

Parent's Guide to Teen Depression

Learn the Signs of Depression in Teens and How You Can Help



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 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. 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.

For teens

If you're a teenager struggling with depression or you'd like to learn how to help a depressed friend, see [Teenager's Guide to Depression](#).

Signs and 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 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. The following are some 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 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 and Newtown school massacres, self-hatred and a wish to die can erupt into violence and homicidal rage.

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

Suicide warning signs in teenagers

Get help for a suicidal teen

If you suspect that a teenager you know is suicidal, take immediate action! For 24-hour suicide prevention and support in the U.S., call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-TALK**.

To find a suicide helpline outside the U.S., visit **IASP** or **Suicide.org**.

To learn more about suicide risk factors, warning signs, and what to do in a crisis, read **Suicide Prevention**.

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 behaviors 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 behavior.

Suicide warning signs in depressed teens

- 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 the last time
- Seeking out weapons, pills, or other ways to kill themselves

Encouraging a depressed teen to open up

If you suspect that a teenager in your life is suffering from depression, speak up right 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. 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 share what he or she is going through.

Your teen may be reluctant to open up; he or she may be ashamed, afraid of being misunderstood. Alternatively, depressed teens may simply have a hard time expressing what they're feeling.

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.

| 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 and willingness to listen. |
| 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 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.

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 specializes 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 that may be better suited to your teenager.

Don't rely on medication alone

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 any one treatment.

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.

Antidepressants and the teenage brain

Antidepressants were designed and tested on adults, so their impact on the young, developing brains is not yet completely understood. Some researchers are concerned that the use of drugs such as Prozac in children and teens might interfere with normal brain development. The human brain develops rapidly in young adults, and exposure to antidepressants may impact that development—particularly the way the brain manages stress and regulates emotions.

Antidepressant suicide warning for teens

Antidepressant medications may increase the risk of suicidal thinking and behavior in some teenagers. All antidepressants are required by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to carry a "black box" warning label about this risk in children, adolescents, and young adults up to the age of 24. The risk of suicide is highest during the first two months of antidepressant treatment.

Certain young adults are at an even greater risk for suicide when taking antidepressants, including teens with bipolar disorder, a family history of bipolar disorder, or a history of previous suicide attempts.

Teenagers on antidepressants should be closely monitored for any sign that the depression is getting worse. **Warning signs include new or worsening symptoms of agitation, irritability, or anger. Unusual changes in behavior are also red flags.**

According to FDA guidelines, after starting an antidepressant or changing the dose, your teenager should see his or her doctor:

- Once a week for four weeks
- Every two weeks for the next month
- At the end of their 12th week taking the drug
- More often if problems or questions arise

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 behavior

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 socialize. 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 realize 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 well-being 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."

More help for teen depression

Depression Help Center: Learn what you need to know to identify, understand, and successfully solve the challenges of depression.

Teen depression help

Teenager's Guide to Depression: Learn Tips and Tools for Helping Yourself or a Friend

Helping a Depressed Person: How to Reach Out and Help Someone While Taking Care of Yourself

Depression Treatment: Therapy, Medication, and Lifestyle Changes That Can Help Depression

Dealing with Depression: Self-Help and Coping Tips to Overcome Depression

Antidepressants (Depression Medication): What You Need to Know About Medications for Depression

Helping Troubled Teens: Dealing with Anger, Violence, Delinquency, and Other Teen Behavior Problems

Dealing with Bullying: Helping Bullied Kids and Teens

Dealing with Cyberbullying: Tips for Kids and Parents to Prevent and Stop Cyberbullying

Suicide Help: Dealing with Suicidal Thoughts and Feelings

Suicide Prevention: How to Help Someone who is Suicidal

Resources and references

General information about teen depression

Depression – Breaks down the different types of depression in teenagers, as well as the symptoms and remedies. (TeensHealth)

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. (Psychology Today)

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)

Teen depression and suicide

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. (TeensHealth)

Teenage Suicide – Offers basic facts about teenage suicide, as well as some of the common warning signs. (National Alliance on Mental Illness)

Teenage depression and violence

Warning Signs of Youth Violence – Learn why some teenagers turn violent, what the warning signs are, and who is at risk. (American Psychological Association)

Depression and Violence in Teens – Explores the problem of teen violence, the possible link to depression, and what parents can do about it. (HealthDay)

Treatment for teen depression

Treatment of Children with Mental Illness – Answers to frequently asked questions about the treatment of mental disorders in children, including depression. (National Institute of Mental Health)

Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist Finder – Series of articles on when to seek help for your child and where to find it. (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry)

For teachers

Suicide: A Teacher's Experience – A teacher's personal account of a student's suicide attempt. Includes suggestions on handling potentially depressed students. (HealthyPlace)

Depression in School: A Student's Trial – From a formerly depressed teen's perspective, how teachers can help depressed students. (HealthyPlace)

Antidepressants for teens

Medication Guide: About Using Antidepressants in Children or Teenagers (PDF) – Medication guide from the FDA covers common questions about antidepressants in young adults. (U.S. Food and Drug Administration)

Antidepressant Medications for Children and Adolescents: Information for Parents and Caregivers – Fact sheet from the federal government on medication for children and teens. (National Institute of Mental Health)

Authors: Melinda Smith, M.A. and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D. Last updated: October 2015.

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