SUPPORTING YOUR TEEN:

A CONVERSATION FOR 10TH GRADE FAMILIES

ABOUT ME:

- Father, Step-Father, Grandfather, Husband
- In Substance Use and Mental Health fields since 2008
- Private practice in Concord since 2015
- Co-Host of award-winning Right Mind Media Podcast
- 2022 MADAAC Counselor of the Year
- In long-term recovery since 2007

PURPOSE OF THIS PRESENTATION

- To strengthen communication with your teen
- To help you understand adolescent brain development
- To provide guidance on discussing substance use, risky behaviors, and mental wellness

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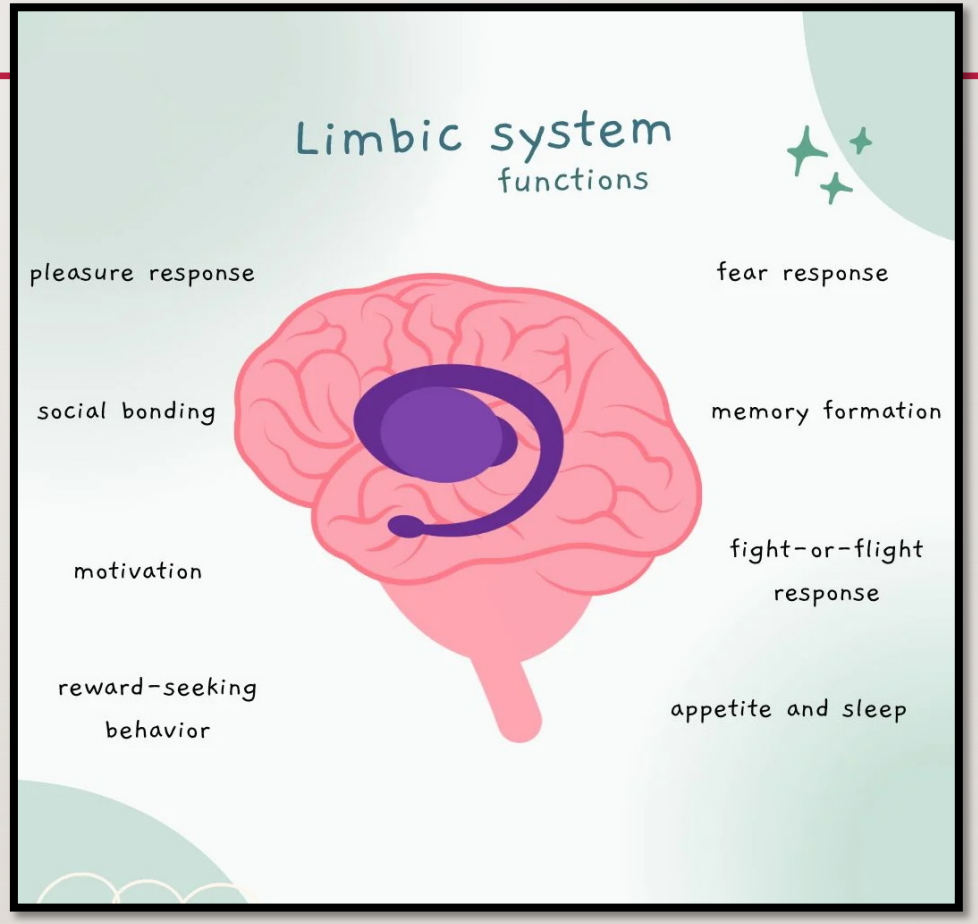
UNDERSTANDING YOUR TEENAGER'S BRAIN
(OR AT LEAST TRYING…)

Developmental Changes

- The limbic system (emotion, novelty-seeking, reward sensitivity) is highly active



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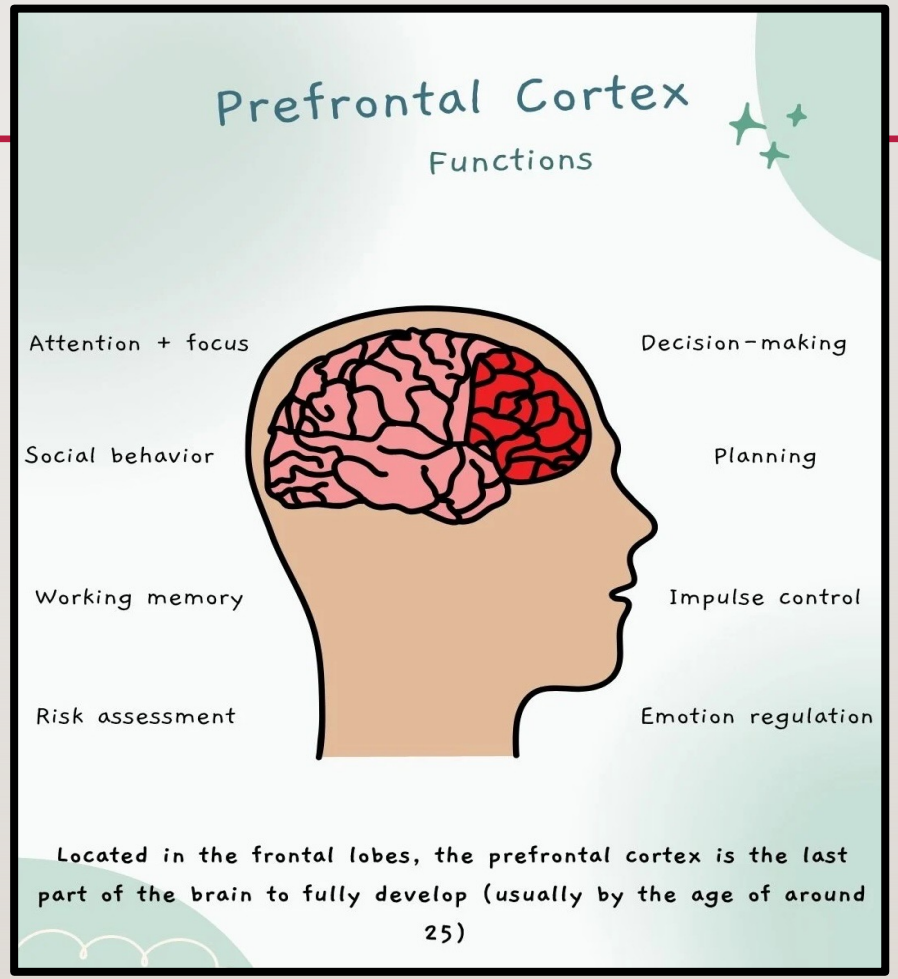
UNDERSTANDING YOUR TEENAGER'S BRAIN
(OR AT LEAST TRYING…)

Developmental Changes

- The prefrontal cortex (reasoning, planning, impulse control) is still **under construction**



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UNDERSTANDING YOUR TEENAGER'S BRAIN
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Developmental

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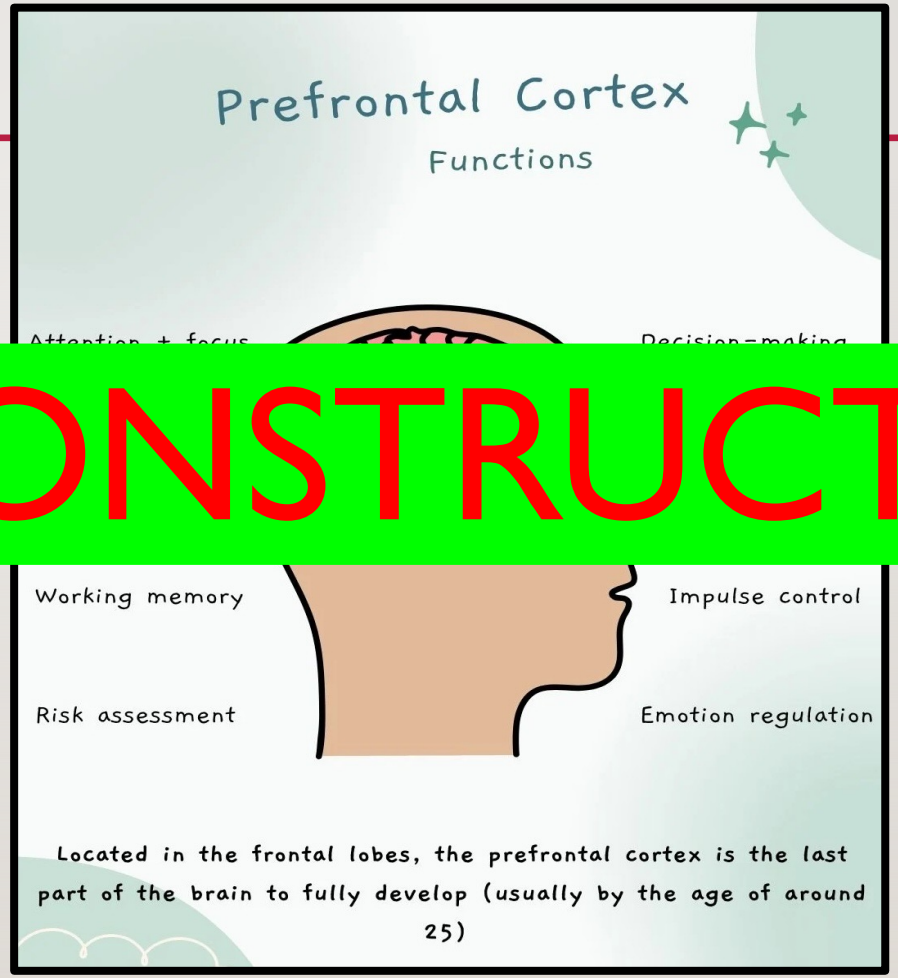

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

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UNDERSTANDING YOUR TEENAGER'S BRAIN
(OR AT LEAST TRYING…)

Developmental Changes

- What this means: Teens FEEL intensely, respond strongly to peers, and may prioritize immediate rewards

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UNDERSTANDING YOUR TEENAGER'S BRAIN
(OR AT LEAST TRYING…)

Differences From Our Adult Brains

- Teens are not "mini adults"
- They often understand right vs. wrong but can't yet consistently act on that knowledge
- Stress tolerance and emotional regulation are still forming

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UNDERSTANDING YOUR TEENAGER'S BRAIN
(OR AT LEAST TRYING…)

What These Changes Look Like to Us Parents

- Expect behavior that looks "insane" at times
- Avoid interpreting impulsive decisions as defiance
- Approach challenges as developmental, not moral failings

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UNDERSTANDING YOUR TEENAGER'S BRAIN
(OR AT LEAST TRYING…)

What These Changes Look Like to Us Parents

- Expect behavior that looks "insane" at times
- Avoid impulsive, in-the-moment decisions as a reflex
- Approach challenges as developmental, not moral failings

Spoiler Alert:

IT'S NOT EASY!

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BUILDING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Relationship Before Rules:

Why Communication Is Still the Most Important Skill

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BUILDING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Relationship Before Rules:

Why Communication Is Still the Most Important Skill

Teenagers open up when they feel *heard* rather than *judged*

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BUILDING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Open-Ended Conversation Starters:

- "How do you feel when you're in situations where people are using? What goes through your mind?"

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BUILDING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Open-Ended Conversation Starters:

- “How do you feel when you’re in situations where people are using? What goes through your mind?”
- "Imagine it's 25 years from now, and you have a teenager my age. What would you tell them about drugs and alcohol?”

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BUILDING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Open-Ended Conversation Starters:

- “How do you feel when you’re in situations where people are using? What goes through your mind?”
- "Imagine it's 25 years from now, and you have a teenager my age. What would you tell them about drugs and alcohol?”
- “What do you think makes someone trustworthy or not when it comes to risky situations?”

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BUILDING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Techniques

- Avoid interrogating or rapid-fire questions
- Be curious rather than judgmental
- Validate feelings even when you don't agree with choices

("I get why this feels important to you.")

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BUILDING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Respond Rather Than React

- Press pause if emotions run high
- Model the aura (regulation) you want to see

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FOSTERING INFLUENCE

Remember:

- Influence is not authority; it is connection
- Teens still care deeply what parents think, even if they don't show it

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THE MESSAGE?

AIM FOR CONNECTION, NOT CONTROL

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DISCUSSING SUBSTANCE USE AND RISKY BEHAVIORS

Why Early Conversations Matter

- The developing brain is more vulnerable to addiction
- Norm-setting at home significantly reduces risk behavior

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DISCUSSING SUBSTANCE USE AND RISKY BEHAVIORS

Remember to model the behavior you want to see

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DISCUSSING SUBSTANCE USE AND RISKY BEHAVIORS

How to Talk About Drugs and Alcohol

- Be factual, not fear-based
- Discuss real effects: sleep, motivation, academics, mental wellness
- Discuss how substance use can interact with anxiety or depression and medication
- *DON'T* use false info or scare tactics

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DISCUSSING SUBSTANCE USE AND RISKY BEHAVIORS

Addressing Peer Influence

"Gee, Tommy, I'd be lost without your constant peer pressure."

DISCUSSING SUBSTANCE USE AND RISKY BEHAVIORS

Addressing Peer Influence

- Discuss social pressures openly - be curious
- Rehearse refusal skills:

"I'm not into it," ,"I can't tonight—family thing," etc.

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DISCUSSING SUBSTANCE USE AND RISKY BEHAVIORS

IF YOU HAVE YOUR OWN HISTORY OF USE

How Much to Share

- Be honest without giving unnecessary details.
- Keep it principle-based: "I learned some things the hard way, and I want better for you."
- Emphasize lessons, values, and hopes for your teen now.
- Acknowledge curiosity: "I get it — I've been there — and I want you safe."

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DISCUSSING SUBSTANCE USE AND RISKY BEHAVIORS

IF YOU HAVE YOUR OWN HISTORY OF USE

Two Pitfalls To Avoid:

- Glorifying past use
- Avoiding the topic completely

SETTING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS AND BOUNDARIES

SETTING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS AND BOUNDARIES

- Collaborate with your teen on the rules and consequences.
- Clearly and consistently state household policies and consequences
- Revisit rules periodically over time. Be fair and consistent.
- Focus on safety over control
- Explain the "why"

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SETTING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS AND BOUNDARIES

- **Prioritize connection:** Keep the relationship at the center, not rigid rule-enforcement.
- **Be flexible:** Don't default to "no"—offer a compromise or explain the reason for a boundary.
- **Build trust:** Say "yes" when you can, so the necessary "no's" carry more weight.

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SIGNS A CONVERSATION MAY NOT BE ENOUGH

- Not caring about their appearance.
- Getting lower grades in school.
- Missing classes or skipping school.
- Losing interest in their favorite activities.
- Getting in trouble in school or with the law.
- Having different eating or sleeping habits.
- Having more problems with family members and friends.

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GETTING HELP

- **Prioritize safety** — remove immediate risks; don't ignore red flags.
- **Don't go it alone** — involve trusted adults, community resources, and support groups.
- **Open the door** — use curiosity: *"I've noticed… can we talk about it?"*
- **Get professional support early** — therapist, pediatrician, school counselor.
- **Stay connected** — consistent check-ins, warmth, and structure.

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PERSONALIZED ADDICTION TREATMENT FOR INDIVIDUALS & FAMILIES