

## Teenage depression

Teenage depression is a serious issue that affects every aspect of a teen's life. Left untreated it can lead to problems at home and at school, substance abuse, self-injury, running away, eating disorders, violence, and even suicide. Although teenage depression is treatable, it is estimated that only 15-20 percent of teens receive the help that they need. Unlike adults who can seek help on their own, most teens have to rely on parents or teachers to recognize symptoms and assist them in getting help. As a concerned parent or friend it's important to know the warning signs and what you can do to help.

The following are possible indicators of teenage depression, particularly if present for more than two weeks:

- Lack of enthusiasm, energy or motivation
- Poor performance in school
- Extreme sensitivity to criticism
- Irritability, anger or hostility
- Unexplained aches or pains
- Withdrawal from friends and activities
- Sadness and hopelessness
- Poor self-esteem
- Excessive guilt
- Lack of concentration
- Restlessness and agitation
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Problems with authority
- Thoughts of death or suicide

Parents often comment that it is very difficult to distinguish between normal teenage moodiness and depression. This is understandable given that teenagers are known to experience a wide range of mood and affect within short periods of time. Trying to assert newfound independence while establishing an identity and coping with fluctuating hormones is a significant challenge. This can explain periods of moodiness, or sullenness. Symptoms of irritability, anger and aggression are sometimes more prominent for teens with depression. It's important to consider how long the symptoms have been present and how much they differ from the teen's usual self. Any suicidal indicators must be taken very seriously, even if they are third hand or expressed in passing.

What to do when you are concerned a teen may be suicidal:

- Offer support – let your teen know that you are concerned. Practice unconditional acceptance, meaning that no matter how irrelevant their problem may seem to you at the time, it is very real for them. Try to let go of judgment when offering support.
- Validate their feelings – feeling understood and accepted are keys to building self-esteem in teenagers and therefore keys to combating depression. Take the time to sit and actively listen. Do not problem solve. Instead be fully aware and present.
- Use gentle persistence – it may take a long time for the teen you are concerned about to come around. Let them know you are not going anywhere. Don't rush or pressure, and avoid saying "I told you so". Do not lecture or ask repeated questions. Do be patient.
- Encourage physical activity. Exercise can go a long way toward alleviating symptoms of depression.
- Encourage social activity. Isolation worsens symptoms of depression. Encourage your teen to maintain contact with close friends.
- Learn about depression, and maintain open lines of communication with your teen, supportive family members, and other professionals involved in their care.
- Take care of yourself. Get the emotional support that you need so that you can be patient and nonjudgmental in your role as a helper.
- Seek professional help with someone who specializes in adolescent mental health. Cognitive behavioural therapy is particularly effective in treating depression. If medication is recommended do not rely on it alone. Some antidepressants may increase the risk of suicidal ideation or behaviour in some teens. Treatment with antidepressants must be monitored very closely.

Teenage depression can be very damaging when left untreated. If you are concerned about a teen in your life it is important to take action right away. Even if depression is ruled out you will still be addressing potential problems, and showing them you care.