



Sujata Kelkar Shetty

We spend endless hours worrying about our teenagers — their exam stress, their social media habits, their mood swings. However, we rarely turn the spotlight on ourselves, the parents navigating this beautiful yet chaotic phase right alongside them. Parenting a teen is a high-wire act performed while we ourselves are often juggling midlife challenges: ageing parents, career pressures, and our own changing health. We are expected to be the calm, steady anchor, but who anchors the anchor? This is the heart of resilient parenting: showing up for your teen means you must first learn to show up for yourself.

Understanding the 'Ferrari Brain'

To parent resiliently, we must first understand what we're working with. My research has taught me that the adolescent brain is like a high-performance Ferrari — all engine, power, and potential, but with brakes that are still under construction. The prefrontal cortex, responsible for judgement, impulse control, and foreseeing consequences, is the last part to mature fully, not until the mid-20s.

Meanwhile, the amygdala — the emotional and reactive centre of the brain — is in the driver's seat. This isn't a design flaw; it's what fuels their passion, creativity, and courage to eventually leave the nest. But it also explains the exasperating impulsivity, the emotional storms, and the perplexing inability to remember to take out the trash despite a dozen reminders.

When we understand this, our frustration transforms into empathy. Our teen's distraction isn't a personal slight against our parenting; it is a neurological reality. Our role shifts from being a disciplinarian to being a co-pilot, helping them navigate until their own internal GPS is fully wired. This knowledge is liberating — it allows us to depersonalise their behaviour and respond with strategic calm instead of reactive panic.

The power of co-regulation

You cannot regulate a dysregulated nervous system from another dysregulated nervous system. This is the science behind the old adage, "calm yourself first."

Our teens' brains are highly attuned to our emotional states — a process called co-regulation. When their amygdala is firing, triggering fight-or-flight, our number one job is to ensure our own prefrontal cortex remains online.

This means when your teen slams his door after a frustrating day, your most powerful move isn't to engage immediately. It is to take a deep breath, perhaps in the kitchen, and activate your own parasympathetic nervous system. Only from that place of calm can you then knock and say, "I'm here when you're ready to talk."

By modelling emotional regulation, we literally offer our calm as a template for their developing brains to download.

We are not just teaching resilience; we are biologically transmitting it through our presence.

From manager to consultant

Resilient parenting requires a fundamental identity shift: from manager to consultant. In childhood, we manage their schedules, their meals, and their playdates. In adolescence, this management becomes a cage, inciting rebellion and stifling the independence they are hardwired to seek.

Our new role is that of a trusted consultant. We are on call, our expertise is valued, but we are not running the company. This means asking, "What's your plan for studying for that physics test?" instead of dictating the study schedule. It means letting them fail a small quiz and then helping them analyse what went wrong, rather than preventing the failure altogether. This is how they build self-efficacy — the unshakable belief that they can handle life's challenges. Our job is not to clear the path for them, but to have faith in their ability to navigate the obstacles, with us safely in their corner.

Parenting my 18-year-old taught me a crucial lesson: adolescence doesn't happen in a vacuum. In our case, his teenage years unfolded against the backdrop of our own midlife challenges. My husband and I were hitting our professional peaks just as we began dealing with the declining health of our parents.

I vividly remember those exhausting days. After navigating work deadlines and frantic calls to geriatric doctors, I would then have to switch gears completely to address the needs of a silent, sullen teenager who had just had a bad day at school.

Sustainable parenting

Megha Sekhsaria Mawandia, a counsellor and founder of Triyoke, perfectly articulated this for me: "The village that shows up when children are young disappears when they become teenagers. And parents are simply exhausted — they just don't have enough juice to give."

We are human. We get tired, irritable, and overwhelmed. Acknowledging this is not a sign of failure; it's the first step toward sustainable parenting. Our teens don't need perfect parents. They need real ones — parents who can model how to handle stress, admit mistakes, and prioritise well-being.

When my older son was in the thick of his teen years, I often found myself listening to respond, not to understand. I was ready with solutions, advice, and occasionally, dismissals like "You'll get over it" or "This isn't a big deal." It took me time to understand that what he needed most was not a fixer, but a witness.

Active listening is the cornerstone of connection. It means:

1 Putting your phone away: The simple, physical act of giving your teen your undivided attention signals that they matter.

2 Listening for feeling, not just fact: Behind the story about a friend's betrayal or a teacher's unfairness is a feeling of hurt, anger, or injustice. Validate that. Try saying, "It sounds like that made you feel really angry. I get that."

3 Asking open-ended questions: Instead of "How was your day?" (which invites a "fine"), try "What was the most interesting thing you learned today?" or "Tell me about something that made you laugh."

4 Resisting the urge to solve: Often, our role is to simply hold space. The most powerful question you can ask is, "Would you like my advice, or do you just need me to listen?"

Riding through the teen storm

You can't steady your teen without first steadying yourself. Parenting teenagers through midlife stressors requires self-regulation and empathy.

Dr Sujata Kelkar Shetty emphasises the emotional resilience parents need to support teen mental health without exhausting themselves in the process



DH ILLUSTRATION: SAJITH KUMAR

3 Academic decline: A sudden, unexplained drop in grades or loss of interest in school.

4 Expressions of hopelessness: Phrases like "I can't do anything right," "No one would care if I were gone," or "I just want to give up."

5 Increased irritability: Anger and frustration that seem disproportionate to the situation.

These can be triggers for underlying mental health issues like anxiety or depression. Ignoring them, hoping it's "just a phase," is a gamble we cannot afford. Half of all serious adult psychiatric conditions begin in the teen years. Early intervention is everything. Your

When your teen slams his door after a frustrating day, your most powerful move isn't to engage immediately. It is to take a deep breath, perhaps in the kitchen, and activate your own parasympathetic nervous system.

first port of call should be your paediatrician, who can guide you to a qualified therapist or counsellor.

You cannot pour from an empty cup. This is not a cliché; it is a physiological fact. Parenting from a place of exhaustion and depletion helps no one. When we are burned out, we become reactive, short-tempered, and emotionally unavailable — the exact opposite of what our teens need.

Don't forget to take care of yourself!

Self-care is not selfish; it is strategic. It is how we ensure we have the emotional and physical reserves to be the parents we want to be. This isn't about

lavish spa days (though those are nice!). It's about consistent, small acts of replenishment:

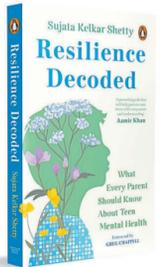
1 Meet your physical needs: Prioritise 7-8 hours of sleep. Move your body for 30 minutes — a walk in any local park counts. Eat foods that fuel you, not just fill you.

2 Meet your emotional needs: Schedule time with friends who fill your cup. Don't repress emotions; a good cry can be as cathartic as a deep laugh.

3 Meet your intellectual needs: Keep learning. Read a book outside your field, listen to a podcast, or pick up an old hobby. A stimulated mind is a resilient mind.

I schedule my weekly yoga session as inflexibly as I schedule a doctor's appointment. It is my sacred time to reset. By prioritising my well-being, I am not taking away from my sons; I am investing in my ability to be present for them.

The author is a clinical research scientist who has been researching, writing and speaking on resilient living for the last 15 years. She has a PhD in Toxicology from the University of Kentucky, Lexington. Her post-doctoral work at the NIH was on the mind-body connection. Her book, Resilience Decoded, was recently published by Penguin.



Key workables for the resilient parent

1 The 5-minute check-in: Dedicate five phone-free minutes each day to each teen. No agenda, no lectures. Just be present.

2 Validate first: Before offering solutions, always acknowledge the emotion. "I see you're upset," or "That must have been so frustrating."

3 Schedule worry time: If your teen is an overthinker, agree on a 15-minute "worry time" each day to discuss anxieties. This contains the anxiety to a specific time rather than letting it dominate the whole day.

4 Model self-compassion: Let them hear you say, "I really messed that up, but I'm going to try again tomorrow." Show them that failure is part of learning.

5 Build your village: Find one or two trusted friends with teens you can talk to without judgement. Venting to them protects your teen's privacy and gives you support.

Parenting a teenager is perhaps the ultimate practice in resilient living. It demands our patience, our presence, and our own constant growth. It is messy, humbling, and utterly beautiful. By tending to our own well-being, listening with our full hearts, and staying lovingly alert, we do more than just manage their adolescence. We build an unshakable foundation of trust and strength that they will carry with them long after they've left our homes, ready to face the world not because they never fell, but because they learned, with our support, how to rise.

MIXED BAG

A rare smell on the brink of extinction

In a shoebox-size gallery with hot pink walls in lower Manhattan, a hushed crowd had assembled around a woman as she was methodically opening an obelisk-shaped box. They watched in fascination as the woman pulled a tall glass flask from the box, containing what looked like a saffron-coloured potion. One that, you could say, promised to conjure Elizabeth Taylor.



The potion was a re-creation of an obscure perfume once worn by Taylor. It was concocted by Marissa Zappas, 38, an accomplished perfumer and the woman who unboxed the fragrance at an opening event for 'Her Scent of Mystery', a new exhibition at the Olfactory Art Keller gallery in Chinatown.

The show, running through September 20, takes its name from 'Scent of Mystery', a 1960 film that briefly features Taylor, who makes an uncredited cameo in its final shot.

Mercilessly panned — including in *The New York Times* — the movie famously incorporated a then-futuristic technology called Smell-O-Vision, which involved a clanking metal box with a bronchiole-like network of pipes being installed in a theatre. As 'Scent of Mystery' played, the machinery would hiss odours in accordance with its scenes. When the villain smoked a pipe, for instance, gusts of tobacco-scented air hit the audience.

Another aroma associated with the movie, and the centrepiece of the new exhibition, is the sharp, spicy fragrance made for Sally Kennedy, the character played by Taylor. But the film flopped. In recent years, only one bottle of the promotional 'Scent of

'Mixed Bag' is your Sunday potpourri — an assortment of snappy articles, engaging ideas and snackable nibbles about this and that, from here and there. Dip in!

Mystery' perfume was known to exist. It belonged to Susan Todd, whose father, Mike Todd Jr, was a producer of the film.

Enter Zappas. She was tapped to re-create the perfume. To remake the 'Scent of Mystery' perfume, which had a formula incorporating 60 raw materials, Zappas conducted a form of chemical analysis known as gas chromatography-mass spectrometry. Her version is a near replica of the original, but has both fewer ingredients and some careful additions, like bergamot (to enhance the perfume's citrusy opening) and a deft touch of powdery talc.

Head-binding for a leg-up?

Parents have been meddling with their children's heads, if not their minds, since prehistoric times. To achieve the desired forms — flat, round, conical — the pliable skulls



A mid-19th-century painting by Paul Kane depicts a woman with a child whose head is being reshaped. NYT PIC

of newborns were typically either wrapped tightly in cloth or bound between boards. The origins of this practice, known as artificial cranial deformation, have been traced to

early *Homo sapiens* in Australia about 13,000 years ago, and, amid some scholarly contention, potentially to Neanderthal populations 45,000 years ago. In the region that is now Peru, early inhabitants apparently believed that a sloping forehead was an advantageous feature, with the earliest evidence dating back to the fourth millennium BC. In his new book, 'The Mountain Embodied', Velasco details the cranial modification traditions of the Collaguas and Cavaans, neighbouring peoples that lived in the Colca Valley of highland Peru.

Velasco's book argues for a shift toward understanding it from the perspective of the people who practised it. "Dr Velasco's book pushes against the colonial invention that head shape was a mere ethnic marker," said Andrew Scherer, an anthropologist at Brown University. In his book, Velasco argues that the practice of head-binding contributed to social disparities and was a mark of wealth.



FEEDBACK
Like this story? Write to us at dhonsunday@deccanherald.co.in

ASTROSPEAK

Gurujit Shrii Arnav



Scan the QR code to read the weekly horoscope