



Guide to Teen Depression

Teenage depression isn't just bad moods and the occasional sadness—it's a serious problem that impacts every aspect of a teen's life. Teen depression can lead to drug and alcohol abuse, self-hate and self-mutilation, pregnancy, violence, and even suicide.

But as a concerned parent, caregiver, teacher, or friend, there are many ways you can help. Talking about the problem and offering support can go a long way toward getting the 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 usual stress 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 core of a teenager's personality, causing an overwhelming sense of sadness, despair, or anger.

Signs and Symptoms of Teen Depression:

- 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 deal 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 adults:

- 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 caregivers, or start hanging out with a different crowd.

Effects of Teen Depression

The negative effects of teenage depression go far beyond an unhappy 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.
- 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. Self-hatred and a wish to die can erupt into violence and rage.

Encouraging a Depressed Teen to Open Up

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 the 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 the teenager. Let him or her know what specific signs of depression you've noticed and why they worry you. Then encourage that 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 the 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 your teen out of his or her depression, even if his or her feelings or concerns appear silly or irrational to you. Simply acknowledge the pain and sadness he or she is feeling. If you don't, he or she will feel like you don't take his or her emotions seriously.

Supporting a Teen through Depression

As the teenager in your life goes through depression, the most important thing you can do is to let him or her know that you're there to listen and offer support. Now more than ever, your teenager needs to know that he or she is valued, accepted, and cared for.

- Be understanding. Living with a depressed teenager can be difficult and draining. At times, you may experience exhaustion, rejection, despair, aggravation, or any other number of negative emotions. During this trying time, it's important to remember that the child is not being difficult on purpose. They're not giving you a hard time, they are having a hard time. The teen is suffering, so do your best to be patient and understanding.
- Encourage physical activity. Encourage the teenager to stay active. Exercise can go a long way toward relieving the symptoms of depression, so find ways to incorporate it into your teenager's day. Something as simple as taking a walk or going on a bike ride can be beneficial.
- Encourage social activity. Isolation only makes depression worse, so encourage your teenager to spend time with friends and praise efforts to socialize. Suggest social activities that might be of interest, such as sports or clubs.
- Stay involved in treatment. Make sure your teenager is following all treatment instructions and going to counseling. It's especially important that your child takes any prescribed medication as instructed if applicable. Track changes in your teen's condition, and call the doctor if depression symptoms seem to be getting worse.
- Learn about depression. Just like you would if the child had a disease you knew very little about, read up on depression so that you can be your own "expert." The more you know, the better equipped you'll be to help your depressed teen. Encourage your teenager to learn more about depression as well. Reading up on his or her condition can help a depressed teen realize that he or she is not alone, giving your child a better understanding of what he or she is going through.

The road to your depressed teenager's recovery may be bumpy, so be patient. Rejoice in small victories and prepare for the occasional setback. Most importantly, don't judge yourself. As long as you're doing your best to get the teen the necessary help, you're doing your job.

Adapted from <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/depression/teen-depression-signs-help.htm>