

Understanding Teen Depression

Although depression is highly treatable, experts say only 20% of depressed teens ever receive help. Unlike adults, who have the ability to seek assistance on their own, teenagers usually must rely on parents, teachers, or other caregivers to recognize their suffering and get them the treatment they need.

Signs and symptoms of teen depression

With all the 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 AND 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 different 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 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 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 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 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 behaviors or attitudes in teenagers are actually indications of depression. See the table below for some of the ways in which teens “act out” or “act in” in an attempt to cope with their emotional pain:

Untreated Depression Can Lead to...

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.
Substance 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.
Eating disorders	Anorexia, bulimia, binge eating, and yo-yo dieting are often signs of unrecognized depression.
Internet addiction	Teens may go online to escape from their problems. But excessive computer use only increases their isolation and makes them more depressed.
Self-injury	Cutting, burning, and other kinds of self-mutilation are almost always associated with depression.
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. As in the case of the Columbine school massacre, self-hatred and a wish to die can erupt into violence and homicidal rage.
Suicide	Teens who are seriously depressed often think, speak, or make "attention-getting" attempts at suicide. Suicidal thoughts or behaviors should always be taken very seriously.

Suicide warning signs in teenagers

An alarming and increasing number of teenagers attempt and succeed at suicide. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), suicide is the third leading cause of death for 15- to 24-year-olds. 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 behavior. The warning signs include:

- Talking or joking about committing suicide.
- Saying things like, “I’d be better off dead,” “I wish I could disappear forever,” or “There’s no way out.”
- Speaking positively about death or romanticizing dying (“If I died, people might love me more”).
- Writing stories and poems about death, dying, or suicide.
- Engaging in reckless behavior or having a lot of accidents resulting in injury.
- Giving away prized possessions.
- Saying goodbye to friends and family as if for good.
- Seeking out weapons, pills, or other ways to kill themselves.

If you suspect that a teenager you know is suicidal, take immediate action!

For 24-hour suicide prevention and support, call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at 1-800-273-TALK or 1-800-273 –TALK or 1-800-784-2433.

Helping a depressed teenager

If you suspect that a teenager in your life is suffering from depression, take action right away. Depression is very damaging when left untreated, so don’t wait and hope that the symptoms will go away. Even if you’re unsure that depression is the issue, the troublesome behaviors and emotions you’re seeing in your 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.

Talk to your teen

The first thing you should do if you suspect depression is to talk to your teen about it. In a loving and non-judgmental way, share your concerns with your teenager. Let him or her know what specific signs of depression you’ve noticed and why they worry you. Then encourage your child to open up about what he or she is going through.

TIPS FOR TALKING TO A DEPRESSED TEEN

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| 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 your child’s comfort level while still emphasizing your concern. |
| 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 teens out of their depression, even if their feelings or concerns appear silly or irrational to you. Simply acknowledge the pain and sadness they are feeling. If you don’t, they will feel like you don’t take their emotions seriously. |

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. If you see depression's warning signs, seek professional help. Neither you nor your teen is qualified to either diagnosis depression or rule it out, so see a doctor or psychologist who can.

Seek out a doctor / specialist and explore the treatment options

According to the [National Institute of Mental Health](#), when medication is used, it should not be the only strategy. There are other services that you may want to investigate for your child. Family support services, educational classes, behavior management techniques, as well as family therapy and other approaches should be considered. If medication is prescribed, it should be monitored and evaluated regularly.

More Help guide articles:

- [Suicide Prevention](#): Signs of Suicide and How to Help a Suicidal Person
http://helpguide.org/mental/suicide_prevention.htm
- [Depression Treatment](#): Therapy, Medication, Lifestyle Changes That Can Help
http://helpguide.org/mental/treatment_strategies_depression.htm
- [Antidepressant Medications](#): What You Need to Know About Depression Meds
http://helpguide.org/mental/medications_depression.htm

Related links for teen depression

[Depression](#) – Breaks down the different types of depression in teenagers, as well as the symptoms and remedies. (Nemours Foundation) -

http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/mental_health/depression.html

[Depression in Boys](#) – While teen depression is more prevalent in girls, teenage boys have their own special risk factors and warning signs. This article delves deeper into male teen depression.

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200308/teen-depression-boys>

[Depression in Girls](#) – With society and hormonal changes wreaking havoc, girls need extra care in the teen years. Learn what parents can do. (Psychology Today)

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200308/teen-depression-girls>

[About Teen Suicide](#) – Discusses teen suicide statistics, risk factors, warnings signs, and how to get help. Also find coping tips for those who have lost a child to suicide.

<http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/behavior/suicide.html>

[Don't Let 20/20 Hindsight Happen to You](#) – Article on the importance of watching for the warning signs of teen suicide. Includes advice for parents. (University of Michigan)

<http://www.med.umich.edu/opm/newspage/2007/hmsuicide.htm>