



# *Support Self-Trust in Teens*

by woven relational therapy

How can I support a teen I know with the lower self-trust and fear that occurs after trauma?

for caregivers, adult mentors, parents, and adults with influence



# trauma & self-trust

Attachment, developmental, or complex trauma early in life can lead to anxious, distressed, or avoidant coping behavior as a way to manage an ongoing sensitivity to rejection, abandonment, uncertainty, or disconnection.

This can negatively impact relationships, positive coping, self-trust, and the ability to manage life's stressors.

**Self-trust** can be defined as the the ability trust our own emotions, experiences, needs, abilities, and judgment. It helps us trust what we're feeling so we know how to respond, take care of ourselves, set boundaries, and feel that we can ask for what we need. Self trust is linked to self confidence and reduces overwhelm.

If a teen learns coping skills, but does not trust what they're feeling or experiencing, it may be hard to use those skills and feel difficult to manage life's stressors.

**Safe adults can help teens build a sense of self-trust.**





# signs of self-trust

<p>Awareness of what you are feeling and the ability to label your emotions and bodily signals</p>	<p>Setting boundaries with others so you can prioritize your well-being and values</p>
<p>Trusting that your emotions are real, valid, and there is a reason you are feeling them</p>	<p>Trusting yourself when you want to say No and sharing that honestly</p>



# trauma symptoms in teens

These are common signs, but this is not a full or individualized list. Some of these are normal developmental behaviors, but can become intense or hard to manage due to past traumatic experiences.

## **fear of loss or abandonment**

this may not be something a teen shares openly, but may look like a fear of losing friends, fear of separation, fear of a loved one dying, fear of a parent leaving, or panic related to the loss of any relationship

## **wanting more control over their environment**

wanting to have their own things not be touched by others or feeling panicked when their environment (room/home/school) changes

## **questioning their self-worth**

they may make statements about themselves not feeling important or generally negative statements about their value to others



## **anxiety and/or depression**

these mental health challenges have an array of symptoms including isolation, irritability, chronic worry, difficulty sleeping, oversleeping, low energy, and more

## **heightened social distress**

this could take many forms, including worrying about others opinions, seeking validation, isolating from others, or becoming preoccupied with how others see or judge them

## **self harm**

self-harm could take the form of physically cutting themselves, unsafe substance use, or emotionally punishing themselves with negative self-talk

## **there may also be....**

fear of asking for closeness, hugs, and affection

seeking reassurance or validation

difficulty, uncertainty, hiding, or spiraling when experiencing certain emotions like sadness, disappointment, or guilt

lying, defiance, rebellion, or becoming withdrawn

(\*this list does not include all behaviors or symptoms)







# how can you support them?

Close and supportive relationships are an essential resource for teens to have so they can develop self-trust and manage distress.


## **consistency**

- use the teen's preferred type of communication
- consistently say, "I'm here for you"
- consistently express that you look forward to seeing them

## **encourage self-validation**

- avoid telling them how they *should* feel or dismissing their emotions.
- encourage them to trust and validate themselves. (ex: tell me more about how you're feeling / what's that like for you? what do you think you need to do for yourself?)

## **stay engaged**

- listening to teens without interruptions encourages self-trust by showing what they're sharing is important
  - mirror and repeat what they say (ex:...am I hearing you correctly? just to check, is this what you said?)
  - try to avoid distractions, like your phone, when they share
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## attunement

- curiosity supports connection, so be curious first
- offer acknowledgement and validation (ex: “you sound overwhelmed” or “that sounds important”)
- tune into their underlying needs rather than the surface behaviors (ex: “are you trying to say you want someone to care about how you feel?” or “are you staying in your room because you feel overwhelmed?”)

## help them understand their decisions and values

- ask questions to help them identify their top 3 or 4 guiding values that they can use to make decisions
- if you notice a pattern of behavior at home or with their peers, instead of offering an initial correction, ask them how and why they made that decision
- help them name negative and positive beliefs they have about themselves and ask what they want to feel instead

## be a calm emotional guide

- know the signs they are emotionally dysregulated:
  - hyper-arousal = anger, panic, distress, overwhelm
  - hypo-arousal = zoned out, frozen, low energy
- model calmness and help them name what they’re feeling
- help them tune into the distress signs in their body

## model relationship repair

- after an argument, ask them for a “do-over” and tell them one way you wished that conversation had gone differently
- tell them you still care about them even if you disapprove of their behavior or attitude
- model accountability by offering an apology when needed and asking them for an apology when needed

## connecting questions

these questions can help them connect with themselves and others, which is helpful in developing self-trust:

- do you need space or do you want to talk?
- did you make any important decisions today?
- what is one thing I do that makes you feel like I care?
- what is one area of your life you would want me to be more curious about?
- what is one thing you’ve been nervous to talk about?

It is important to respond with reassurance. We do not have to agree, we merely need to acknowledge their emotions are real and help them feel valuable. This list does not offer “quick fixes” and requires a long term commitment. This list also does not include a safety plan for unsafe behavior.