

Parent Guide on Adolescent Depression

CAN CHILDREN SUFFER FROM DEPRESSION?

Decades ago when baby boomers were still children, parents might have dismissed very real signs of depression as sulkiness or chronic moodiness. Today, doctors know that depression can affect even young children, and sometimes it can follow them throughout their lives.

Studies show that roughly 7 percent of all children are depressed, including 2 percent of children in grade school and 5 percent of adolescents. Adolescent girls are twice as likely to suffer from depression as boys their age. By recognizing the signs, you can help your child through a dark time, even if you don't know what is causing it.

MY CHILD SEEMS SAD. IS HE OR SHE SUFFERING FROM DEPRESSION?

Not necessarily. Normal sadness or grieving is not depression. Don't worry if your child occasionally feels blue or down in the dumps. Life has its ups and downs, and it's normal for children to grieve over a loss or feel sad for a few hours or days at a time. But if his or her melancholy lasts for more than a couple of weeks, or seems to interfere with regular activities and relationships, he or she may be clinically depressed.

Depression is far more than a temporary change in mood; it's marked by a prolonged sense of hopelessness and a lack of energy and enthusiasm that can last for weeks, months, or (in rare cases) even years at a time.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

It might seem logical that the most obvious symptom of depression would be sadness, but many depressed children say they don't feel sad or gloomy. Interestingly, one of the key signs of depression in children is chronic irritability. Children may be depressed if they have trouble getting along with other kids and family members or have dramatic mood swings. Other signs of depression include lack of energy, inability to concentrate, poor performance in school, a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, and frequent complaints about physical ailments like headaches or stomach aches.

Depression often goes hand in hand with other physical and mental health problems. Some children may be depressed because of a chronic illness, such as diabetes. A child who has an eating disorder or a substance abuse problem, as well as kids who are constantly defiant, disagreeable, and getting into trouble with authorities, may also suffer from depression.

HOW CAN I GET HELP FOR MY TEEN?

If you suspect that your teen is going through some form of intense emotional turmoil, first try to engage him or her in dialogue. This may be particularly challenging for parents with sons, but it may save their lives, according to Harvard psychiatrist Pollack.

Many boys and male teens, he says, are victims of what he calls the "Boy Code" — old, outdated rules that demand stoicism and silence at enormous emotional cost. He suggests creating what he calls a shame-free zone or safety zone — physically and emotionally — for "action talk." It may be as simple as taking a ride in the car or talking while you're playing a board game with your son — any activity that involves action so that you and your son are not simply facing each other across a table with your arms folded.



A plan for life.

“Don’t bombard your son with questions, just let him know you’re there,” Pollack says. “If he doesn’t talk, you can give an entry like, ‘You’ve seemed a little down lately,’ or you can share something about yourself. This kind of safe encounter allows boys to open up.”

If your teen is combative or refuses to talk to you, call your doctor for a referral to a mental health professional skilled at working with adolescents. Finding a psychiatrist or psychologist your teen is willing to talk to is the first step; it may require numerous telephone calls and visits to more than one professional before you and your teen find the right fit. As parents, you may be asked to participate in some of the sessions to work out problems that may be hurting your relationship with your teen. Ultimately, your therapist might be able to help you pinpoint potential triggers of your child’s troubled behavior, such as the death of a close relative or bullying at school.

Finally, realize that no matter how bored, indifferent, moody, sarcastic, or rebellious a teen acts in your presence, he or she is still a child that needs your love and support. You can and should set limits on his or her behavior, and let your child know when you’re hurt or upset, but always reassure your teen that you still love him or her.

If you need more information or assistance, please call CDPHP Behavioral Health Services toll free at 1-888-320-9584.

SERIOUS SIGNS OF TEENAGE DEPRESSION INCLUDE:

- A change in appetite and sleep patterns
- Loss of interest or enjoyment in usual activities
- Prolonged sadness
- Withdrawal from friends
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Lack of energy
- Poor school performance
- Difficulty falling asleep

These are all signs that should alert you to a problem that may need professional counseling (especially if the signs persist and the teen doesn’t respond to encouragement).

Depression increases the risk of suicide attempts. Depressed teens often “self-medicate” by taking illicit drugs or drinking alcohol, with disastrous consequences, including worsening of depression. Having a close family member with a history of depression, alcoholism, or significant drug abuse problem puts a teenager at increased risk of depression.

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