

Teen Depression - A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS

Teenage depression isn't just bad moods and occasional melancholy—it's a serious problem that impacts every aspect of a teen's life. Teen depression can lead to problems at home and school, drug abuse, self-loathing—even violence or suicide. But as a concerned parent, teacher, or friend, there are many ways you can help. Talking about the problem and offering support can go a long way toward getting your teenager back on track.

Understanding teen depression

There are as many misconceptions about teen depression as there are about teenagers in general. Yes, the teen years are tough, but most teens balance the requisite angst with good friendships, success in school or outside activities, and the development of a strong sense of self.

Occasional bad moods or acting out is to be expected, but depression is something different. Depression can destroy the very essence of a teenager's personality, causing an overwhelming sense of sadness, despair, or anger.

Whether the incidence of teen depression is actually increasing, or we're just becoming more aware of it, the fact remains that depression strikes teenagers far more often than most people think. And although depression is highly treatable, experts say only 1 in 5 depressed teens receive help. Unlike adults, who have the ability to seek assistance on their own, teenagers usually must rely on parents, teachers, or other caregivers to recognize their suffering and get them the treatment they need. So if you have an adolescent in your life, it's important to learn what teen depression looks like and what to do if you spot the warning signs.

Signs and symptoms of teen depression

Teenagers face a host of pressures, from the changes of puberty to questions about who they are and where they fit in. The natural transition from child to adult can also bring parental conflict as teens start to assert their independence. With all this drama, it isn't always easy to differentiate between depression and normal teenage moodiness. Making things even more complicated, teens with depression do not necessarily appear sad, nor do they always withdraw from others. For some depressed teens, symptoms of irritability, aggression, and rage are more prominent.

Signs and symptoms of depression in teens

- Sadness or hopelessness
- Irritability, anger, or hostility
- Tearfulness or frequent crying
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Loss of interest in activities
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Restlessness and agitation
- Feelings of worthlessness and guilt
- Lack of enthusiasm and motivation
- Fatigue or lack of energy
- Difficulty concentrating
- Thoughts of death or suicide

If you're unsure if an adolescent in your life is depressed or just "being a teenager," consider how long the symptoms have been present, how severe they are, and how different the teen is acting from his or her usual self. While some "growing pains" are to be expected as teenagers grapple with the challenges of growing up, dramatic, long-lasting changes in personality, mood, or behavior are red flags of a deeper problem.

The difference between teenage and adult depression

Depression in teens can look very different from depression in adults. The following symptoms of depression are more common in teenagers than in their adult counterparts:

- **Irritable or angry mood** – As noted above, irritability, rather than sadness, is often the predominant mood in depressed teens. A depressed teenager may be grumpy, hostile, easily frustrated, or prone to angry outbursts.
- **Unexplained aches and pains** – Depressed teens frequently complain about physical ailments such as headaches or stomachaches. If a thorough physical exam does not reveal a medical cause, these aches and pains may indicate depression.
- **Extreme sensitivity to criticism** – Depressed teens are plagued by feelings of worthlessness, making them extremely vulnerable to criticism, rejection, and failure. This is a particular problem for "over-achievers."
- **Withdrawing from some, but not all people** – While adults tend to isolate themselves when depressed, teenagers usually keep up at least some friendships. However, teens with depression may socialize less than before, pull away from their parents, or start hanging out with a different crowd.

Effects of teen depression

The negative effects of teenage depression go far beyond a melancholy mood. Many rebellious and unhealthy behaviors or attitudes in teenagers are actually indications of depression. The following are some the ways in which teens "act out" or "act in" in an attempt to cope with their emotional pain:

- **Problems at school.** Depression can cause low energy and concentration difficulties. At school, this may lead to poor attendance, a drop in grades, or frustration with schoolwork in a formerly good student.
- **Running away.** Many depressed teens run away from home or talk about running away. Such attempts are usually a cry for help.
- **Drug and alcohol abuse.** Teens may use alcohol or drugs in an attempt to "self-medicate" their depression. Unfortunately, substance abuse only makes things worse.
- **Low self-esteem.** Depression can trigger and intensify feelings of ugliness, shame, failure, and unworthiness.
- **Internet addiction.** Teens may go online to escape from their problems. But excessive computer use only increases their isolation and makes them more depressed.
- **Reckless behavior.** Depressed teens may engage in dangerous or high-risk behaviors, such as reckless driving, out-of-control drinking, and unsafe sex.
- **Violence.** Some depressed teens (usually boys who are the victims of bullying) become violent. As in the case of the Columbine school massacre, self-hatred and a wish to die can erupt into violence and homicidal rage.

Teen depression is also associated with a number of other mental health problems, including eating disorders and self-injury.

Suicide warning signs in teenagers Teenagers and Suicide

If you suspect that a teenager you know is suicidal, take immediate action!

- Take your child to the nearest hospital emergency room or to your local psychiatric hospital facility for an immediate evaluation.
- The Aurora EAP is available 24/7 at 800-236-3231 to provide information and consultation to parents with concerns about their children.
- For 24-hour suicide prevention and support, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-TALK**. This resource is available to teens and to parents.

Teens who are seriously depressed often think, speak, or make "attention-getting" attempts at suicide. An alarming and increasing number of teenagers attempt and succeed at suicide, so suicidal thoughts or behaviors should always be taken very seriously.

For the overwhelming majority of suicidal teens, depression or another psychological disorder plays a primary role. In depressed teens who also abuse alcohol or drugs, the risk of suicide is even greater. Because of the very real danger of suicide, teenagers who are depressed should be watched closely for any signs of suicidal thoughts or behavior.

Suicide warning signs in depressed teens

- Talking or joking about committing suicide.
- Saying things like, "I'd be better off dead," "I wish I could disappear forever," or "There's no way out."
- Speaking positively about death or romanticizing dying ("If I died, people might love me more").
- Writing stories and poems about death, dying, or suicide.
- Engaging in reckless behavior or having a lot of accidents resulting in injury.
- Giving away prized possessions.
- Saying goodbye to friends and family as if for good.
- Seeking out weapons, pills, or other ways to kill themselves.

If you suspect that a teenager in your life is suffering from depression, speak up right away. Even if you're unsure that depression is the issue, the troublesome behaviors and emotions you're seeing in your teenager are signs of a problem.

Whether or not that problem turns out to be depression, it still needs to be addressed—the sooner the better. In a loving and non-judgmental way, share your concerns with your teenager. Let him or her know what specific signs of depression you've noticed and why they worry you. Then encourage your child to share what he or she is going through.

Your teen may be reluctant to open up. He or she may be ashamed, afraid of being misunderstood. Alternatively, depressed teens may simply have a hard time expressing what they're feeling.

If your teen claims nothing is wrong, but has no explanation for what is causing the depressed behavior, you should trust your instincts. Remember that denial is a strong emotion. Furthermore, teenagers may not believe that what they're experiencing is the result of depression.

Tips for Talking to a Depressed Teen

Offer support - Let depressed teenagers know that you're there for them, fully and unconditionally. Hold back from asking a lot of questions (teenagers don't like to feel patronized or crowded), but make it clear that you're ready and willing to provide whatever support they need.

Be gentle but persistent - Don't give up if your adolescent shuts you out at first. Talking about depression can be very tough for teens. Be respectful of your child's comfort level while still emphasizing your concern and willingness to listen.

Listen without lecturing - Resist any urge to criticize or pass judgment once your teenager begins to talk. The important thing is that your child is communicating. Avoid offering unsolicited advice or ultimatums as well.

Validate feelings - Don't try to talk teens out of their depression, even if their feelings or concerns appear silly or irrational to you. Simply acknowledge the pain and sadness they are feeling. If you don't, they will feel like you don't take their emotions seriously.

Getting treatment for teen depression

Depression is very damaging when left untreated, so don't wait and hope that the symptoms will go away. If you see depression's warning signs, seek professional help.

- Your **EAP** has licensed counselors available to parents free of charge. Counselors can consult with you by phone 24/7 or schedule an in-person appointment with you. EAP can answer your questions, help you develop a plan, assist your family with assessment and counseling, and refer you to a specialist if needed. **Call 800-236-3231.**
- Make an immediate appointment for your teen to see the family physician for a depression screening. Be prepared to give your doctor specific information about your teen's depression symptoms, including how long they've been present, how much they're affecting your child's daily life, and any patterns you've noticed. The doctor should also be told about any close relatives who have ever been diagnosed with depression or another mental health disorder. As part of the depression screening, the doctor will give your teenager a complete physical exam and take blood samples to check for medical causes of your child's symptoms.

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