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## Whose kids? Our kids!

# Teens and depression

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Adults often think back on their teen years as a time of excitement and freedom. Yet, the teen years are full of challenges and demands. Why do some young people become depressed? There are many possible reasons, but teens undergo many changes and even the most well-prepared adolescent can sometimes feel overwhelmed and alone.

Feeling depressed is not the same as feeling stressed. Symptoms of stress such as tension, frustration and worry tend to last for only a few hours or a few days. Depression is more severe and lasts longer. If your teen shows three or more of the following warning signs that last more than two to three weeks, you should seek help.

### Warning signs of teenage depression

- ✓ Irritability and troublesome behavior
- ✓ Unusual change in appetite or weight
- ✓ Loss of interest in what were once enjoyable activities
- ✓ Lack of energy; always feeling tired
- ✓ Changes in sleeping—suddenly sleeping all the time or not at all
- ✓ Wanting to be alone most of the time; withdrawing from friends
- ✓ Expressing feelings of helplessness or guilt
- ✓ Feeling sad or hopeless
- ✓ Skipping school or experiencing a sudden drop in grades
- ✓ Reckless behavior involving alcohol, drugs, sexual activity, etc.
- ✓ Suicidal thoughts or actions

### Depression and risks

Certain conditions in the family place teens at risk for depression. These conditions include a family history of depression or suicide, frequent family conflict, divorced parents, an alcoholic parent, chronic illness in a family member or loss of a parent or close loved one. Other non-family factors that can put youth at risk for depression include rejection from peers, sexual or physical abuse, a learning disability and low self-esteem.

### When is depression a problem?

How can a parent tell the difference between just a few bad days and real depression? There are two main types of depression teens may experience. Moodiness is common for teens and is not usually considered a medical problem. Moodiness rarely lasts more than a few days and can be described as “the blues,” “irritability” or “feeling insecure.” This type of mood may result from a disappointment such as a bad grade or rejection from friends, or it just may be the “mood of the moment” for no identifiable reason. Sadness typically improves on its own and is only a problem if it recurs and continues to bother your child.

Clinical depression is more serious and less common. Teens who are clinically depressed may have significantly sad moods for two weeks or more, and may exhibit some or all of the warning signs listed above. Teens who are clinically depressed are not only more likely to think about suicide, but also to act on the idea. Always take seriously any mention of suicidal thoughts.

**“I just don’t feel like doing anything. My friends don’t want to be around me and it’s not so great being with my family either—does it even matter?”**

—9th grader

## Parents make a difference!

Studies tell us that teens who have a close relationship with their parents are less likely to be depressed. They are also more likely to discuss problems with their parents. Frequent and open conversations can help to lessen the extent of sad moods. Here are some suggestions that might strengthen interactions between you and your teen:

### When you talk with your teen:

- ✓ Remember that teens may feel uncomfortable discussing their concerns at first. They may not even know how to communicate them out loud. It may take several attempts at communication before your child can or will discuss their feelings with you.
- ✓ Let teens know that you love them and are not angry or disappointed in them if they do feel depressed. The less judgmental you appear, the more likely your teen will trust you with his or her feelings.
- ✓ Be a good model of how to deal with stress. Work together with your teen to choose positive alternatives such as exercising, playing music, helping someone in need, talking with family or close friends, and painting or other artistic activities.

- ✓ Listen to your teen. Refrain from giving too much advice or direction.
- ✓ Help teens develop problem-solving skills. Encourage them to make plans, set goals and identify options.

## What if my child refuses to talk or talking doesn't help?

Sometimes, adolescents may be so depressed that they may not talk about their feelings with you. If you have concerns and are unable to communicate with your teen, try the following resources:

1. Contact your school counselor, social worker or psychologist.
2. Contact your family doctor.
3. Contact a mental health professional in your community.

## What NOT to do!

- ✓ Don't tell a teen that "these are the best times of your life." To a teen who is struggling to cope, hearing that this is as good as it gets is not good news. In fact, a depressed teen may interpret this as "If this is the best it gets and it's such a struggle, why keep going?"
- ✓ Don't brush off your teen's concerns by saying "Don't worry about it," "Get over it," or "If you think you've got problems..." Teens need reassurance that you have confidence in their ability to work out a solution.
- ✓ Don't discount the problems your teen faces. This can turn off any productive communication.
- ✓ Don't criticize or downplay your teen's feelings. Instead, ask questions about their feelings.
- ✓ Don't wait to talk with your teen until you see signs of depression. Offer help early before a problem arises.
- ✓ Don't stop with one conversation. Be ready to listen, offer encouragement and provide attention to your teen on a regular basis.

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