

# IS YOUR TEEN DEPRESSED?

Proven Strategies To Help Your  
Teen Find Happiness, Hope and Healing



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## **The Teen Years Can Be Overwhelming**

The teenage years are characterized by the new challenges that they bring. As a parent or as an adult who cares for a teen, you may currently be feeling as though you are up against a lot more confusion and frustration than you anticipated. In addition, you may have concerns that your teen may be struggling in a way that is more serious than typical “growing pains.”

You may be wondering whether an outburst from your teen is related to a developmentally appropriate mood swing, or if he or she is actually displaying signs of being in serious emotional trouble. You may be feeling at a loss when trying to determine whether you should intervene in your teen’s social life, either because of a lack of friends, an apparent obsession over relationships with friends, or a concerning choice in friends. You are probably at a point where your teen’s behavior or emotional state is having an impact on his or her life as well as the life of your family, and you are diligently, even desperately, searching for the answers that will help you feel secure about your teen’s well-being as well as bring peace back into your household.

## **Understanding Teenage Depression**

The word “depression” is commonly used to refer to characteristics that may be better described as sadness, mood fluctuations or fatigue. Insomuch, it is difficult for someone other than a mental health professional to identify true depression, especially since the term is so frequently used in typical conversations today. A qualified therapist can understand what someone is really up against when they suffer from depression, and can determine the difference between grief or sadness and a depressive disorder, and provide tools to heal from the burden depression.

Depression is a medical condition that impacts many areas of a person’s life, both internally and externally, reducing quality of life, overall health and happiness. Depression often causes feelings of hopelessness, difficulty concentrating, and persistent negative thoughts. For your teen, these symptoms will likely show up in relation to school work, social relationships, and/or family relationships. If your teen is depressed, he often doesn’t feel like himself, and will even start to lose touch with who he really is and what he cares about. If your teen is depressed, she may feel too sad, tired, or “foggy” to do the things that will bring happiness into her life.

The causes of teen depression can be numerous. Sometimes there is a genetic component. Other times, there are life events that occur that cause teens to struggle. Some teens are not equipped with the emotional tools to properly heal and move forward, so patterns of sadness, fear or anger turn into patterns of depression. There is a brain chemical component to depression that psychotherapy is known to treat in unique and lasting ways.

Your teen may be at higher risk for depression due to a traumatic experience from his or her childhood. Sometimes symptoms resulting from troubling experiences will not surface for many years. Often symptoms will manifest in the teenage years because it is a developmental time for personal exploration, emotional and hormonal changes and new expectations from the world around them. Sometimes difficult experiences manifest through anger or shame directed toward one’s self – and teens are particularly vulnerable to directing anger and shame inward in negative and destructive ways such as self-harm, negative self-talk and feelings of worthlessness.

Depression can lead to suicidal thoughts and actions, as it involves feelings of hopelessness along with confusion, sadness, anger, or reckless actions. Suicide is among the leading causes

of death in teens within the United States. Proactive attention to depressive symptoms early on can increase an individual's ability to cope, heal, and find relief and motivation.

### **How Do I Know If My Teen is Depressed?**

The teenage years can be challenging to navigate, and will likely bring up struggles that neither you nor your teen have faced before. Although most teens have ups and downs as they develop emotionally, socially and biologically, a typical, healthy teen will maintain strong friendships, have a moderate-to-high level of self-esteem, and be involved in their chosen communities. An emotionally healthy teenager will actually make wise choices most of the time when it comes to appropriate and safe behavior. If your teen is suffering from depression, however, it is less likely that he or she is making healthy choices and focusing on positive relationships.

You may be spending some time trying to remember what it was like to be a teenager. Perhaps you recall some of the struggles that you experienced and how confusing it was to sort through emotions. Perhaps you survived difficult times, and you may or may not have gone through periods of depression yourself. Try to picture whether you feel your teen is currently capable of managing the feelings that he or she is experiencing, or whether your teen seems to be too overwhelmed or overpowering. This will help you begin to view your teen's situation as objectively as possible, and it can indicate to you whether your teen needs help.

Depression is not just moodiness. Occasional and manageable expressions of anger or sadness do not directly indicate that your teen is depressed. However, if there are prolonged or intense episodes of emotionality - or alternatively, an apparent *lack* of emotional reactivity - it is wise for you to be concerned about your teen's wellbeing.

Cases of depression in teenagers are quite common, and there are also other common mood disorders that have symptoms similar to depression, so it is important to seek help in determining what your teen is truly dealing with. Commonly, teens who suffer from depression will suffer with other co-occurring issues, such as anxiety. For example, you may begin to notice depressive symptoms emerging if anxiety surrounding school performance or social interaction becomes heightened.

Many teens do not receive the treatment that they need because their symptoms can fluctuate or disguise themselves as normal teen behavior. It can be difficult as a parent to determine what your teen is experiencing, partially because you may not recognize your teen within his or her current types of behavior. It is also likely that your teen is not able to understand or express what he or she is experiencing. Don't hesitate to find out what your teen needs; untreated depression and anxiety in teens can lead to dangerous results and poor decision making. Depression, anxiety, and related conditions also contribute to the high rate of suicides and suicide attempts that occur during the teen years, and the risk signs for suicide are not always clearly visible.

It's important to note that depression typically presents differently for teens than it does for adults. It is more common for a teen to show anger than sadness, for example, if they are suffering from depression. Also, it may be more likely for a teenager with depression to engage in reckless behaviors. For example, the use of drugs and alcohol is not only a potential sign of depression, but also actually increases your teen's risk for depression due to the mood-altering nature of many substances. This can even be true when it comes to excessive use of legal drugs, such as caffeine.

## **Assessing Your Teen**

This brief, 20-item questionnaire will help you to determine whether your teen is facing depression and/or a related mood disorder.

### **Depression Assessment for Teens (Parent Tool)**

1. Does your teen seem to anger easily?
2. Is he/she withdrawing from previously enjoyed activities or reducing interaction with a typical group of friends?
3. Does your teen make negative comments about his or her own appearance, intelligence or abilities? For example, I'm "dumb," "ugly," or "useless"?
4. Does his/her mood tend to shift in extreme ways for seemingly meaningless reasons?
5. Does your teen experience "lows" that sometimes last for days at a time?
6. Is more than one aspect of your teen's life (school, home, friends, etc..) being impacted by his/her fluctuating moods?
7. Does he/she tend to think in extremes or all-or-nothing terms? For example, talking about a past or potential future experience as being completely terrible when it's more likely that there were positive components as well?
8. Has your teen ever talked about wanting to die, "leave and never come back," "disappear" or anything along these lines?
9. Has your teen recently experienced a significant life change, such as a move, starting at a new school, a family member or friend moving away or a break-up?
10. Have there been any disturbing events that have impacted your or your teen's community, such as a death of a schoolmate or community member, or an incident of violence?
11. Do you suspect that your teen is using drugs or alcohol?
12. Do you suspect that he/she is self-harming? This may be in the form of "cutting," "burning," drug or alcohol use, or many others.
13. Does it seem like your teen's personality has changed?
14. Does he/she suffer from headaches, stomachaches or have trouble sleeping?
15. Is your teen highly sensitive to criticism from others?
16. Have you notice any significant weight loss, weight gain or a change in eating habits?
17. Is your teen behaving in reckless, destructive or violent ways?
18. Has there been a significant change in your teen's grades and/or participation at school?
19. Does he/she have crying spells or bouts of nervousness or restlessness that seem unexplained?
20. Does he/she have difficulty concentrating?

If you answered yes to just 1 or 2 of these, it is likely that your teen is experiencing normal teenage emotional responses to growing up. If you answered yes to 3-5 of these, an assessment is strongly recommended as your teen could definitely benefit from professional support. If you answered yes to more than 5 of the above, please schedule an assessment as soon as possible, as immediate help for your teen may be necessary.

### **How is Depression Treated?**

A mental health professional is the only one who can give your teen the proper assessment, diagnosis and plan for treatment that he or she needs. It's recommended to seek a therapist who is a teen specialist and experienced in treating depression. A teen specialist will know how to connect with your teen, and enable him or her to access and implement the insight and tools to help mitigate and manage depression symptoms.

A treatment plan for a teenager with depression will likely include short and long term goals, which will be attained through various therapeutic interventions geared toward healing, motivating and empowering your teen. Treatment may focus on shifting your teen's view of him or herself, allowing healthy behaviors to manifest.

A relationship with a therapist is often the key element in a teen's successful healing process when it comes to the affects of depression. A teen specialist knows how to enlist a treatment team, if necessary, potentially collaborating with a psychiatrist, medical doctor, and other professionals to thoroughly address your teens needs. A medical evaluation will probably be recommended, as your child's physician can look for any physical contributors to symptoms. Ultimately, therapeutic treatment allows for overall growth and change to happen in order to help heal your teenager in a way that will support him or her throughout life.

### **What You Can Do To Help**

As a parent or an adult who cares about a teenager, you may be wondering how to help your teen. It's vital that you take an active approach, as a component of depression is trouble focusing and determining what's really happening, difficulty forming clear thoughts or plans, and low motivation to change. There is no benefit to waiting for the problem to get worse.

While it isn't safe to be silent about the situation, it's also important to be selective about who you share your concerns with. Respect your teens privacy, as it can have a strong negative impact on your teen if you discuss your concerns with extended family, friends or other people. Speak only to your teen, your co-parent (or one trusted parent in your support system, if you are a single parent), and a mental health professional about your concerns. You absolutely deserve to have your own support during this confusing time, but don't let anything delay you in reaching out to the people who will truly be able to help your teen.

It can be terrifying to imagine that your teen is depressed, and it can feel overwhelming when you try to consider the best course of action. The situation may even make you feel hopelessly sad yourself at times. Try to employ a step-by-step approach to move forward in assisting your teen by finding relief and hope. With help, depression can become manageable for yourself and your teen.

### **Tips For Supporting Your Teenager Through Depression**

**First**, enlist the help of an individual therapist for your teen who can clarify what you are up against. Your therapist can begin creating a collaborative plan to reduce depression symptoms and prevent further decline into negative thinking or behaviors. This will bring clarity not only to your teenager, but also to you.

Even if you haven't discussed therapy or other treatment with your teen, contact a therapist who works with teenagers to get help. A specialist will be able to answer your questions and provide guidance as you move forward in assisting your teen. You will also find it becomes easier to provide your teenager with the help he or she needs from you once you have made the first step in communicating with a professional about your teen's needs.

**Second**, take some time to learn about depression so you can better understand and be empathetic to your teen's experience. Make sure that you're doing what you can to help your teen maintain structure and a healthy environment. Proper diet and sleep are vital for emotional

health. Model this healthy way of living, and keep your environment consistent by regularly making home-cooked meals, removing alcohol from the house and making time for exercise.

Since teenage depression can be a terrifying topic for parents, learning tools and strategies to support your teen can help you stay focused and positive. It will also help you interact with your teen in supportive and productive ways. While you can't control what your teen does, you can take certain actions that enable you to have influence in positive ways. This article provides useful tools in a general sense, but feedback tailored for you from a professional may be instrumental to your success as you navigate your role as a parent for your depressed teen.

**Third**, begin to track progress and appreciate improvements. It is vital for your teen to be within a positive environment, which can help him or her feel safe as well as accountable. Also, create a clear plan of what to do if you notice that your teen's depression is getting worse. Consider treatment for depression as a healing process that will help your teen to overcome obstacles and create building blocks for his or her maturing identity. Depression treatment can help him or her create a healthy way of navigating through life.

One of the most powerful things that you can do for your teen is to work on strengthening your communication.

### **Communicating with Your Teen About Depression. The “Do’s” and “Don’ts”**

**Do truly listen to your teen.** There may be messages within your teen's behavior or emotional instability that frustrate or bother you, but these often indicate that your teen is in pain. Attempt to genuinely “hear” what your teen is saying. Focus on building a genuine relationship with your developing adult. Ask open ended questions, rather than questions that invite only yes or no answers. Appreciate the things that your teen does share with you, even when it is limited amounts.

**Don't lecture your teen or try to talk him or her out of depression.** These tactics are likely to push your teen further down into a low, as it will feel like you're invalidating his or her feelings and experience. Be especially careful to highlight what your teen is doing well, rather than what he or she isn't. This is important because your teen is probably internalizing even minor criticisms in an unhealthy way.

**Do offer understanding and support.** Be available to your teen in as many ways as possible. Get creative about ways in which to spend time together. Be mindful of the way you are spending your time when he or she is around you, and mindful of the way in which you are using your words when you speak to him or her. Offer constructive plans of action, even if your teen resists at first.

**Don't let your pride get in the way.** Your teen may often be irritable or even angry. Irritability can make it difficult to communicate with your teen. It will likely also push your buttons in exhausting ways, making it especially hard to stay calm, admit when you are wrong, and reasonably respond to your teen. Also, don't let pride keep you from seeking support from professionals in this tough situation.

**Do take the opportunity to examine your family structure.** Explore ways in which your family can heal and support each other more effectively. Be sure that you aren't neglecting your own self-care. Family tension, conflict and any changes within the family are almost certainly impacting your teen's emotional situation and contributing to the struggle with depression. Find

a professional to help you to identify and employ your family's strengths. A professional can also help you create a support plan for your whole family, which includes being open about hopes, concerns and feelings.

**Don't give up on your teen.** You may be feeling pushed away, helpless and even angry at your teen. Depression is a serious and very real experience for your teen, and he or she needs you to be persistent about finding help and being supportive. It doesn't help to pressure your teen into talking about depression when he or she isn't ready, but waiting for the problem to go away is never the right solution. Finding something that your teen IS willing to do to get better is vital.

**Do provide structure and encouraging opportunities.** Encourage your teen to engage socially in educational and motivational settings, and keep daily routine's manageable. Pay attention to and recall your teen's expressed interests. Extreme sadness or depression can make the world feel very small and dark. Invest your time in doing your part to keep the world big, bright, and full of possibilities for your teen.

**Don't put your teen on medication when he or she is not in the care of a skilled therapist.** Antidepressants can sometimes help, but antidepressants are a serious medication that comes with many risks, and may even make your teen's condition worsen. A medical doctor or a psychiatrist is simply unable to monitor your teen in the way that an individual therapist can; that person's role is meant to be different.

**Do stay positive.** Practice gratitude and hope within your own life. Model coping tools for your developing teen. Although he or she may not directly emulate your actions, you will actively be creating a living space that will support growth and healing for your teen.

**Don't blame yourself.** Sometimes parents get lost in wondering where they went wrong, and blame themselves or other's for their teen's situation. Free yourself from the blame game, commend yourself for searching for ways to help your child, and recognize that depression is no one's fault. Let this become an opportunity for your teen to develop the tools that he or she needs at this critical point in life.

**Do find resources and get your questions answered by professionals.** A teen specialist will support and guide you and your teen toward hope and healing.

### **How Therapy Can Help**

As a Marriage and Family Therapist and teen specialist, I am familiar with the struggles that adolescents and their families experience. I am also familiar with the solutions that help these teens to grow and succeed. A short assessment process can help me, and you, to determine what is best for your teen when it comes to the next steps toward emotional and social health. You need to know whether or not your child is experiencing depression, anxiety, relational stress at school, or just struggling to navigate the process of growing up. My experience has repeatedly shown that early intervention can open up many more possibilities for a teen, as therapy will help him or her to redirect away from negative habits and to utilize strengths more effectively.

I can offer you support, strategies, tools and guidance. Don't hesitate to reach out so that you can start getting your questions answered and start feeling confident in your teen's well-being

and future success. Your teen deserves the best chance at a fulfilling and positive experience as he or she formulates a more mature identity and moves toward becoming an adult.

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