

# A PARENT'S GUIDE TO TEEN DEPRESSION



## LEARN THE SIGNS OF DEPRESSION IN TEENS AND HOW YOU CAN HELP

### TEEN DEPRESSION: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

The biggest hurdle teens face when they are having problems is the reaction they get from their parents. Parents who categorise their teen's complaints as "teenage angst, puberty blues, and growing pains" risk further isolating their already vulnerable kids. Teenage depression isn't just bad moods and the occasional melancholy—it's a serious problem that impacts every aspect of a teen's life. Teen depression can lead to drug and alcohol abuse, self-loathing and self-mutilation, pregnancy, violence, and even 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 incidences of teen depression are actually increasing, or we're just becoming more aware of them, the fact remains that depression strikes teenagers far more often than most people think. And although depression is highly treatable, experts say only one in five depressed teens receives help. Unlike adults, who have the ability to seek assistance on their own, teenagers usually must rely on parents, teachers, or other caregivers to recognise 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 & 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 & 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 differently 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 behaviour are red flags of a deeper problem.

### THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TEENAGE & 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 stomach aches. 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 socialise 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 behaviours or attitudes in teenagers are actually indications of depression. The following are some of 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 their problems, but excessive computer use only increases their isolation, making them more depressed.
- **Reckless behaviour** - Depressed teens may engage in dangerous or high-risk behaviours 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.

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

### 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 patronised 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 and a lot of well-meaning parents at attempts to "fix-it", are not helpful to your teen. Asking "what can I do that is most helpful to you" is often better. Be respectful of your child's comfort level while still emphasising your concern and willingness to listen.
- **Listen without lecturing** - Resist any urge to criticise 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.

### 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.

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 other mental health disorders. 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.

Your GP may be able to refer you to funded counselling through their primary mental health programme, so always ask if that is available.

### SEEK OUT A DEPRESSION SPECIALIST

If there are no health problems that are causing your teenager's depression, ask your doctor to refer you to a psychologist or psychiatrist who specialises in children and adolescents. Depression in teens can be tricky, particularly when it comes to treatment options such as medication. A mental health professional with advanced training and a strong background treating adolescents is the best bet for your teenager's best care.

When choosing a specialist, always get your child's input. Teenagers are dependent on parents for making many of their health decisions, so listen to what they're telling you. No one therapist is a miracle worker, and no one treatment works for everyone. If your child feels uncomfortable or is just not

"connecting" with the psychologist or psychiatrist, ask for a referral to another provider who may be better suited to your teenager.

## TREATMENT OPTIONS

Expect a discussion with the specialist you've chosen about treatment possibilities for your son or daughter. There are a number of treatment options for depression in teenagers, including one-on-one talk therapy, group or family therapy and medication.

Talk therapy is often a good initial treatment for mild to moderate cases of depression. Over the course of therapy, your teen's depression may resolve. If it doesn't, medication may be warranted. However, antidepressants should only be used as part of a broader treatment plan.

Unfortunately, some parents feel pushed into choosing antidepressant medication over other treatments that may be cost-prohibitive or time-intensive. However, unless your child is considered to be high-risk for suicide (in which case medication and/or constant observation may be necessary), you have time to carefully weigh your options before committing to antidepressant medication. This should always be seen as a last resort.

## RISKS OF TEENAGE ANTIDEPRESSANT USE

In severe cases of depression, medication may help ease symptoms. However, antidepressants aren't always the best treatment option. They come with risks and side-effects of their own, including a number of safety concerns specific to children and young adults. It's important to weigh the benefits against the risks before starting your teen on medication.

## TEENS ON ANTIDEPRESSANTS: RED FLAGS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Call a doctor if you notice...

- *New or more thoughts of suicide*
- *Failed suicide attempts*
- *New or worse depression*
- *New or worse anxiety*
- *Feeling very agitated or restless*
- *Panic attacks*
- *Difficulty sleeping (insomnia)*
- *New or worse irritability*
- *Acting aggressive, being angry or violent*
- *Acting on dangerous impulses*
- *Being extremely hyperactive in actions and talking (hypomania or mania)*
- *Other unusual changes in behaviour*

## SUPPORTING A TEEN THROUGH DEPRESSION TREATMENT

As the depressed teenager in your life goes through treatment, 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 your child is not being difficult on purpose. Your teen is suffering, so do your best to be patient and understanding.
- **Encourage physical activity.** Encourage your 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 walking the dog or going on a bike ride can be beneficial.
- **Encourage social activity.** Isolation only makes depression worse, so encourage your teenager to see friends and praise efforts to socialise. Offer to take your teen out with friends or suggest social activities that might be of interest, such as sports, after-school clubs or an art class.
- **Stay involved in treatment.** Make sure your teenager is following all treatment instructions and going to therapy. It's especially important that your child takes any prescribed medication as instructed. 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 your 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 realise 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 or compare your family to others. As long as you're doing your best to get your teen the necessary help, you're doing your job.

## TAKING CARE OF THE WHOLE FAMILY WHEN ONE CHILD IS DEPRESSED

As a parent dealing with teen depression, you may find yourself focusing all your energy and attention on your depressed child. Meanwhile, you may be neglecting your own needs and the needs of other family members. While helping your depressed child should be a top priority, it's important to keep your whole family strong and healthy during this difficult time.

- **Take care of yourself** – In order to help a depressed teen, you need to stay healthy and positive yourself, so don't ignore your own needs. The stress of the situation can affect your own moods and emotions, so cultivate your wellbeing by eating right, getting enough sleep and making time for things you enjoy.
- **Reach out for support** – Get the emotional support you need. Reach out to friends, join a support group, or see a therapist of your own. It's okay to feel overwhelmed, frustrated, helpless or angry. The important thing is to talk about how your teen's depression is affecting you rather than bottling up your emotions.

- **Be open with the family** – Don't tiptoe around the issue of teen depression in an attempt to "protect" the other children. Kids know when something is wrong. When left in the dark, their imaginations will often jump to far worse conclusions. Be open about what is going on and invite your children to ask questions and share their feelings.
- **Remember the siblings** – Depression in one child can cause stress or anxiety in other family members, so make sure "healthy" children are not ignored. Siblings may need special individual attention or professional help of their own to handle their feelings about the situation.
- **Avoid the blame game** – It can be easy to blame yourself or another family member for your teen's depression, but it only adds to an already stressful situation. Furthermore, depression is normally caused by a number of factors, so it's unlikely—except in the case of abuse or neglect—that any loved one is "responsible."

## TEENAGERS AND SUICIDE

Seriously depressed teens often think about, speak of, or make "attention-getting" attempts at suicide. But an alarming and increasing number of teenage suicide attempts are successful, so suicidal thoughts or behaviours 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 behaviour.

*If you suspect that a teenager you know is suicidal, take immediate action! For 24-hour suicide prevention and support call:*

## NATIONAL HELPLINES

**Lifeline** – 0800 543 354 or (09) 5222 999 within Auckland

**Suicide Crisis Helpline** – 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)

**Healthline** – 0800 611 116

**Samaritans** – 0800 726 666 (for callers from the Lower North Island, Christchurch and West Coast) or 0800 211 211 or (04) 473 9739 for callers from all other regions

## HELPLINES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

**Youthline** – 0800 376 633, free text 234 or email talk@youthline.co.nz thelowdown.co.nz – or email team@thelowdown.co.nz or free text 5626 (emails and text messages will be responded to between 12 noon and 12 midnight) What's Up – 0800 942 8787 for five to 18-year-olds, 1pm to 11pm daily

**Kidsline** – 0800 54 37 54 (0800 kidslines) aimed at children up to 14 years of age; 4pm to 6pm weekdays

## The Key To Life Charitable Trust

**A:** PO Box 926, Taupo, 3351

**W:** www.keytolife.org.nz

**f** TheKeytoLifeCharitableTrust



**Mike King**

**T:** +64 21 448 789

**E:** mikeking@keytolife.org.nz

**f** TheNuttersClub

