

**The Secret Life of Teens:
What you don't know about them –
What they may not want to know about themselves...**

*Thomas F. Barrett, Ph.D. – © Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development 2007
Originally Presented to the Intown Club of Cleveland – March 12, 2007*

Professionals have long struggled to understand and work effectively with teenagers. This has been equally true for parents, and even grandparents. Too often, we over-control or micromanage teens to get them to do what we want them to do. As a result we end up treating them as though they are younger than they are. At other times we do the opposite. We treat them as though they are young adults. When we want a weekend away with our spouse we think our teenage children should be able to stay home alone and manage as if we were there.

This confusion about what our children are ready for starts early and lasts long. Even before they become teenagers, we overly-stimulate them by exposing them to the harsh realities of adult life – including its violence and sexuality.

We do this by not adequately supervising the movies or television they watch. Or, we provide them with cell phones, portable DVD or PSP players, laptops, and credit cards long before they need them and before they can be adequately responsible for their purchase, care, or use.

In a contrasting way we treat older teens as though they are younger than they are. Increasingly, we hear examples of what has come to be called the “helicopter” generation of parents – the ones who can't stop “hovering” over their young adult offspring. Some parents actually call their college student children each morning to wake them up or they place calls to the college professors of their children to complain about a poor grade received in a course or on an assignment.

This confusion over how to interact with our adolescent children is understandable inasmuch as the actual parameters of adolescence – when it begins and when it ends – are hard to pin down. It would be nice if we could point to the onset of menstruation for a girl, or a first “wet-dream” for a boy as the beginning of adolescence. Similarly, it would be ideal if graduation or one's 21st birthday signified its completion. Instead, we learn that girls menstruate at earlier and earlier ages and that boys become pubescent earlier, as well. There is also no clearly identified end to adolescence, as teenagers seem to drift through undergraduate school (something that used to take four years!) only then to take a year or two off to “find themselves” or “travel” before similarly drifting through graduate school. What may then follow is a protracted and often ambivalent job search.

Parents may hear, “Mom and Dad, I'm not really ‘living’ at home. I'm just staying here for a while until I decide what I'm going to do next. You wouldn't want me to rush into something I would later regret, would you? You wouldn't want me to waste my money on rent or on a lease that I would just have to get out of?” While I admit to

exaggerating a bit for effect, it is only a bit, as adolescence seems now to stretch from late elementary school to the late 20s or even early 30s.

Often we focus on the obnoxious or provocative words or actions of teenagers. By doing so we are responding to what is apparent on the outside. By contrast, we give little attention to what is going on inside, what we might call, “the secret life of teens.” I suspect there are many reasons for this, some of which run deep.

In many ways teens are like toddlers – they are awkward, often uncoordinated, and though they may spend what seems like hours in the bathroom, both they and their bedrooms tend to be messy and unkempt. Just as being around a toddler can threaten to bring an otherwise civilized adult to a toddler level, five minutes with a provocative, obnoxious, off-putting teenager can threaten to return a parent to a screaming, name-calling adolescent level of functioning. It may be that our wish to keep repressed painful memories of our own adolescence causes us to not want to know about the inner, “secret life of teens.”

But if we think it is painful for us to be with them, we might consider how being with themselves is even more painful for our teenagers. At least we are finished with adolescence. We know we’ve survived and we’re wise enough to not wish to return. But our teenagers have no certainty of what is on the other side and when or whether it will ever be reached.

Developmentally we might ask, “What’s going on?” At an obvious level there are the bodily changes with which we are all familiar. And, indeed, these changes are huge for a young person to assimilate. Each teenager must struggle to face the challenge of getting to know and coming to like and feel comfortable with what feels like an entirely new and different body.

In many ways though, attaining bodily maturity is the easy part, as the course of bodily change is inevitable, even inexorable. What is less certain is the progression toward emotional maturity, as, for teenagers, becoming emotionally mature includes the essential task of modifying the quality of their relationships with their parents.

On a conscious level this modification includes steps with which, again, we are familiar – the processes of growing up, leaving home, establishing oneself as an independent adult, choosing a career, falling in love with someone, getting married, starting a family, etc. What I would like to focus on though is what is less clear, what happens at a deeper, unconscious level where the task is to transform the quality of the original ties to one’s parents. This needs to happen for all teens so that over time those ties can be newly invested, again largely at an unconscious level, in a relationship with someone who, ideally, will become a partner for life.

We are all familiar with how the strong, unconscious ties to one’s parents begin in a child’s mind during earliest infancy. They emerge from instincts that are present at birth. These are the ties that promote and allow for safe and secure development. We are also familiar with how similar instinctual ties support development in virtually all other species. Unlike other species though, human ties to parents last much longer and are transformed and altered only gradually, with this often accompanied by considerable pain

and loneliness. It is this pain and loneliness and how our teenagers try to cope with it that I would like to think with you about this evening.

In my work with adolescents I've come to recognize how important feeling lonely is in the development of virtually every young person. While I recognize that some teens struggle with true, deep depression, I have come to suspect that what is often diagnosed as clinical depression (and then treated with medication) is actually a misdiagnosis and mistreatment of the normal and healthy (albeit painful) experience of feeling lonely. Furthermore, I've come to appreciate how helpful and even essential it is for young persons to be able face, feel, and recognize within themselves the ability to tolerate lonely feelings. When this can occur, the sense of mastery that results bolsters self esteem and facilitates the ability to progress toward mature adulthood.

I have come to recognize that adolescent loneliness has its own unique characteristics. Often, there occurs a painful inner craving for intimacy and closeness that can literally feel like an aching emptiness inside. Unlike cases of depression though, in adolescent loneliness one notices an underlying and important element of hope. In my work with more severely depressed teens I've often noticed an absence of hope. They tend not to talk much about childhood memories or experiences. In fact, if asked directly they may deny having such memories.

By contrast, less depressed teens or those who've made progress in treatment, tend to talk more spontaneously about childhood memories, including sad or conflicted as well as happy ones. I've come to understand this ability to recall and talk about memories as a sign of hope for the future. I base this on the recognition that one cannot look forward with a sense of optimism unless one can look backwards and recall and even emotionally invest a past when one felt happy and could master or at least "bear up" in the face of conflicts, sadness, and even trauma.

Perhaps this combination of hope and longing is what compels teenagers to turn to one another as an antidote to loneliness. A recent study of teenage behavior claimed that, through Internet or "text" messaging, teens connect with an average of 35 people for a total of three hours each week. In a related way, consider the immense popularity among teens of such Internet sites as "FaceBook," "MySpace," and "YouTube" where teens can both use (and abuse) the opportunity to compose, create and share information with one another, oftentimes spending several hours a day in such activities.

Studies have further noted that when not reaching out directly to peers in these ways, teens seek a sense of connection and fulfillment in the music with which they identify. Most teenagers spend between two and three hours a day downloading or listening to music online.

As a therapist of young teenagers I have often encountered a preoccupation with downloading music. One girl, I'll call her Michele, had a history of early losses in her life. She had become overweight and was a passive youngster who, though of high intelligence, was an average to mediocre student. She frequently lost her school books or "forgot" to turn in homework or study for tests. We observed how it seemed hard for her to hold on to what we came to call her "loving feelings" for herself.

Gradually, in our sessions she began to describe feeling lonely and empty inside. She reflected how in response to these feelings she often felt compelled to overeat. As these observations helped her gain better control over her eating she told me how each evening, while supposedly studying in her room, she was compelled to download music from the Internet. She knew that what she was doing was illegal but could not stop herself. She admitted having stolen thousands of tunes and acknowledged she could never enjoy listening to the music because all she could think of was “getting more.”

Like with many young persons like her, what proved most helpful with Michele was talking with her about her empty, lonely feelings. In doing this, rather than expressing concern that she was “depressed,” I focused on how her feelings were a sign of strength rather than a weakness. When Michele said that she saw no point in living, I disagreed and said that I thought her behavior was an indication to the contrary. Her wish to be “filled up” was a sign of how much she yearned to be able to connect and have meaningful relationships with others.

While much of significance followed in our work, this focus on Michele’s “empty,” lonely feelings proved a turning point. She became better able to feel hope for her future and, as a sense of self pride emerged, it led her to become more socially involved and academically successful. She began to participate in sports, lost weight and felt proud to be fit and active.

Perhaps because of her relatively young age, Michelle’s symptoms did not include the use of alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, or sexual activity. But as many of my high school and college-age patients have talked to me about comparable feelings of emptiness and loneliness, they have described their defensive and often excessive use of such substances and activities.

As I listened to teenagers describe to me their weekend and sometimes daily drinking excesses I came to recognize how their patterns of drinking were both quantitatively and qualitatively different from adult drinking.

From college students I learned that it is now the norm on college campuses that the “weekend” begins on Thursday evening. For many this has meant that drinking begins on Thursday afternoon since they feel they must be “blitzed” or “trashed,” as they put it, before going to a party or heading out for an evening of “bar hopping.” As the evening progresses, often extending through much of the night, there typically follows more, almost constant drinking, even to the point of passing out.

I further learned that teenage drinking often occurs in the context of any number of drinking games. A web search of such games reveals evidence of a subculture and a booming industry. Hundreds of sites pander to high school and college students offering rules for dozens of games including ones using sporting equipment, cups, cards, dice, or coins. Other games are played while watching television shows, movies, and even the State of the Union Address. For these games drinking is required when certain anticipated words, phrases or actions occur. Other websites are devoted to the sale of equipment, t-shirts, posters and drinking paraphernalia. And still others advertise locations for up-coming drinking game tournaments.

The most popular of the drinking games is one called “Beer Pong.” This game involves propelling a ping pong ball across a table in an effort to get it to land in one of several cups of beer. There are usually two teams of two people, each, with 10 cups or more of beer. When the ball lands in a full glass, a point is scored, and the loser consumes the contents of the cup where the ball landed. When a team has scored in all of their opponents' cups, the game is won.

As I puzzled over these reports from my teenage patients about their drinking activities, I found myself struggling to understand and make sense out of what I was hearing. I’ve always been leery of explanations of “peer pressure” or the claim that “it’s what everyone does.” And, I was impressed by the driven, even obsessive degree to which some teens pursued these drinking activities.

John was a high school junior who’d come for counseling with the presenting problem of falling grades. While he found it hard to talk about it, he was a painfully lonely young man. The oldest in his family, John was terrified by the challenge of “measuring up” to what he complained were his parents’ standards (though they were also really his own). He dreaded the thought of graduating and going off to college as he found unimaginable the thought of saying “good-bye” to his friends. Though he defended himself with humor and sarcasm, we took note of his feelings of loneliness and emptiness. Occasionally, as he talked of his feelings his eyes would fill with tears.

At one point he cautiously shared that he’d begun to have feelings about a girl in his peer group. But, he was certain she could never really care about him. When she began to go with his best friend, John denied feeling hurt and instead committed himself to being “like a big brother to her.” In his self-imposed rejection he could think of little else during his sessions than to strategize about which house he and his friends would occupy during the coming weekend (meaning whose parents would be away) so they could party and play beer pong.

Over several weeks he regaled me with the events of the previous weekend, often telling how he’d needed to provide assistance to various peers who’d gotten drunk. While he, too, would drink, he managed to remain less drunk than the others so that he could chauffeur friends home or be the one to speak with police who might be called to the party house by complaining neighbors.

Over time John gained insight into how he yearned to be needed and to be viewed, at least in the eyes of his peers if not his parents, as the “responsible” one that they could count on.

Another high school junior, I’ll call him Evan, was bereaved following the death of his older brother and the subsequent divorce of his parents. Evan’s mother had become depressed, withdrawn, and preoccupied while his father had defended against his helpless feelings by immersing himself in his work.

Evan took respite and escape in beer pong games that he played with his male peers, as often on weekday nights as on weekends. An extremely bright young man, Evan got by in school with minimal effort. He daydreamed through most days, filling his mind with ruminative debates and pseudo-intellectual conversations with himself.

Though Evan resisted admitting to feeling lonely, he acknowledged how much he missed his brother. He felt angry and helpless that he'd not been able to prevent his brother's death, and was furious with his parents for divorcing. Because of his continuing need for his defenses, it was a long time before he could consider that his beer pong games with friends provided an escape from all he was feeling.

As I reflected on my work with these and similar adolescents, I became convinced that there was something about their compulsive drinking I was failing to appreciate – something about being “blitzed” or “trashed” that played an essential role in defending against their conflicts and feelings.

Like Michele, who felt compelled to try to fill herself up with first more and more food and then with pirated songs from the Internet, my older adolescent patients were literally trying to fill up the emptiness they felt inside by drinking alcohol which brought with it the added advantage of converting (at least temporarily) their depression, sadness and loneliness into opposite feelings of euphoria. What proved essential in each case was to consider how their efforts at facing and bearing up under their lonely feelings were in fact signs of strength and indications of a core feeling of hope. To the extent that each could view loneliness as an important developmental accomplishment, an indication of a yearning for a new relationship, it meant that he or she really did want to grow up to become an independent adult. Rather than depression and despair, or emptiness and loneliness, each could come to see in him or herself a sense of capacity and optimism. Realizing this brought with it a sense of pleasure that enabled each to begin to turn away from a dependence on manic defensive behaviors.

I have noted similar defensive qualities in such behaviors as drug usage, cigarette smoking, and promiscuous sexual activity. And, I would further add that, while the reasons are complex, loneliness is also among the myriad factors that contribute to eating disorders and symptoms of cutting or self-hurting.

For too long I fear that we have rather simplistically tended to think that teenagers use drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes, and act out sexually as ways to gain access to aspects of the adult world that they feel to be otherwise withheld from them.

We are all aware of how considerable time and money gets spent on “educational” efforts, beginning in early elementary school, to convince children to avoid the use of these products and to abstain from sexual activity. After hearing such lectures at school, children come home and criticize their parents for driving home from a restaurant after having a glass of wine with dinner. They express disgust over the uncle who smokes. And, they assert that they will never give in to older peers who might some day tempt them to take drugs or to act out sexually. Yet, these are the same children who, as adolescents only a few years later, turn to these very behaviors.

What I am suggesting is that this is not a failure of our educational system. Rather, it is a failure on our part to sufficiently appreciate how the use of these substances and behaving in these ways meshes with the defensive need teenagers have to ward off the painfully lonely feelings that are so typical of adolescence.

In other words, this is not only “substance abuse” or sexual acting-out, per se. Teens engage in any number of manic-like, driven behaviors that range from pirating

music from the Internet to excessively “IM-ing” one another, to binge-eating or hoarding food or other objects. If understood at their basic, defensive level, these behaviors are undertaken in an attempt to “fill-up” the emptiness they feel inside as they struggle with the developmental requirement of modifying the quality of their unconscious dependent ties to their parents.

Lest you may think that my experiences are out of the ordinary, I feel that I can confidently say that the teenagers I have treated in therapy are not that different from teens that are not in counseling. In fact, as indicated by their ability to seek out and utilize such help for themselves, many have relatively more ego strength.

I have come to believe that what I am describing is a relatively typical – perhaps even necessary – defensive process. It is undertaken in one form or another by virtually every teenager in response to that secret, inside part that even they often try to avoid or deny.

If this is true, the question that logically follows is to ask how we can best respond to help our teenagers traverse this painful path. My experience causes me to advocate for what you may think of as an inadequate solution. But, simply put, I feel that what we especially need to do is to talk with our teenagers and, even more importantly, we need to listen to them. Most teenagers, their seeming defensiveness to the contrary, if given sufficient respect, time, and permission to do so, are eager to have someone with whom they can talk – someone who will be there to listen and to help them listen to themselves. For many teens this can be done with a parent, or with some other caring, invested adult like a relative, a teacher, a coach, or a clergyperson. And, when warranted, we should suggest and support the idea that teenagers consider counseling or therapy.

Oftentimes, it’s just such a relationship that allows even the relatively depressed and frightened teenager to begin to find hope and courage for the future. Moreover, since they are inundated with bodily changes and developmental challenges, teenagers are actually all the more primed for the task of self-observation. Once they are helped to begin to share what they are able to notice about themselves and the world around them, the dialogue that follows helps them to feel more valued and respected.

This happens because two essential processes occur. The first is that through talking teens become active. We know that a key component of a manic defense is an effort to be active so as to ward off an underlying feeling of passivity that gets equated with a sense of helplessness and a feeling of loneliness. The process of talking and the thinking that leads to conversation are both forms of activity that are far preferable to the acting out involved in substance usage, sexual promiscuity and the other behaviors I have described.

The second essential process that occurs as a consequence of dialogue is that a young person begins to feel “filled-up” inside with the sense that “I’m a ‘somebody.’” When teenagers are really listened to and taken seriously they come to feel that their thoughts and ideas matter. They begin to feel that what they notice about themselves and the world around them has value and credibility.

One of the reasons that it can feel hard, if not impossible, to have a conversation with a teenager is that too often we wait until a crisis or a conflict has occurred before

making such an attempt. What I am advocating is not a quick fix and some crises require interventions that go far beyond conversation. But, if parents of teenagers take stock of their lives and family environments to think of ways to build in more time for casual and comfortable talking and spending time together, it is often surprising the benefit that can be obtained.

The old fashioned idea of a regular family mealtime might be considered. This kind of strategy works much more effectively when it is implemented when children are still relatively young and before feelings of loneliness and disenfranchisement have become so strong for a teenager. But, even in families with teens where conflict already seems to simmer it is never too late to try. And, if one's efforts are patient and consistent, without erring on the side of creating what just feels like another rule or punishment, it is possible to bridge the divide and to begin to connect in meaningful and caring ways, especially if parents can truly convey a sense of respect and basic trust.

Even as I advocate in this way it should be acknowledged that there is yet another point to be made about loneliness and the way it can emerge to cause problems in the relationships between teenagers and their parents. This time though, rather than focusing on teenage loneliness, I would ask you to consider the loneliness experienced by parents themselves as their children strive to become independent of them. In other words, I ask you consider the "Secret Life of Parents of Teens."

In a very real way the loneliness that parents experience can be just as painful as it is for teens. And, as with teens, parents, too, employ defenses against their loneliness.

Usually, the defensiveness takes one of two forms. In one version parents leave first – before being left. This can occur in both physical and emotional ways. I referred earlier to parents who want to go away for an extended weekend, leaving their teenagers home alone. More dramatically, they may identify with the emerging sexuality of their children by becoming unfaithful in their marriage with this then leading to separation or divorce.

In more subtle ways parents can also withdraw their investment in their teenage children by not really wanting to know or by not paying sufficient attention to their activities and peer relationships. When anxious parents ask questions and act like they care and want to know, their children see through this. Perhaps sensing their parents' need not to know, they find it easy to lie to them. In these instances though I would stress that while teens may seem to take advantage of such opportunities to deceive their parents, at an underlying level what they are left feeling is a sense of resentment and regret.

As I described earlier in my example of the "helicopter parents," things can also turn to the opposite extreme. Rather than leaving first, parents might defend against loneliness by actively resisting and prohibiting the attempts of their children to make even modest strides toward independence. Some try to be their teenager's best "friend." Others treat them as much younger than they are and maintain attitudes and patterns of behavior that are overly controlling and intrusive.

Sometimes this can cause unexpected problems. Many times I have heard the parents of an almost 16 year old assert during a parent session their plan that unless their

child keeps up his or her grades the parents will withhold from their child the opportunity to drive. If they persist with this plan, it often occurs that their child repeatedly fails – usually just barely – to reach the required grade point level. What the parents have not understood is their child’s loneliness and fear of growing up. Faced with such a challenge or a requirement of more mature behavior young persons will often opt to remain little. Since, at a conscious level, they are defended against knowing about their fears and loneliness, they typically continue to fight with their parents and complain about the restrictions placed on them. Sometimes, if the parents then relent, an anxious child will find another way to avoid his or her fears as by getting a traffic ticket or denting the car or some other act that will again cause driving privileges to be revoked. Here, as before, the only viable solution is to be able to engage in dialogue about the worries and the fears – feelings that are part and parcel of the loneliness teenagers feel at the prospect of growing up and leaving home.

In summary, to become independent adults adolescents must transform the deep emotional ties they have to their parents to be able to extend those ties, eventually, to the persons they will ultimately love in a similar deep and enduring way – the persons with whom they will share their adult lives. Even in relatively healthy teens this is often a protracted, conflict-laden process, one that results in an intolerable sense of loss.

While, as a result, many teens may appear clinically depressed, I’ve suggested that what is often diagnosed as clinical depression (and in turn medicated as such) is better understood as a unique, adolescent form of loneliness. This loneliness is typical of the phase and is often accompanied by what teens describe as an intense feeling of “emptiness” inside.

Many teens, perhaps even most, resort, at least from time to time, to what I have termed “manic defenses” that are designed to fill up this emptiness. These defenses can include the compulsive acquisition of substitute gratifications that are sought to replace what is felt to be lost. Such substitutes can include the friends and peers with whom they seem driven to associate and interact – even strangers with whom they might connect through various websites. In this context I would note that when young persons seem constantly to be involved with friends and peers, it is easy to misinterpret this as a sign that they are not lonely, rather than recognizing the driven way in which they pursue these relationships and involvement as a defensive attempt to ward off loneliness.

Alternately, young persons might excessively turn to the music they can download from the Internet, or they may overeat or turn to the use of alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs. Or they may engage in promiscuous sexual encounters. All are attempts to transform (albeit briefly) their lonely feelings into ones of euphoria or happiness.

Still other teenagers progress to even more worrisome behaviors. They may show symptoms of an eating disorder or they may engage in cutting or other self-hurting acts, even to the point of becoming suicidal. While I have not focused on these more severe forms of teenage behavior and distress, without minimizing the complex factors that lead to such actions, I would stress that in each of these symptom clusters, this developmentally typical form of adolescent loneliness also plays a contributing part.

As my adolescent patients have faced and mastered their lonely feelings they have been able to reduce and ultimately relinquish their dependence upon manic defenses.

As they give voice to their lonely feelings they come to recognize an underlying strength that is indicative of a sense of hope and a yearning for a future that will bring with it new opportunities for mature and satisfying adult-level relationships.

If rather than telling our teenagers what to do or how to think and behave we instead ask them to be the ones to tell us about what they observe, what sense they make of their lives and of the world around them, what values they are forming; the active process that results can go a long way toward helping them become not only independent persons in their own right, but persons about whom their parents and all who know them can be proud.

When in a related way the parents of adolescents struggle to defend against their lonely feelings they, too, are helped by the opportunity to face, feel, and talk about them. The importance of this cannot be overstated. How many times we hear it said that parent-child relationships that get fractured during adolescence seem never to be repaired?

We should not think that these struggles with loneliness are new or a unique consequence of our current era; or that it is hopeless. These same struggles have been noted throughout the generations and are often portrayed in literature and in film. We have only to recall the lonely adventures of Holden Caulfield in Catcher in the Rye or Judy's words in the film *Rebel without a Cause* when, while holding a wounded Jim in her arms she gives voice to a dawning realization as she says, "For so long I've wanted someone to love me but now I have someone to love."

This is the progression that all teens must, and most do make as they go from being loved and wanting the love of their parents during their childhood years through a transformative process that results in being ready and available to extend unconditional love to another in a mature adult relationship. If we can hold in our minds that this is their journey – and that our task is both to let them go... and to help them get there – the outcome can be a happier one for all.