

# Healthy Responses to Self Criticism

By Rebecca Meiser

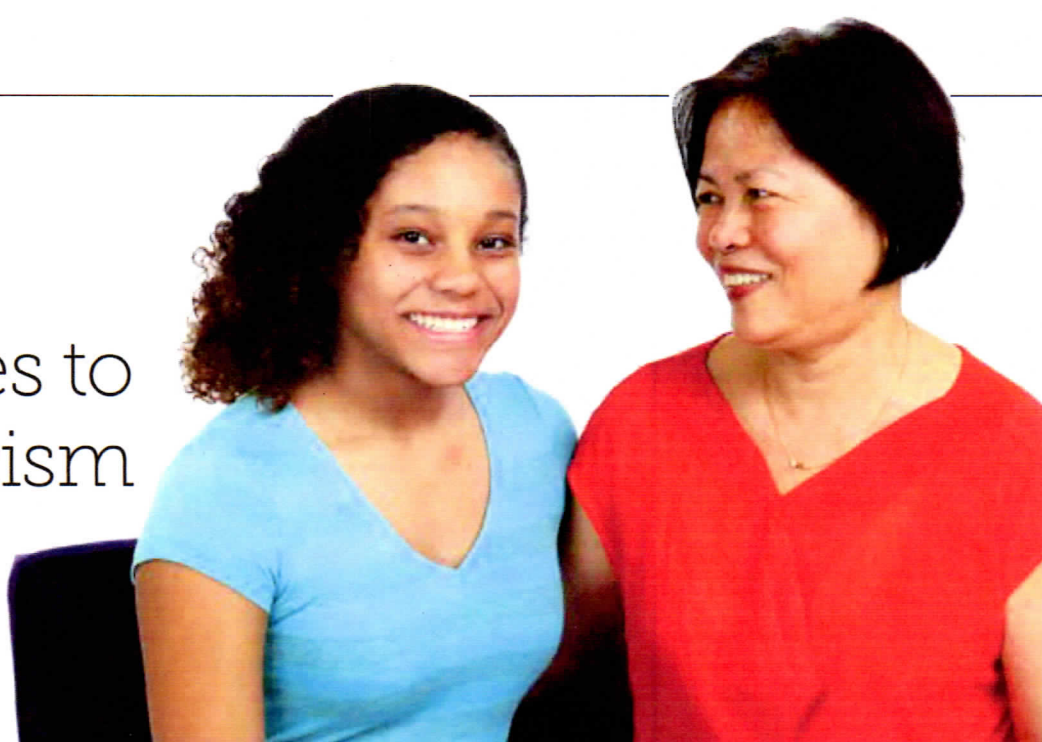


Photo: Beth Segal

There was a time, not too long ago, when, in the eyes of Sammy, their teenaged daughter, Deborah Smith and her husband could not say or do anything right. Sammy was going through a phase where she felt insecure about almost everything: her appearance, academics—and especially how her parents would act around her friends.

“One time, at a school event, my husband made a joke, and Sammy just burst into tears in embarrassment,” Deborah recalls. “It was like she felt judged all day, every day.”

Deborah hurt for her daughter—and also a tiny bit for herself. Insecurity—the feeling that you are not good enough—is terrible for a teenager, and just as awful for the parent who is watching.

“It’s difficult to hear our children speak poorly of themselves,” says Dr. Deborah Gilboa, a parent and youth development expert and founder of the advice site *AskDoctorG.com*. “Both because we like them so much and because we fear what their insecurity means. We fear the pain they’re going to experience and the bad choices they might make because of those insecurities.”

Often a parent’s first instinct is to deny their child’s statements. *No, you totally don’t have big teeth honey. Or: You’re good at math. That test was just really hard.*

As well-meaning as these responses are, turns out they’re not very helpful. “Denying your teenager’s insecurities makes your teenager feel invalidated. They just think that you don’t understand them,” explains Dr. Barbara Greenberg, a Connecticut-based clinical psychologist and co-author of *Teenage as a Second Language: A Parent’s Guide to Becoming Bilingual*.

Often, Greenberg says, these self-slanders about “feeling fat” or “feeling ugly” are really stand-ins for other, deeper emotions. “Your teen might have a fight with their peers, and then all of sudden they feel ugly,” Dr. Greenberg explains. “For a lot of girls, that’s code for something else that’s going on.” What Greenberg encourages in these situations is to keep the dialogue open and prod a little bit, asking your teen why she is feeling that way.

Though it may take some willpower on your end, it is possible to honor your teenager’s feelings without agreeing with him. “You can say things like: *I hear that you are feeling ugly. That’s not what I see, but I understand that’s how you’re feeling,*” Dr. Gilboa suggests.

Teens don’t always want you to fix their problems. Oftentimes, they just want your ear. “Sometimes the best thing we can do for our children is to provide a safe place where they can express their feelings without us trying to solve everything,” Dr. Gilboa explains.

And unwittingly, when we do try to fix things for our teenagers, we

can actually end up negatively affecting their self-esteem. “It disempowers your teenager and makes them feel incompetent,” Dr. Greenberg notes.

There are small things you can do, though, to help your child lift himself up. At home, give your child the opportunity to do things she is good at. If she has a keen design sense, ask her to help rearrange the living room furniture, for instance. Teens like to feel competent, Gilboa says. If your child is having a hard time socially at school, you can ask if he wants to join a youth group or try out a new summer camp. This gives him access to a different, wider net of people—which might be what your child needs to feel better about himself, Greenberg says.

It may help both you and your child to remember that everyone has insecurities. Even the most confident people hate the way their hair looks sometimes. It is part of everyone’s burden and journey in life to learn how to live with—and occasionally even cherish—these flaws.

Though her daughter is “mostly over” her sensitive phase (“*Thankfully,*” Deborah says), she knows the process to self-acceptance is never easy for either parent or child. Possibly the best thing a parent can do during this time is offer a child some grace and sympathy. ■