

Families with Teens

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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Information Series for Parents and Caregivers of Teens

Teens and Depression

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Adults often think back to 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.

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.”

Warning signs of depression may include irritability; changes in appetite, loss of interest in activities, lack of energy, changes in sleep patterns, or wanting to be alone most of the time. Other warning signs may include feeling sad, expressing feelings of helplessness, skipping school, having a drop in school grades, practicing reckless behaviors involving alcohol, drugs, and sexual activity or having suicidal thoughts or actions.

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 warning signs listed earlier. Teens who are clinically depressed are not only more likely to think about suicide, but also to act on the idea.

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.

Remember that teens may feel uncomfortable discussing their concerns. 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 or talking with family or close friends.

Listen to your teen. Refrain from giving too much advice or direction. Avoid telling 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.

Help teens develop problem-solving skills. Encourage them to make plans, set goals and identify options.

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, contact a school counselor or social worker, family doctor, or mental health professional.

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Source: *Positive Parenting of Teens*. University of Minnesota Extension Service. 1999.

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For more information on families with teens, check out these resources:

Teen Talk: School Issues – A Survival Guide for Parents of Teenagers, #08129
Teen Talk: Youth Choices – A Survival Guide for Parents of Teenagers, #08130
Teen Talk: A Survival Guide for Parents of Teenagers, #07938
<http://www.parentingteens.che.umn.edu/TeenTalk.htm>

Thriving With Your Teen, #07752, <http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/familydevelopment/DE7643.html>

The Growing Season: A Parent’s Guide to Positive Parenting of Teens,
#07607 – video/booklet package
<http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/familydevelopment/DE7607.html>

#07776 booklet only <http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/familydevelopment/DE7776.html>

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