Depression and Teens: A Guide for Parents

Having bad days once in a while is normal for teens. But sometimes a teen may be down in the dumps for a few weeks or months. If sadness or bad moods won't go away, the cause might be depression.

Depression is very common. It can affect any person at any age. There are ways you can spot the signs of depression. You can get help for your teen.

Causes and symptoms of depression

What is depression?
Depression affects actions and thoughts. There may be sadness or anger. There may be a lack of energy. Your teen may have trouble sleeping. He or she may feel hopeless. Your teen may have unhappy thoughts about life.

Depression may affect a person physically. This can cause trouble sleeping or eating. Your teen may have trouble thinking. He or she may have pains such as headaches or stomach aches.

Who gets depressed?
Depression affects children, teens and adults of all ages. It affects all ethnic and racial backgrounds. Of all children and teens ages 9-17, about one in 20 will have major depression.¹

What are the symptoms of depression?

Teens with depression may have these feelings.

- Feel sad or "empty" a lot of the time. (These feelings may come and go, but last at least two weeks.)
- Not feel like doing things they used to enjoy. They may not want to play sports or hang out with friends. They may not feel like studying.
- Get angry or lose their temper quickly.
- Feel tired. Feel restless and edgy.
- Have changes in their eating habits. (They may eat more or less than they did before.)
- Have changes in sleep. They may sleep a lot more or less than before. They may have trouble falling asleep or waking up.
- Find it harder to think and make decisions.
- Feel bad about themselves.
- Feel guilty about things that they do or don't do.
- Feel that things will never get better.
- Think about not wanting to live. Think about hurting themselves. Or they may have tried to hurt themselves.

How do I know whether my teen is depressed or just sad?

It is normal to feel depressed or sad sometimes. But your teen could have depression if he or she has some of the above symptoms most of the time for two weeks or more.

There are no tests that prove someone is depressed. If you think your teen is depressed, talk with his or her doctor. It may also be good to talk to a mental health doctor about your teen.

What are the effects of depression?
Depression has many effects on people.

Depression can:
- Make it harder to work at a job or in school.
- Make it harder to make and keep friends.
- Make it harder to get along with family members.
- Affect physical health. (For example, a person with depression may feel tired all the time.)
- Make a teenager feel tempted to try alcohol, drugs or sex. He or she may use these to get away from bad feelings.
- Make your teen feel very angry. This can cause him or her to yell and argue.
- Make it hard to pay attention. This can lead to car accidents and other serious mistakes.
- Lead to serious injury and even suicide if left untreated.

What causes depression?
No one knows for sure what causes depression. It is not your teenager's fault. Most likely, depression is caused by more than one thing.

Sometimes depression can be the result of medical problems. Depression may occur when someone has a health problem that causes chronic pain.

Some factors may increase the risk for depression.
- Genetics: If other people in the family have had depression, your teenager may be more likely to get depressed.
- Family Problems: A major loss or conflict in your family may cause your teen to feel depressed.
- Low Self-Esteem: Teenagers who are criticized or ignored may feel depressed. Teenagers who have problems at school or other activities may feel depressed.
- Feeling Alone: Some teens feel they are different from others. They think their friends and family don't understand them. This may be true for teens who are gay, lesbian or bisexual. Teens who have just broken up with a boyfriend or girlfriend may feel this way. Teens who have a parent with an illness or substance abuse problem may feel this way.
- Medical Problems: Medical problems can result in depression. If there is a serious medical problem in your family or child, tell the doctor.

Your teen may not have any of these problems but still feel depressed.

How to get help for your teen

What should I do if I think my teen is depressed?
If you think your teen may be depressed, ask him or her about it. Ask if he or she has been feeling down, sad, angry or hopeless.

Let your teen know you see he or she is unhappy. Say that you care. It is very important to talk to a doctor if you are concerned about your teen. You may notice depression for more than a short time, drinking or using drugs, not eating, bad grades, anger, risky actions or self-harm.

This information is not intended to serve as medical advice. If you experience physical symptoms that cause you concern, please consult your physician.
These professionals should be able to help you get treatment for your teenager:

- Mental health professional such as a social worker, psychologist or psychiatrist.
- Health care provider.
- School counselor.
- Religious or community leader.

**What if my teenager says he or she is thinking about hurting him or herself?**

Anyone who has thoughts about hurting himself or herself should be taken seriously. The person should get professional help right away. Suicide is the third leading cause of death in teens and young adults. But it can often be prevented with urgent treatment.

Many people tell someone before they kill themselves or attempt to kill themselves.

Teenagers may injure themselves by cutting without meaning to kill themselves. However, self-injury is serious. It should always be taken as a sign that the teen needs help. If a teen is harming himself or herself, you should get help right away.

If your teen is harming or thinks about killing himself or herself, see a mental health professional immediately! If you are unable to obtain urgent care from a mental health provider, take your teen to the nearest emergency room or call 911.

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