

Q & A: Are My Teen Step-daughters' Moods Normal?
Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.

Question: I've recently married and my new husband has full custody of his 14-and 16-year-old daughters. I thought I knew what I was getting into prior to the marriage, but living with these kids seven days a week has me wondering if I'm in over my head! While their father and I were dating they seemed to have some ups and downs (mainly glad to be with us) but since we've married and things have settled into a "normal" routine, the mood swings of both girls seem irrational at times. Nothing, I swear, has happened that day, and at least one will come home from school looking like a lost puppy without a friend in the world. And, when I go to comfort her, she may run to her bedroom and I hear her crying. Then, about a half-hour later, the kid is on the telephone laughing with a friend and having a good time. Never having had children of my own, I'm just not used to the quick moods and sensitivity of both girls. I grew up with two brothers, and rarely was a tear shed or a worry displayed about how they fit in with friends or peers at school. Is this normal? Their father says it's been this way for a few years and he seems to not be worried about it.

Answer: Sounds like your step-daughters have a particularly sensitive nature! Consider, though, that teen girls are known for questioning their identity and where they fit in with peers, especially as they travel from the preteen through the adolescent years. Girls, in general, seem to be more emotionally expressive than boys, even as little ones. Whether tolerated, allowed, or encouraged to emote, preschool girls tend to cry more frequently than do boys. In grade school they whine, complain and cry (again) more, and by middle and high school they run circles around the guys in terms of crying (once again), spreading rumors, and expressing just about every thought that crosses their minds. In short, girls learn to emote and to show and share their frustrations. In many, many ways this tendency to verbalize is admirable and encourages good communication. In the process of learning how to communicate their thoughts, though, many parents are bewildered by their whims, moodiness and over-sensitivity.

Teenage girls populate a good 60% of my practice. Normally these kids come into counseling with a less-than-thrilled attitude, afraid that therapy will result in some form of negative consequence, or at best—they will be misunderstood. Some, though, especially the angry ones, are glad to have the forum to dump their gripes --they can't wait to unload their feelings of frustration and anger, how unfair Mom or Dad are, or how tough it is making it socially at school. These girls have little trouble communicating—in fact, sometimes it's downright difficult for me to get a word in edgewise.

Then there are the depressed girls. I've come to the conclusion that along with sensitivity, introspection and the peer radar that teenage girls are so good at comes the negative aspects of over-reaction, over-sensitivity and extreme self-absorption. The latter takes the form of believing that almost anything that they say or do outside the home (which is a safe place, usually—Mom and Dad have to keep them no matter how they

behave) is subject to becoming the center of attention for anyone or everyone. At school a bad hair day can be disastrous—as if the other kids notice. I try to convince my teen girls that others are themselves involved in so much self-absorption and insecurity that they don't *always* have the time to think of anyone but themselves. Usually it's like talking to a wall, though, so this tactic is often less than successful in terms of teaching teen girls to be less sensitive about *everything*.

This hyper sensitivity puts teen girls at risk for many problems: believing that just about anything that they say will be made fun of, that looking the least bit different will be the topic of the lunchroom for at least a few days, or that appearing too dumb or too smart sets them apart from others. So, they search for conformity. Each teen girl has their own tactic, but the hit list of conformity techniques includes: hiding intellect and ambition, foregoing a skill or gift, settling for a crowd of kids believing or behaving against their basic values, inclusion in a group even though it's uncomfortable or unsafe, or withdrawing almost completely from the whole social scene.

Yet some girls make it through adolescence in one piece, seemingly unscathed. What are these hardy, almost invulnerable girls or their parents doing that allows or encourages this success? According to Judith Rich Harris, author of "The Nature Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do", it's mostly genetics, a pinch of luck, and a spoonful of involved and insightful parenting. Although I agree with Dr. Harris' stress upon genetics as an important aspect in how our kids turn out, I've seen that smart, gutsy parenting goes a long way in terms of keeping our teen girls on track.

I believe that there are many things that parents can do to not only help their girls to better survive adolescence, but that help parents to come through this period sane and in one piece. In our efforts to help our teen girls we can try to set them on the course for developing a good self-concept as well as providing discipline so that their behavior remains within reasonable bounds. In setting the stage for good teen self-esteem and behavior, I've found that aside from crossing your fingers and hoping for the best, parents should:

- Pick their battles wisely, letting the little stuff go while digging your heels in on the bigger issues.
- Try to understand how the teen girl feels, perceives and defines her world.
- Endeavor to remember how being 13 was for you (luckily I've kept an old diary and it confirms many of my not so fond memories—mostly of loneliness or feelings of rejection).
- Become informed about today's teen girl culture and issues—fear of AIDS, prevalent sexual activity (oral or otherwise).
- Understand your daughter's quest to be your own persona, within the constraints of tremendous peer pressure to conform to often arbitrary rules and regulations.
- Learn about lunchroom politics that may be downright cruel.
- Realize that "thin is in", whether it's healthy or not, and that food often becomes an issue during adolescence.

- Find and retain the guts to parent wisely, even though your teen girl may profess to hate you at the moment.
- Understand the lure of substance use and abuse and find out what you can do to better drug-proof your daughter.
- Learn to listen *effectively* even though the kid is being unreasonable, bull-headed, or just downright selfish.
- Set rules that are fair, clear, and capable of being followed consistently.
- Figure out how to rescue your daughter from the claws of the MTV vulture and culture.
- Promote a sense of spirituality (not necessarily religious, but moral in nature) which will assure her of a lifetime of direction even though there will be lots of curves in the road.
- Implement a family code of values necessitating giving to others, not just taking.
- Instill a desire for involvement—be it in sports, hobbies, academics or volunteering—anything that gets her butt off of the couch and into the minds and hearts of others.

Since you are the woman in their lives, your thoughts, compassion and just being there for them are of the utmost importance. Be sensitive to the fact that you are the newcomer to the family, and respect their special relationship with their father. Realize, though, that you bring a potentially unique relationship to the table—a female bond that even their father won't be privy to. Take it slow, try to understand the patterns of their ups and downs, respect their need for a good cry and their privacy. But, if you get the gut feeling that more help is needed than you or their father can offer, consider some guidance with a therapist or counselor during especially trying times. I've found that many times girls will listen to and accept my thoughts and advice, even when their folks have previously sent the same message. Be patient, this too shall pass!