



# The Graduation Transition Toolkit

An Interactive Guide for Teens and Families Facing  
Life's Next Chapter

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# Introduction:

## From My Family to Yours



As a clinician, I've spent decades supporting families as they navigate big life transitions. As a mother, I have had my experiences, too! My children's path through graduation and college wasn't linear; it was full of self-discovery, unexpected challenges, and a lot of learning on both of our parts. And with my son approaching his graduation in a few years, I'm reminded that the journey from adolescence to adulthood is anything but predictable.

This toolkit is a heartfelt collection of what I've learned professionally and personally. Whether your teen is heading off to college, taking a gap year, or still figuring out what comes next, I hope that this guide helps your family feel seen, supported, and more prepared for the road ahead.

Throughout this guide, you'll find:

- Self-reflection sections for teens
- Insight and strategies for parents
- Joint activities to strengthen communication and connection



# Section 1: Is My Teen Struggling?

## For Parents: Know the Signs

Graduation and life transitions can mask deeper emotional struggles. Teens may seem "fine" on the surface while experiencing anxiety, depression, or identity confusion underneath.

Check off any that apply:

- ☐ My teen avoids talking about the future.
- ☐ They've withdrawn from friends or family.
- ☐ I've noticed changes in sleep, appetite, or mood.
- ☐ They seem more irritable or easily overwhelmed.
- ☐ Risk-taking or substance use has increased.

If you checked two or more, consider having an open, supportive conversation or reaching out for professional help.



# Section 2: Let's Talk About It

## Joint Activity: Family Conversation Journal

Use the prompts below together. Take turns answering, either in writing or out loud.

### Parent Prompt:

- What was most confusing or hard about this life stage for you?

### Teen Prompt:

- What's something you wish adults understood about being your age?

### Together:

- What does "support" look like to each of you right now?
- How can we ask for help from each other when things feel tough?

### Use this space to write reflections:

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# Section 3: Exploring Identity with Support

## For Teens: Who Am I Becoming?

Identity exploration is normal. Whether you're figuring out your interests, values, gender, or sexuality, your identity deserves respect.

### Reflection Questions:

- **When do I feel most like myself?**  
\_\_\_\_\_
- **Whose support makes me feel safe and seen?**  
\_\_\_\_\_
- **What messages do I want to unlearn about identity?**  
\_\_\_\_\_

## For Parents: Tips for LGBTQ+ Allyship

- Use your teen's name and pronouns, even if it takes practice.
- Say: "You don't have to have it all figured out. I'm here while you do."
- Explore resources like The Trevor Project or PFLAG together.

### Joint Reflection:

What are some things we can each do to make our home feel more affirming?

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# Section 4: Tools for Coping

## For Teens: Build Your Resilience Toolkit

Try These Strategies and Check What Works Best:

### ☐ 4-7-8 Breathing When I Feel Anxious

**What it is:** A calming breath pattern that slows the nervous system.

**How to do it:** Inhale through your nose for 4 seconds, hold for 7 seconds, then exhale slowly through your mouth for 8 seconds.

**Why it helps:** It tells your body you're safe and helps calm intense emotions.

### ☐ Take a Tech-Free Walk to Clear My Mind

**What it is:** A short walk without headphones or your phone, just noticing the world around you.

**Try this:** Count your steps, notice sounds, or name five things you can see.

**Why it helps:** It gives your brain a reset and reconnects you to the present.

### ☐ Create a “Grounding” Playlist

**What it is:** A list of songs that help you feel calm, comforted, or confident.

**Try this:** Pick songs that remind you of your strengths, loved ones, or peaceful moments.

**Why it helps:** Music can soothe your nervous system and lift your mood.

☐ **Set One Intention, One Gratitude, and One Kind Act Each Day**

**What it is:** A daily check-in that boosts emotional awareness and resilience.

**Why it helps:** Focusing on what matters most shifts your brain from stress to strength.

**Example:**

- Intention: "I will take breaks when I need them."
- You Try: \_\_\_\_\_
- Gratitude: "I'm thankful for my pet."
- You Try: \_\_\_\_\_
- Kind Act: "I'll text a friend and let them know I appreciate them."
- You Try: \_\_\_\_\_

**Journal Prompts:**

- **What scares me most about the future?** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- **What has helped me cope with hard moments?** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- **When do I feel strongest?** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



## For Parents: Model Coping

Share your strategies, too. Teens learn by watching.

• **How do you manage your stress?** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

• **When do you take a break and reset?** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

• **What's something you've done for self-care this week?**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



## Joint Exercise: Create a Family Coping Plan

### Example Family Coping Plan

#### Daily Tools We Can Use:

- Teen: “When I feel overwhelmed, I’ll listen to my grounding playlist or journal.”
- Parent: “I will take a five-minute walk or do a breathing exercise before reacting when I feel stressed.”

#### Family Reset Ritual:

- Every Sunday evening, we will spend 20 minutes doing a calming activity together, like playing music, doing a puzzle, or going for a walk.

#### Words That Help:

- “I’m here if you want to talk.”
- “It’s okay to take a break.”
- “We’re a team—we’ll figure this out together.”

#### Emergency Plan:

- If anyone in the family is in crisis, we will contact our therapist or use our local crisis line: River’s Bend (248) 702-6132



Create your version here:

**Daily Tools We Can Use:**

• **Teen:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

• **Parent:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Family Reset Ritual:**

•

\_\_\_\_\_

**Words That Help:**

•

\_\_\_\_\_

•

\_\_\_\_\_

•

\_\_\_\_\_

**Emergency Plan:**

• If anyone in the family is in crisis, we will contact our therapist or use our local crisis line: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

# Section 5: Making Choices Without Melting Down

## For Teens: Understanding Your Brain and Emotions

Big decisions—like where to go to college or what kind of person you want to be, can feel overwhelming. When you're anxious, your brain might:

- **Go into fight mode:** You lash out or shut others down
- **Slip into flight mode:** You avoid or ignore the choice
- **Freeze completely:** You feel stuck and can't decide at all

Good news: You're not broken—you're human! And your brain is still developing (especially the prefrontal cortex, which helps with clear decision-making). That means stress can make it harder to think things through.

### Tool: The 5-Pause Method

Try this any time you're overwhelmed by a choice:

**1. Pause.** Step away for at least 10 minutes.

**2. Name the emotion.** Say: "I feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_."

**3. Ask: What's in my control?**

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**4. Write out the options.** Seeing them helps your brain organize them.

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**5. Talk it out.** Call or text someone safe

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## Exercise: The Decision Grid

Use this chart to walk through a choice:

Option	Pros	Cons	How does it make me feel?	Do I feel safe choosing this?

Start with something small, then build your decision-making muscle.

Reminder: Not knowing right away doesn't mean you're wrong. It means you care enough to pause and think it through.



# Section 6: Knowing When to Reach Out for Help

## For Teens: Understanding When You Can Use a Helping Hand

Big feelings and big transitions sometimes need more than just coping tools. It's okay if what used to work isn't enough anymore. Asking for help is a sign of strength!

Use this checklist to explore whether additional help, like therapy or a consultation with River's Bend, might be a good next step:

Check any that apply:

- ☐ I feel overwhelmed more days than not.
- ☐ My emotions or stress are affecting school, work, or relationships.
- ☐ I've stopped enjoying things I used to like.
- ☐ I'm having trouble sleeping, eating, or focusing.
- ☐ I feel stuck, alone, or unsure of what to do next.
- ☐ If you checked two or more, consider reaching out or letting your parent know you need help. You don't have to figure it all out by yourself.

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# HELP

## What Do I Want From Support?

Whether you're reaching out to River's Bend or talking to a school counselor, it helps to think about what kind of support would feel helpful to you.

### Use this space to reflect on what you need help with:

- What are the biggest things on my mind right now?

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- What would I hope to get out of talking to someone? (Examples: less anxiety, tools for decisions, support with identity, space to vent)

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- What makes me feel safe and supported?

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## Final Note: You're Not Alone

Whether you're a parent navigating uncertainty or a teen trying to make sense of what's next, this toolkit is a starting point, not a solution. You don't have to have all the answers. Just being here and reading this means you care and are ready to figure out your next step.

Let that be enough for today.

With compassion,

*Stephanie Howey,*  
LMSW COO & Co-Owner, River's Bend PC



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