue harder out of hurt, fear and frustration, they pull further away, and round we go.

We get caught in **the cycle of nag and pursue.** Sometimes we need like a computer reboot, then reassess the whole thing from a fresh perspective.
Find another way to connect. Notice the little things they're doing in the right direction.



CONSEQUENCES DONE RIGHT.

Remember: our neurodiverse teens have often had more failures and more criticism than their peers.

We have to be careful not to reinforce the negative beliefs they already have about themselves.

That doesn't mean no consequences — but they should be used sparingly, and reserved for the real deal-breakers. **For everything else: teach, don't punish.**

Consequences Only Work If They're Known BEFORE Behaviour Occurs

They need to be:

- Really obvious
- Fair
- Important to your teen
- The smallest thing you can be effective with
- Something you can implement every single time

Better still — involve your teen in creating them. Open up the conversation, work together. They'll sometimes say there should be no consequence at all, and of course we let them know we wouldn't be good parents if we agreed to that!

Give them a real say: either they come up with consequences with you, or you'll do it on your own — remembering to make them reasonable, relevant and actually implementable.

When we leave it until we explode, we come up with something completely ridiculous that we can't possibly follow through with or they are unrealistic and makes OUR life harder, not just theirs.

Parenting is not about control, it's about teaching.

BEING OK WITH YOUR KIDS NOT BEING OK

Something really important, otherwise we will struggle deeply:

being okay with our kids not being okay.

This will tear you apart some days. But they will go through tough times, and managing life's hurdles is part of their development, with us beside them, not fixing it for them. We walk beside them, not carrying them.

The Two Villains That Lose Us Our Temper

1. An inflated expectation, or a thought-story we become attached to: Where did I go wrong? There's nothing good about my kid. They'll never get a job, never move out. That story puts us in fear and urgency, dysregulated before we've even spoken.

2. Taking it personally — the eye roll, the slammed door, the "You never do anything to help me!" It stings. It's rarely about us.

The Antidote — Your Capacity

How do we hold all this?

- **Take care of ourselves**
- **Stay regulated**
- **Have our own social and emotional network**
- **Be kind to yourself**
- **Exercise**
- **Get out into nature**

The more we do this, the more capacity we have to be the parent they need.
We as parents need to tolerate failure and be realistic with our expectations, **manage our own anxiety, frustration and emotions, and be okay with our teen's disorganisation.**

Teens need support, not criticism, and not a private butler.

As much as possible, because this is damn hard some days, we won't be perfect, but we can try.

POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES

We often look at consequences from a negative view point but we can also use it in a positive way such as:

Positive consequences frame boundaries as opportunities rather than punishments.

Instead of taking things away when rules are broken, you can offer privileges that are earned when agreements are honoured.

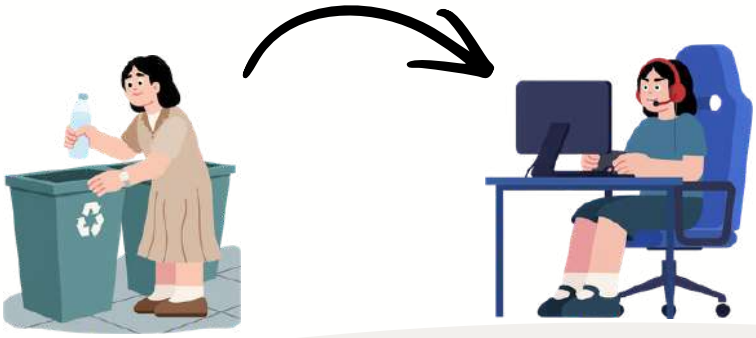
Examples:

- "By following the rules around phone usage, you get to stay up until 10pm"
- "By bringing your grades up, you get a voucher at your favourite store"
- "By not swearing at me during the week, you get to have your friends stay over on the weekend"

This approach builds motivation through connection and achievement rather than fear, helping teens understand that their choices directly open doors to things they value.

VACUUMING HOUSE = MORE FREEDOM WITH FRIENDS

TAKING RUBBISH OUT = MORE SCREEN TIME



PARENT SELF CARE - YOU MATTER TOO!

Parenting a neurodiverse teen requires stamina you didn't sign up for. You're grieving the child you imagined while raising the child you have. You're managing other kids, a partner, work, and your own mental health while walking on eggshells at home.
Your capacity determines everything. **When you're depleted, you escalate faster, you react harder, you see fewer good things in your teen.**

Build Your Own Foundation

- Exercise regularly — even a 20-minute walk counts
- Get out into nature — sunlight and green space reset the nervous system
- Have your own social network — people who talk about things other than your teen
- Schedule small pleasures — coffee, a podcast, 10 minutes alone with a book, a bath
- Be kind to yourself — you're doing the best you can with the tools you have
- Fuel your body - with nutritious food
- Sleep – get a really good bed time routine
- Take time out for yourself - no matter how small a window there is always time!

Parenting is tough — especially with neurodiverse teens. Be compassionate towards yourself. Get support. You're going to get it wrong sometimes — and so will they.

QUICK REFERENCE SCRIPTS FOR TOUGH MOMENTS

When Emotions Are High (Both Of Yours)

"I love you. I'm going to give you some space. We'll talk when we're both calm."

When You Need Them to Hear You

"I notice you getting angry and think I am criticising you. Help me understand what you think I am saying."

When They Walk Away or Slam Doors

"You knew that you were so angry that you needed to walk away. Thank you for not taking that out on me."

When They Do Something Right (Catch Them!)

"Wow, I really noticed you emptied the dishwasher without being asked. Super responsible."

"I appreciate that you didn't hit the walls when you were angry. That takes a lot of self-control."

"Your sister was so annoying and yet you walked away — great self-control."

"I see you're frustrated with your assignment and you're sticking with it. Great determination."

QUICK REFERENCE SCRIPTS FOR TOUGH MOMENTS

When They Make Mistakes

"I didn't handle that well. I'm sorry. Let's try that conversation again."
"I can understand why that hurt."

When Setting Clear Boundaries

"I love you and I'm here. I won't accept being spoken to that way. We'll try again when we're calm."

"There are boundaries. I will keep you safe. I will be clear and predictable."

When Asking Questions Instead of Lecturing

"Tell me more."

"That sounds really hard."

"Have I got that right?"

"What do you think is going on?"

YOUR WEEKLY CHECKLIST:

Pick ONE thing to focus on each week. Don't try to do everything at once.

Week 1: The Pause

☐ Caught myself about to escalate at least once — I stopped instead
☐ Used the pause script at least once
☐ Came back to conversation when calm

Week 2: Light Up

☐ Caught my teen doing something right three times this week
☐ Lighted up genuinely for each one
☐ Noticed how it felt to say it out loud

Week 3: Look Beneath

☐ Audited a behaviour across cognitive/chemical/sensory domains
☐ Added one scaffold or support
☐ Asked "what would make this possible?" instead of "why won't they?"

Week 4: Warmth + Structure

☐ Stated one expectation clearly without "please"
☐ Held a boundary without disconnecting
☐ Identified one area where I've been over functioning — stepped back

Week 5: Listen & Validate

☐ Waited to solve before they finished talking at least once
☐ Used "Tell me more" or "That sounds hard"
☐ Asked one open-ended question without pushing my agenda

Week 6: Repair

☐ Apologised when I got it wrong
☐ Invited a "do-over" conversation
☐ Noticed how it affected our relationship

Weekly Self-Care (Every Week)

☐ Had one adult conversation about things other than my teen
☐ Did one physical thing for my body (walk, stretch, swim)
☐ Got outside in daylight at least twice
☐ Said to myself: "I'm doing the best I can"

FINAL THOUGHTS – WHAT MATTERS MOST.

Be the calm sky around their storm. Don't let their emotions become your emotions.

Change starts with you. Not with fixing them. Not with controlling them. With changing how you show up.

- ✓ Behaviour is communication — every time
- ✓ Connection comes before correction
- ✓ Regulate yourself before responding
- ✓ Reduce cognitive, chemical and sensory demands
- ✓ Make tasks visible, meaningful and achievable
- ✓ Break big things into small steps
- ✓ Listen before solving
- ✓ Curiosity over criticism and coercion
- ✓ You don't have to agree to validate
- ✓ Talk about behaviour, not identity
- ✓ Warmth and structure belong together
- ✓ Hold important boundaries, let go of unnecessary battles
- ✓ Repair when things go wrong
- ✓ Consistency is more powerful than intensity
- ✓ Be kind to yourself

Your teenager doesn't need a parent who gets everything right.
They need a parent who keeps coming back.

Stay regulated. Keep the relationship open. Listen and validate. Stay curious.

Mental Health Line – 1800 011 511
Lifeline – 13 11 14
Kids helpline – 1800 551 800

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If your teen is in crisis, contact emergency services or your local mental health hotline immediately.

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