

CHAPTER 7

The Art of Inquiry with Teens

The greatest teacher will send you back to yourself.
—NAYYIRAH WAHEED

Inquiry is an indispensable tool for teachers guiding teens in overcoming obstacles and learning to become compassionate and kind to themselves. The term primarily refers to the exchange between the teacher and teen or a group of teens following a mindfulness or self-compassion practice, where the teacher uses specific questioning to inquire into the experience of the students. However, inquiry can also be used in an informal context to navigate any situation that arises with a teen, as discussed in the previous chapter. It provides the scaffolding for much of the communication with your students.

Inquiry presents one of the greatest challenges for teachers, especially with teens, but is worth mastering, as it offers the gateway for supporting teens in self-regulation and resilience. Hence, we are covering the subject in its own chapter.



The Purpose of Inquiry

Inquiry is a method of exploration that has the capacity to guide teens into a deeper sense of self-discovery. It can facilitate a teen's ability to be with difficult emotions and uncertainty during the trials of adolescence. Through a sensitive and delicate dance between the student and teacher, inquiry helps to unpack any discomfort or struggle a teen may be experiencing following an exercise or practice. Over time, inquiry builds a teen's tolerance for holding the pain of life gently in their hands and the capacity to hold themselves with kindness during challenging times.

Teacher Qualities That Support Inquiry

The process of facilitating inquiry draws on the same set of foundational teacher qualities covered in Chapter 4: embodiment, patience, acceptance, nonjudgment, and loving-connected-presence. As you will discover in more detail in Part 4, there are selected self-compassion practices that are carefully crafted to put teens in touch with the suffering they are carrying. The way a teacher approaches this suffering is crucial to any insight teens may gain into their struggle, and to their response. Your ability to stay *tuned in* and attentive to the process, *curious* about the full experience, and *nonjudgmental* of whatever arises can help to cultivate these same qualities in the teens you are working with. But the key is to hold the space for yourself as well. Staying embodied and noticing signs of your own stress or emotional activation allows you to face the anxiety or fear when any unexpected event arises in working with a teen or a group. It enables you to stay present and to inquire into your own experience, asking yourself, “What do I need in this moment?”

Andy, the teen we discussed in Chapter 6 with anxiety and severe ADHD, challenged the teacher and the group with continuous disruptions. Aware of his rising frustration and self-doubt, the teacher met these challenges with her tool kit, but the teen was persistent and she was aware of the group observing her actions. The teacher, remembering to stay embodied, met her own struggle with awareness and loving-kindness, asking the group to pause and take a self-compassion break. The teacher, inquiring within, was able to offer herself a soothing touch, recall the foundational attitudes, and return to maintaining her engagement with interest and curiosity.

As Crane and colleagues (2015) conclude in their qualitative study of inquiry, “mindfulness-based teachers seem to have a particular way of hearing experience. . . . The particular skills and knowledge required to enact this competence are not well articulated in the literature, but in our view, much of it rests on a moment-by-moment connection to the teacher’s personal mindfulness practice, which they embody during teaching” (p. 1112).

When you are embodied, you are not only aware of the momentary shifts unfolding in your own experience but are also able to recognize the minute and subtle movements that may indicate backdraft or emotional activation in a teen. The skill of tracking can support this process—an awareness of the sometimes observable or felt shifts in the expression, tone, posture, and language of a teen during inquiry. Teens are skillful at avoiding and compensating for their pain—but tracking their experience is crucial to knowing when to advance and when to withdraw. It informs you on when to move in and proceed with inquiry and when to remove the focus. If you linger too long in inquiry, you risk exposing a teen’s vulnerability or shame and creating more resistance in the teen as well as the group. A teacher who begins to excavate, digging into a teen’s experience for more information, sends a message to the entire group that the safety of the container is being challenged. At the same time, you must be available to the teen, holding the emotional space with loving-connected-presence, tending to their experience.

As Chris Germer (2014, p. 6) says, “the holy grail of MSC inquiry is for students to ‘feel felt.’” This holds true for teens as well. A teen is most likely to feel seen and felt when

they experience a resonance with the teacher—a connection that conveys safety, understanding, and acceptance. Your willingness to be open to their full experience is the most compelling way to be present with a teen: *The way in is the only way out!* Refining your ability to notice the simultaneous unfolding of your own experience and that of another during inquiry will enable you to hold a safe space for everyone. This is especially important when a teen is struggling and resistant to acknowledging their suffering or is reacting to the felt experience of their struggle. It is your emotional resonance and feeling of safety, care, and connection that can soothe the wounds being expressed in the moment. Words are not always necessary in the exchange. The resonance that is conveyed through presence, and a simple gesture of a hand on the heart is powerful beyond measure.

The following components can guide the process of inquiry: (1) mindfulness: building skills of awareness—noticing what is actually here in this moment or what is arising in the experience of the teen and of yourself; (2) loving-kindness—cultivating an attitude of warmth and kindness, recognizing and helping the teen begin to perceive and name what they need when appropriate; and (3) compassion—modeling for teens how they can respond to their own personal pain with kindness and understanding and reminding them that they are not alone.

The Basic Format of Inquiry

What Is the Teens' Direct Experience and How Aware Are They of It?

You can open the inquiry process with simple questions such as “What did you notice?,” “What did you learn?,” or simply “How was that?.” Keeping the questions open-ended with teens is a skillful way to draw attention to their experience, to inspire curiosity and interest in the felt sense of their experience. However, if there is no response, it can also be helpful to give examples while holding the space with your own curiosity and interest. A teacher might make the comment, “Have you ever noticed that when you are facing a very challenging situation like giving a speech in class, you might feel sensations in the body, like butterflies, tightness, or anxiety? We might say that emotions and sensations are the language of the body and are responding to the thoughts and stories in our mind. Raise your hand if you noticed any sensations or emotions.”

If the teen's response indicates a positive or neutral experience, the teacher can offer a little reflective listening and a gentle appreciation of the sharing by saying “thank you” and moving on. This is known as “dipping in and dipping out.” No need to linger or try to find something else. It is important, however, to acknowledge a teen's willingness to share. You are invited to share their enthusiasm from a place of sympathetic joy. Validating teens' experience rather than praising a desired response allows them to remain curious and embodied and not get caught in the dynamic of pleasing a teacher. When a teacher is overly enthusiastic, the focus shifts to the teacher's experience. Validating a teen is best done by maintaining a focus on the felt sense of their experience. A follow-up question might be “How did you know that you felt calm? What is the experience of feeling calm?” or “What is it like to feel relaxed?” The idea is to invite curiosity and build interest in their own felt experience.

TEACHER: How was that? What did you notice?

YU: I felt my whole body relax, and I started to fall asleep.

TEACHER: Isn't that interesting that we can become so relaxed when we steady and quiet our busy minds? Were you aware of anything else as you noticed you were starting to fall asleep?

YU: No, I didn't fall asleep, but I did notice that I felt more relaxed than before the meditation.

TEACHER: So how do you feel now?

YU: I feel good, I feel really calm.

TEACHER: Thank you. (*to the whole group*) So this may be one of the benefits of learning to meditate. We can begin to notice how our body feels, where we are holding tension, and choose to relax or let go of any tension we're holding in the body.

Teens can become aware of their fatigue and may fall asleep during a meditation. In inquiry this can be an opportunity to explore with curiosity how teens related to the experience. "How was that for you, when you woke up and noticed you had fallen asleep?" You may also then validate the stressful effect of their busy lives. "You must have been tired; it's so important to practice self-care, right?" "How do you feel now?" The focus of this inquiry is still on helping them cultivate an awareness of their experience and the need for rest, and it also reinforces the notion of self-care in self-compassion training.

If Any Emotional Discomfort or Struggle Arose during the Exercise, Was The Teen Able to Resolve It?

If the response from a teen to your initial inquiry indicates emotional distress, your task is to try to assess whether or not the teen is capable of becoming intimate with the struggle by naming the emotion or becoming aware of where it feels most alive in their body. Body issues are a common theme in adolescence. Inquiring directly into the body (e.g., "where do you feel that in your body?") can potentially create more opportunity for activation and resistance. It is wise to keep the reference to the body broad, if possible—for example, "Are you aware of any physical sensations?" or "Is there a particular place where you noticed this experience?"

You are then looking for resolution of the struggle, which means the teen was able to access self-compassion to address their suffering. It is important to remember the paradox of self-compassion, however—we offer ourselves compassion because we recognize our suffering, not to make ourselves feel better. Self-compassion can lead to an emotional shift, but it is important to convey to teens that we are simply learning to recognize our suffering and respond to it with kindness. If a teen stays engaged and confirms that they were able to use a practice in the midst of their struggle, you can affirm the teen's actions by naming the skill they used and asking, "What was that like, to be able to work with this difficulty?" or "Where else do you think you might use these self-compassion

practices?” You can then smile, say thank you, and move on. If you are still unsure if the struggle is resolved, it is important to ask if the teen “needs anything else” or ask “How do you feel now?” at the end of the inquiry. These words convey genuine concern for their well-being and invite the teen to reflect on the question “What do I need in this moment?”

The following is a sample inquiry following an exercise on the inner critic:

TEACHER: How was that? What did you learn?

DAMIAN: It was hard to think about my inner critic; I don’t think I realized how harsh or mean it can be sometimes.

TEACHER: Yeah, the words we hear from our inner critic can be harsh. So, was there anything else you noticed when you became aware of the inner critic?

Remember, we can have corresponding feelings and sensations when we have critical thoughts or any thoughts, for that matter.

[This question is essential to directing the teen’s attention from thinking mode to sensing mode—the felt sense of the experience.]

DAMIAN: I think it was just more of a surprise at how much I do criticize myself and how this critic feels like a bully and how bad it makes me feel sometimes.

[The teacher then displays a genuine appreciation for how difficult this can be for a teen by leaning in with hand on heart, and a sympathetic nod.]

TEACHER: Were you able to offer yourself a kind word or maybe a little compassion?

DAMIAN: It wasn’t easy, but I can see how being kind to myself like this might make a difference over time.

TEACHER: So how are doing right now?

DAMIAN: Okay.

TEACHER: So, self-compassion helps us to be with things as they are, especially when there is struggle. Being kind to ourselves can help us make a shift toward acceptance and learning to be here for ourselves. *(Turns toward teen and nods, indicating a thank-you for participating).*

If the Struggle Is Unresolved, Then What?

There are times when struggle is apparent and visible through posture, facial expression, or wet eyes. You then have to make a judgment if a teen is able to engage and seems sufficiently present or has been hijacked entirely by a threat or trauma response. If the latter is the case, we recommend following the guidelines on working with backdraft and trauma in Chapters 6 and 8 because, essentially, they need to be guided back to safety first and foremost. Often, a teen who is experiencing backdraft or reactivation of trauma may wish to remain silent, which is often indicated by a physical withdrawal such as a lowered head and hidden face. In this case, you may choose to lean in and gently inquire with the teen, making eye contact, using a gentle tone while inclining physically toward the teen. If a teen feels safe and compelled to share, they will do so with a gentle nudge. It is important to give some space for the teen to consider their thoughts and feelings. If a teen gives

verbal or nonverbal indicators that they don't wish to engage in inquiry, it is important for you to respect their wishes while still holding a safe space by offering loving-connected-presence—hand on heart, a warm smile, and a simple nod of acknowledgment. You must then check in with the teen individually later on.

On the other hand, if a teen is engaged and present in the inquiry, an important follow-up question is “So what do you think would be helpful here . . . in this moment?” It conveys a trust in the teen that they may have the capacity or skill somewhere inside them to respond to their emotional distress. Often a teen will know what they need. If not, you can make a suggestion to the teen or to the whole group to “drop inside,” to return to their own landscape, and to check in with their own minds, hearts, and bodies to just notice what is here right now, perhaps aware of any signs of distress, discomfort, or uneasiness. It is important to also mention that they may be aware of pleasant or even neutral sensations and no matter what might be present in their experience, they can choose to offer themselves a soothing gesture or a kind word.

The teacher can then facilitate a group self-compassion practice, moving from vertical inquiry (working with one teen and staying with their individual process) to horizontal inquiry (engaging the whole group), taking the attention from the individual to the group. This is offered as a way of encouraging practice and reminding the teen and the group that these are the moments when we can turn toward ourselves and offer a little kindness. Horizontal inquiry also has the benefit of allowing group members to soothe themselves after becoming activated by another teen in distress.

Noticing that a teen appeared uncomfortable following an exercise, the teacher chose to address her directly.

TEACHER: How was this exercise for you?

ANNA: I don't know . . . (*long pause*). I wasn't able to do it very well.

TEACHER: Can you say more?

ANNA: (*silent, averting eye contact*)

TEACHER: (*after a respectful pause*) Sometimes we need time to just be with our experience without having to share. When we take time to become curious about our experience, we might begin to notice how we judge ourselves and how it makes us feel when we judge ourselves. It is important to know that it is quite common for teens to feel like they are not doing the exercises very well. Is there anything that might be helpful to you right now?

ANNA: (*silence*)

TEACHER: (*turning toward the group to take the focus off the teen*) These are the moments when we can consider offering ourselves a little warmth or compassion. We don't always get the experience we want when we do these exercises. Let's see if we can practice as a group in case anyone else struggled.

Gently close your eyes and check to see what is here right now, and if you find that you experienced a little uneasiness or there are unpleasant feelings or sensations, see if you can offer yourself a kind word, a soothing touch . . . maybe even practice.

This group self-compassion practice will reinforce learning how to recognize suffering and how to respond with compassion, particularly when there is unresolved struggle. Taking the direct focus off the teen in emotional distress to avoid escalation has the potential to support them in self-regulating. However, it is important to maintain an awareness of the teen in distress and check in with them after class for a brief moment, depending on the situation. When teaching a group, having a co-teacher can be helpful for assessing emotional distress in a teen and the need for further intervention.

Working with unresolved struggle requires flexibility, as illustrated by the example of Mateo, a 20-year-old young man suffering from depression and low self-esteem.

TEACHER: How was that experience? Did anyone notice anything?

MATEO: I found the practice very challenging. I don't think this is meant for me. I'm not sure I deserve self-compassion.

Taking a moment to reflect and pause prior to responding allowed the teacher to check in with what was arising in her own experience and respond to her need to fix the situation.

TEACHER: I appreciate your willingness to share this thought, Mateo. Is this a familiar way of thinking about yourself?

MATEO: *(nodding)*

TEACHER: Sometimes our thoughts create strong emotions and physical sensations. So, when you have this thought, is there anything else that comes with it?

MATEO: It just makes me feel very depressed and sad.

TEACHER: *(taking a moment to express loving-connected-presence by leaning in and placing a hand on her heart before moving on)* These are challenging thoughts and emotions. I'm wondering what might feel supportive?

Mateo remained silent, curled into a ball, and after a period of silence said he would like to cover himself with a blanket. This was his way of soothing himself. This is an example of relaxing the structure to accommodate the need of a teen who is struggling.

After providing a blanket to Mateo, the teacher instructed the entire group to take a moment to notice their own experience and practice meeting themselves with a soothing touch. This helped to address any anxiety or concern anyone in the group may have been having during this inquiry with Mateo. Over time, Mateo participated in more of the meditations and engaged with the group with more frequency because he was accepted and met with kindness just as he was. He didn't actually need to be different to be deserving of compassion from the teacher. She acknowledged and allowed his sadness and feelings of worthlessness and met him with loving-connected-presence.

If a situation arises when a teen requires more support, you can choose how to support the teen. There are times when you must determine if moving forward with inquiry in front of the group is appropriate or if a private, individual inquiry after class would be in the best interest of the teen. For example, a teen in distress may be very resistant to inquiry because of backdraft, including shame and/or reactivated trauma. However, it is

still your responsibility to check in with the teen prior to their leaving to determine if further action or support is required.

Following a group discussion, Sydney, an 18-year-old first-year college student, felt overwhelmed and vulnerable, having shared a personal experience with self-compassion. This phenomenon has been aptly named a “vulnerability hangover” by Brené Brown (2012). Sydney began crying, asking if she could leave the room. The way in which she held eye contact indicated she was present enough for the teacher to move into an inquiry about her experience. On rare occasions like this, the teacher can choose to narrow the field for the teen, which means shrinking the safe container, so the teen does not feel so vulnerable in front of the whole group. This meant asking for permission to sit directly in front of her, “Would it be okay for you to wait for just a moment before you leave?” Sydney agreed. “Do you mind if I sit closer to you?” The teacher, with her hand on her heart and a gentle lowered tone, moved toward Sydney, placing herself directly in front of the teen. She reminded Sydney that stopping the pain was not the objective, only acknowledging and learning to be with the struggle in order to strengthen her capacity to feel her pain. The teacher held the space with such skill and compassion that the teen was able to stay connected and present to the intensity of her experience until it was manageable. Alternatively, if a teen really wishes to leave the room or you think that this would be best because of their level of distress, it is important to ask a co-teacher to go with them. This is a good example of why it is crucial to have a co-teacher present at all times.



What Inquiry Is Not

The intention of inquiry is to help teens cultivate awareness of what is present and alive in the moment—thoughts, sensations, and emotions—and to recognize when suffering is present. However, teens often want to go into the storyline of their experience, staying in their heads. It is a safer way to engage rather than allowing feelings to emerge or becoming aware of the uneasiness of unpleasant sensations in the body. Nonetheless, your task is to help a teen shift from the story they are telling themselves to the felt sense of their experience. Teachers sometimes struggle with how to make this shift. They may not want to risk alienating the teen or may be afraid of the teen’s reaction. Guiding teens to stay focused on the experience requires courage, sensitivity, patience and humor.

TEACHER: (*following a body scan meditation*) How was that?

ROBIN: My mind just wandered the entire time. I have a test coming up and I’m just not prepared for it. I’ve got to do well or it’s going to affect my grade. I’m really freaked out that I will never get into the college I want.

TEACHER: Wow, there was a lot going on. Were you able to come back to the meditation?

ROBIN: Yes, for a little bit . . . but then I kept going over all the things I should have studied for this test.

TEACHER: So this is what we mean by our minds wandering into the past and future. What would happen if we just slowed this down and focused on what your

experience is right now as you're having these worrisome thoughts? What are you aware of right now in the way of physical sensations or any particular emotions that are connected to these thoughts?

ROBIN: I feel very anxious . . .

TEACHER: That's great awareness. Are there any particular physical sensations that go with this anxiety?

ROBIN: My palms get sweaty.

TEACHER: Is there anything you've learned that might be helpful to you in this moment?

ROBIN: I could say something kind or reassuring to myself maybe.

Inquiry offers an opportunity for an intimate exchange that benefits everyone. However, an important rule to follow is to ask what and how, not why. Guiding this process carefully with curiosity and interest can lead to self-awareness for the teen. "Why?" questions are reserved for the therapy session. The focus of inquiry remains on present-moment experience, letting go of the need for the client to gain a particular insight or shift in their emotional struggle. We are not excavating, analyzing, or fixing in inquiry. We are simply meeting the experience with compassion.

When to End Inquiry

How do you recognize the endpoint in inquiry? With teens is it often quite obvious. A teen will demonstrate discomfort or resistance through body posture, facial expression, a slight withdrawal, or silence. On the other hand, if something positive is shared and there are no signs of distress, move in and out quickly. Inquiry with a teen should not take more than 1 or 2 minutes, and often inquiry with teens is very simple. This point cannot be emphasized enough. Therapists may want to naturally create insight by probing deeper into the psychological nature of the experience; teachers may naturally want to educate and inform. Staying aware of your intentions and motivations is paramount to keeping inquiry safe.

In other cases, there will be teens who like to talk and who monopolize the conversation for a variety of reasons. This may signal to the teacher that there is an unmet need behind this behavior. You then have to determine if the situation requires further attention (e.g., due to unresolved struggle) or if it is time to bring the inquiry to an end by smiling, saying "thank you," and moving on. Tracking the teen's nonverbal signals carefully and using your own resonance helps to discern this. Managing individual behavior in the group helps to maintain the safe container.

Working with Silence

As we have discussed in Chapter 6, silence is golden with teens and often a place they retreat to when feeling awkward or uncomfortable, particularly during inquiry. Learning how to navigate silence during inquiry is another way to encourage safety and trust. You

must learn to recognize a reasonable pause in inquiry. By design, this pause or period of silence should allow time for the teens to reflect on their experience or gather the courage to speak. When a teacher is uncomfortable with silence, they may unwittingly interrupt a growing insight by talking too soon. This brings us back to the importance of embodied presence—the place where inquiry should always begin. We hold the promise for teens to cultivate the tools to befriend and accept who they are by understanding the value of silence.

On the other hand, you must recognize when silence becomes too long and uncomfortable for the group. For example, a teen who really doesn't want to talk starts talking because they can't bear the silence. To avoid this, it can be helpful to ask a narrower question, such as "Did anyone notice their mind wandering?," perhaps also asking for a show of hands, or "Were you able to imagine a safe place?" Sometimes teens are silent because the question is too big and they need an easier entry, which is possible by asking about a specific part of the exercise.



Co-Teaching and Inquiry

When co-teaching in a group, there are a few essential rules to follow that will help guide a successful inquiry with teens. These guidelines will contribute to a healthy co-teaching relationship, and it is important to discuss them with your co-teacher ahead of time. As a rule, the teacher who just guided a practice or exercise is responsible for conducting the inquiry afterwards. This means that they are in charge of the inquiry from the beginning to the end. Giving your co-teacher space to inquire into the experience of a teen without the concern of being interrupted is the holy grail of co-teaching and inquiry. This is an opportunity to stay curious about the process. Otherwise, you risk derailing the inquiry process and taking it into an unintended direction.

Co-teachers can communicate with one another on when and how to most effectively add to an inquiry process. The only question they must ask themselves is "will my contribution make a difference?" If you wish to add something, ask your co-teacher for permission at the end of the inquiry. As a shorthand, remember to practice W.A.I.T. (Why am I talking?). If time permits, it is polite for the teacher in charge to ask their co-teacher if there is anything they would like to add. Likewise, if the guiding teacher gets stuck, this can be a signal that they need some support.

Guidelines for Co-Teaching and Inquiry

1. Discuss guidelines for co-teaching ahead of time.
2. Communicate your preferences in teaching clearly to your co-teacher.
3. Agree on signals to communicate your needs during the teaching process.
4. The guiding teacher conducts the inquiry.
5. Respect the guiding teacher's process.
6. Practice W.A.I.T. (Why am I talking?).
7. Co-teacher may contribute at the end of the inquiry with permission from guiding teacher.

 **Conclusion**

As we stated at the beginning of the chapter, inquiry is not without challenge. It is an art that takes practice and a willingness to be fully present, humble and authentic. No answers are necessary, simply holding a light for the teen to see themselves more clearly and offering a warm and accepting presence. Genuine curiosity helps to promote self-interest in a teen. It can encourage a teen to turn toward their experience with their own curiosity and with acceptance, creating the pathway for emotion regulation. This is the purpose and practice of inquiry. One important way to develop your inquiry skills is to stay curious about your own moment-to-moment experience and explore how you can offer yourself compassion when you become aware of struggle. Your personal practice remains the foundation to teaching others. Throughout Part IV, we have provided sample inquiry dialogues with corresponding notes that will further illustrate the points we've made in this chapter.