

## Teen Depression

Teenagers face a variety of pressures, from the hormonal pressures of puberty to the deeper questions of who they are and how they fit into this world. The natural individuation process from child to adult often brings conflict in the home as both the teen and the parents struggle with the assertion of independence. The pressures are great – fitting in with their peers, doing well in school, making decisions about their future, first love relationships, sorting out their personal belief system, and often extreme demands for outside activities.

In spite of this, most teenagers function well. Occasional bad moods and acting out is expected. However, depression is different and can destroy the essence of the forming personality and cause overwhelming sadness, despair, and anger.

Unlike adults, who have greater understanding and the capacity to seek help, teen-agers are dependent on others to recognize their suffering and get them the help they need. It is important for all parents to understand the symptoms of depression and the differences in teen depression and adult depression.

### Signs and Symptoms of Depression in Teens

- Sadness or hopelessness
- Restlessness and agitation
- Feelings of worthlessness and guilt
- Irritability, anger, hostility
- Frequent crying or tearfulness
- Withdrawal from others
- Loss of interest in otherwise pleasurable activities
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Lack of enthusiasm
- Difficulty with motivation
- Poor grades in school
- Lack of energy
- Problems with concentration
- Thoughts of suicide
- Thoughts or behaviors of harming self.

If you are unsure if this is depression, consider how long the symptoms have been present, the severity of the symptoms, and the impact the symptoms are having on your teen's life.

Teen-age depression can look different than adult depression. The following are symptoms that are more common in teen-agers than in adults.

**Anger:** Irritability, rather than sadness is often the predominant mood in depressed teens. A depressed teenager may be hostile, easily frustrated, and more prone to angry outbursts.

**Unexplained aches and pains:** Depressed teens frequently complain about physical ailments such as headaches or stomachaches. If a thorough medical evaluation reveals no medical cause, these symptoms may indicate depression.

**Extreme sensitivity to criticism:** Depressed teens are plagued with feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness, making them more sensitive to the criticism or rejection of others as well as to their own perceived "failures".

**Withdrawal from some, not all, people:** While adults tend to isolate themselves from everyone during bouts of depression, teens will usually keep some friendships. They will often pull away from their parents and family or start hanging out with a different group of friends.

### Untreated Teen Depression Can Create Additional Problems

Substance Use and Abuse	In an attempt to “self-medicate” their depression, teens often turn to substances that help them feel better or improve their concentration.
Eating Disorders	Being thin is proposed as the key to happiness with friends, family, and in the media. When depressed, many teens develop eating disorders as something they can control and something that will make them happier.
School Problems	It is difficult to keep up with school work when your concentration is compromised and your energy is low. Poor attendance and dropping grades can have a lasting effect on the teenager but is a common problem concurrent with teen depression.
Running Away	Many teenagers run away from home or talk about running away. This can be seen as a “cry for help” and, hopefully, is heard when it is still in the talking stages.
Low Self-Esteem	Identity is being formed in the teen-age years. Feelings of ugliness, shame, failure, unworthiness, helplessness, hopelessness can become a part of the depressed teen’s formation of self-identity.
Internet, Sex, Shopping Addictions	Teens may practice addictions to alleviate their symptoms of depression. Excessive computer use is a sign of depression and creates increased isolation for the teen.
Self-Injury	There are many causes for self-injury; most are related, in some way, to depression. Self-injury is more common in teens than in adults.
Reckless Behavior	Depressed teens may engage in high-risk behavior because of the lack of caring about self and the need to “feel something”. Reckless driving, unsafe sex, out-of-control substance use are all problems for teen depression
Violence	Some depressed teens, usually victims of bullying, become violent. Self-hatred and a wish to die can erupt into violence.
Suicide	Depressed teens often think, speak, or make “attention-getting” attempts at suicide. Suicidal thoughts and behaviors should always be taken seriously.

**For parents:** Let your depressed teen know that you are there for them, fully and unconditionally. Don’t ask a lot of questions, they will resist the questions. This resistance will lead to greater distancing. Teenagers are sensitive to patronization and over-protection. Respect their level of comfort, but continue to express your concern, love, and willingness to help. Respect their boundaries but don’t give up. This requires an extremely difficult balance, but your awareness of the balance can be helpful in achieving this.

Be careful about lecturing, criticizing, or judging your teenager. Once they open-up and talk, the last thing you want to do is “shut them down” with lectures and criticism – even when your intent is to be helpful. Be respectful and feel honored by their desire to talk. Avoid unsolicited advice. They do plenty of lecturing, criticizing, and judging of themselves and usually there is no need to add to the burden they are already carrying.

Don't try to talk them out of depression, even if their feelings and concerns seem silly and irrational to you. Their concerns are very real and very important to them. Acknowledge their pain and sadness.

Encourage exercise, healthy eating, and social interaction; don't pressure.

Dealing with a depressed teen can be difficult and draining; you will experience exhaustion, despair, and aggravation yourself. It is important to take care of yourself and the rest of your family during this time. Get the support you need while being careful about talking to those who will pass on your remarks to the struggling teen. Speak kindly to and about your depressed teen – but speak. You need and deserve support. Most important: Don't blame yourself. Depression can be caused by a number of factors, most of which are out of your control. Except in cases of abuse or neglect, it is usually not appropriate to blame anyone for depression.

**Studies repeated indicate that a combined treatment approach including both psychotherapy and medication is the most effective treatment for major depression.**