

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

Depression in Teens: What Parents Can Do

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Depression in adolescents is more than simply the difficulties of teen years, and it requires more than just patience and understanding to get through it. Particularly as it appears in teenagers, depression is often a disguised illness. Its symptoms can easily appear to be a normal part of the turmoil of adolescence, a time not noted for stable moods or logical behavior by adult standards. Rapid changes in hormones, physical and psychological development, response to peer pressure, and perceptions of the world, combined with conflicting desires to be independent but free of responsibilities, make adolescence a time of emotional upheaval and behavioral extremes. Even common adolescent behavior, such as slavish adherence to fads, can seem abnormal to parents. Occasional bad moods or episodes of acting out are to be expected, but depression is something different. How can parents distinguish between adolescent characteristics that, no matter how outrageous, are "just being a teenager," and those that suggest serious clinical depression requiring evaluation and treatment?

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

Depression is not a personal weakness, a character flaw, or the result of uninformed or inadequate parenting. It is an illness that affects the entire person, changing the way he or she feels, thinks, and acts.

Clinical Depression

Clinical depression is generally defined as a persistent sad or irritable mood accompanied by a loss of interest and pleasure in nearly all activities. Depression is more than just feeling down or having a bad day, and it is different from normal, healthy feelings of grief or sadness that usually follow a significant loss, such as parental divorce, a breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend, or the death of a loved one. Depression can destroy the very essence of a teenager's personality, causing an overwhelming sense of sadness, despair, or anger.

Depression affects 8–10% of adolescents. Left untreated, it is the leading risk factor for teen suicide. Depression often leads to poor academic performance, poor social relationships, school absenteeism, dropping out, disruptive behavior, and school violence. Although depression is highly treatable, only 20% of depressed teens ever receive help.

How Does Depression Differ From Typical Moodiness of Adolescence?

Depressed teens can experience a range of symptoms, including changes in appetite, disturbed sleep patterns, increased or reduced activity level, impaired concentration, and decreased feelings of self-worth. Adolescents suffering from a depressive disorder are often defiant and oppositional rather than sad and slow-moving, like most depressed adults. Symptoms of depression can show up in school as behavior problems, unusually poor attention in class, an unexplained drop in grades, truancy and cutting classes, dropping out of previously preferred activities, and fights with or withdrawal from friends and acquaintances. Depression in teens may also be disguised as other problems or behaviors, such as anxiety, learning problems, sexual promiscuity, and substance abuse.

Depressed adolescents often self-medicate with street drugs or prescription medications. Alternatively or in addition, they may seek risky thrills to alleviate their pain. Some seek relief through self-injury, such as cutting themselves or taking extreme physical risks. These behaviors are different from normal teenage behavior because they last longer, are more intense, and cause greater problems and dysfunction.

Symptoms or behaviors that last longer than two weeks, are far out of proportion to an event or situation, and impair a student's academic and/or social functioning are cause for professional

evaluation. Although episodes of clinical depression are sometimes self-limiting (meaning that the teenager may appear to get better spontaneously), depressed teens rarely can just snap out of it on their own. They are also likely to experience additional episodes in the future.

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION IN TEENS?

Any one or more of these signs may indicate symptoms of depression:

- Prolonged feelings of hopelessness
- Unreasonable feelings of guilt
- Irritability, anger, or hostility
- Frequent tearfulness
- Unusual fatigue and lack of energy
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Restlessness and agitation
- Reduced enthusiasm and motivation
- Problems concentrating
- Talk of death or suicide
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Loss of interest in preferred activities

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS FOR A DEPRESSIVE DISORDER?

Depression can occur in anyone, but there are certain factors that predispose adolescents to depressive disorders. Clinical depression usually has a genetic component, and those who have a family history of depression or mood disorders, particularly among close relatives, are more vulnerable. More than half of teens who are diagnosed with a depressive disorder have one or more coexisting mental disorders, so those who already have emotional or behavior problems are at greater risk.

Other risk factors include low self-esteem; uncertainty about sexual orientation; poor academic functioning; poor physical health; chronic illness and pain; ineffective coping skills; substance abuse; and frequent conflicts with family, friends, and teachers. In addition, students who have experienced significant trauma or abuse, are bullied, or do not feel welcome or accepted at school are much more susceptible to depression. While depression is more common in girls and adolescents living in poverty, depression does affect both genders and teens from all walks of life, cultures, and ethnicities.

HOW CAN PARENTS HELP DEPRESSED TEENS?

Parents are critical sources of support for depressed teens.

Get Professional Help

If you are unsure whether 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 and moodiness 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. If you are uncertain about whether your teenager is depressed, consult your school psychologist or other mental health professional for advice.

Provide Support

Parents can further help depressed teens:

Stay involved. The influence of parents during the turbulence of adolescence is essential for raising healthy teens. Too often, parents respond to signs of increasing independence by withdrawing from their teens' lives or by being too strict. The most important thing a parent can do is to be involved in positive ways. Spend quality time with your teenager.

Be a good listener. Parents should be available and open so teens can talk to them about the problems they are facing. Ask your teen about her life and listen to the answers. Pay attention to her troubles and help her find solutions to problems without doing so for her. Know and recognize warning signs of depression. If a teen talks of suicide, take it seriously and seek professional help immediately.

Be empathic. Living with a depressed teenager can be tough. Frequently, you may experience exhaustion, rejection, despair, aggravation, or any number of negative feelings. During this difficult time, it's important to remember that your child is not being a problem on purpose. He is hurting, so do your best to be patient and understanding. Always keep in mind that with effective treatment, your child will improve.

Support positive relationships. Teens need to feel that they belong. Their friendships and social interactions can help them to do this. Encourage and assist your teen in finding interests and activities that provide opportunities to connect with other teens in face-to-face, positive, healthy ways. Offer to take your teen out with friends or suggest social activities that might be of interest, such as sports, after-school clubs, or classes in the arts. Teens also need to be exposed to other caring adults they can trust, such as coaches, scout leaders, religious mentors, and so on. Contact with responsible adults can help

provide direction for their lives, build resilience, and provide stability.

Encourage regular physical activity. Try to get your teenager to lead an active life, even though it's difficult for someone who is depressed. Exercise can go a long way toward relieving the symptoms of depression, so find ways to make it a regular part of your adolescent's routine. Something as simple as walking the dog or going for a bike ride daily can be a great help. Set a good example.

Learn more about depression. Just as you would if your child had any other illness, read up on depression so you can be knowledgeable. The more you understand, the better able you'll be to help. Encourage your teenager to learn more about depression, too. Reading up on their own condition can help depressed teens feel less alone and will give them a better understanding of what they're going through.

Stay involved in interventions. Make sure your teen is following all treatment instructions and going to therapy as recommended. It's especially important that any prescribed medications are taken as instructed. Keep track of changes in your teen's condition, and call the doctor if the depression seems to be getting worse.

Take good care of yourself. In order to help anyone, you must stay healthy and positive yourself. Pay attention to your own needs, too. The stress of the situation can wear on you, so make sure that you eat right, get enough sleep, and make some time for things you enjoy. It is important for teens with depression to observe adults who know how to cope. Taking good care of oneself is a great way to model coping with stress.

Communicate with your family. Don't avoid the issue of teen depression in an attempt to protect other family members. Even small children know when something is wrong. When left in the dark, their imaginations will often be worse than the reality. Be open about what is going on and encourage family members to ask questions and share feelings. Siblings may need individual attention or professional help of their own to handle their worries, fears, and feelings of being neglected.

Don't place blame. It can be tempting to blame yourself, other family members, or friends for your adolescent's depression, but blaming only adds to the stress. Depression is normally caused by a number of factors, so it's unlikely—except in the case of abuse or neglect—that any one thing or person is responsible.

Get support. Get the emotional encouragement you need. Reach out to friends, join a support group, or see a counselor of your own. It's normal to experience many different and difficult emotions. The important thing is to express how your teen's depression is affecting you to someone who can help, rather than holding your feelings inside. If you do not know where to turn, see your school psychologist for help.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

American Association of Suicidology: http://www.suicidology.org

Depression Center: http://www.depressioncenter.net

HelpGuide.org, *Teen depression: A guide for parents and teachers*: http://www.helpguide.org/mental/depression_teen.htm

Kaufman, M. (2001). *Overcoming teen depression: A guide for parents*. Buffalo, NY: Firefly Books.

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, *Depression*: http://www.cdc.gov/features/depression

National Mental Health Information Center, *Suicide prevention*: http://www.mentalhealth.org/suicideprevention

United States Surgeon General, *The Surgeon General's call to action to prevent suicide*. Available: http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/calltoaction/default.htm

Yellow Ribbon International: http://www.yellowribbon.org

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