



H.O.P.E.

Helping Our Parents Endure

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NEWSLETTER



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How Parents Make Things Worse for Struggling College Students

It's a familiar, annual sight during the college orientations I run: at the snack break, a handful of sad looking students peel off from the crowd, wearing carefully curated first-day outfits and clutching their phones. They cluster along the edges of the room, or just outside, murmuring quietly to their parents. If their hair is long enough, it will hang over their faces to cover tears.

I imagine the nervous parents pacing on the other end of the line, stomach in knots as they listen to anguished kids. For many of them, it is the first time they will nurture their children at a distance. Many are surely thrilled that their struggling teen calls at all. After all, isn't a kid who bends your ear what we call a parenting win?

It depends, researchers say. Psychologists have identified a style of communication between parents and adolescent children that can have the opposite effect of soothing. Co-rumination occurs when we dwell with our kids on their problems, worry about a problem's causes, focus on a child's negative feelings and egg each other on to keep talking. Originally discovered in 2002 as a phenomenon occurring among friends, co-ruminating – also called perseverating or overthinking aloud with a companion -- has been linked by University of Missouri psychologist Amanda Rose to both closeness in relationship and anxiety and depression.

In other words, repetitive talking about problems brings us closer, but it can also make us unhappy. Co-rumination also interferes with people's ability and motivation to solve problems, too, largely because it's more about talking about challenges than taking action to address them. It is more likely to occur among girls and women.

In 2008, Christine Calmes and John Roberts, professors at the State University of New York in Buffalo, found that undergraduates who co-ruminated with a parent were more likely to say they suffered from anxiety. The researchers speculated these conversations were more "passive, repetitive and negative" compared to worries

shared with others. And in 2013, Rose and Erika Waller published data in the *Journal of Adolescence* that strongly suggested adolescents who co-ruminated with their mothers were more likely to do it with friends, and to develop “internalizing symptoms” like depression and anxiety. In their study’s conclusion, Rose and Waller advised that “mothers who co-ruminate with their adolescent children should be aware that they may be modeling a communication style that, if replicated with friends, could have negative emotional consequences.”

Is the answer to change your phone number, ignore SOS texts, or avoid talking about their problems? Of course not. You can, however, take a moment to consider whether you’re co-ruminating with a struggling child. Calmes and Roberts take pains to point out that “it is the manner in which...pairs are discussing problems, as opposed to the fact that they are discussing problems, that makes co-rumination depressogenic.”

Or, as my mom always says, “It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it.”

You might ask yourself these questions:

- Do you spend most of your quality time with your child talking about their problems, and for a long time? Does this tend to happen every time you see each other or talk?
- Do you spend a lot of time talking about how bad they feel as a result of their problems?
- Do you spend a lot of time trying to figure out parts of their problem that you can’t understand, the reasons why the problem has occurred, and every bad thing that might happen because of the problem?
- Do you encourage them to keep talking about their problems at different times?
- Do you do this instead of doing other activities together?

Co-ruminating conversations are often painfully circular: we go around and around as we wonder, speculate and emote about our problems. What we don’t do is problem solve and make a decision. Long conversations that dwell on hard feelings can keep kids tethered to their parents at the very moment they need to strike out on their own. To shift away from co-ruminating with your child, you’ll need to let go together of what you don’t (or can’t) know the answer to, and embrace what is in your control to change.

ORID is a problem solving method that was developed to help individuals and groups break free of indecision. You can also use it to redirect conversations that are becoming too ruminative.

Say your child is talking with you about a roommate she doesn’t like. The roommate is inconsiderate and unfriendly and, on top of that, doesn’t seem to realize he’s a royal slob. Your daughter sounds despondent: it’s only the second week of school. How will she survive for an entire academic year?

Your first line of questions should be objective: ask her what she actually knows to be true. What events have occurred? What has the roommate said and done? What did your daughter say or do in reply? Stick with the who, what, where, when and how. No whys. Don't let your daughter start editorializing (Can you believe how rude she is? How am I going to study when he's so insanely loud?!). Remain on the solid ground of evidence, and what she knows to be true right now.

Your next set of questions are reflective: How does she feel about this? Is she angry? Betrayed? Disappointed? Let her vent a bit about how the roommate assignment process is rigged, and whether pitching a tent on the quad is legal.

Now, move to interpretive questions: What does this mean for her? What is the impact of having an inconsiderate, unfriendly roommate? How will that affect her emotionally, socially and academically?

Finally, move to decisional questions: What is she going to do about this, and how can you help her? What campus resources are available, and what's the best next step? Is it to confront her roommate, talk to residence life staff, or try to switch rooms? What's the school's policy and protocol?

One sign that your child might prefer co-ruminating is that you get blown off when you direct him to the decisional questions. This is where you might hear, It's hopeless. There's nothing I can do. I can't believe he left his dirty laundry on my bed! Or: I knew I should have gone to that other school.

Here's what you might say in response: "I know you're upset. I get it, and I would be, too. But at some point, we have to move forward, try to address what's happening and make this better for you. The best way for us to move forward is to figure out your next steps. Let's do that together." Empathy will be key. When your child believes you really respect what he's feeling, he'll be much more likely to trust you.

Co-ruminating is, at its core, a bad social habit. It's not genetic, nor is it unavoidable. It can help to imagine co-ruminating as a track your conversation is chugging along. We have to shift onto a more positive conversational track to start generating better thoughts. This fall, as kids set out on new adventures, the real parenting win won't just be a phone that rings, but a conversation that combines empathy with problem solving, refuses to linger in sadness, and nudges them into the next chapter of their lives.

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