

Understanding Teen Depression

10 tips to help you recognize symptoms of depression and support your teenager.

1

Know the signs.

Watch for changes in your child's attitude and behavior, including:

- Loss of energy
- Changes in appetite
- Persistent irritable or angry mood
- Excessive or prolonged sadness
- Fixation on past failures or extreme self-criticism
- Difficulty concentrating
- Frequent unexplained body aches or headaches
- Social isolation
- Poor school performance or frequent absences
- Angry outbursts
- Self-harm
- Less attention to personal hygiene or appearance
- Substance abuse
- Suicidal thoughts or actions

2

Don't blame.

If your teenager is suffering from depression, they can't simply snap out of it. Don't blame them — or yourself — for their condition. There are many contributing factors to teenage depression, including peer pressure, social media influences, academic expectations, hormonal changes, genetics, bullying, stressful experiences, and lack of social support.

3

Talk to your teen.

Bring up your concerns in a loving, nonjudgmental way. Without criticizing, let your teen know what symptoms of depression you've noticed and why you're worried. Ask them to share what they're going through. Then listen calmly, validate their feelings, and offer your support. This isn't the time to ask a lot of questions or lecture. What's most important is letting your teen know you're there for them, no matter what.

4

Keep trying.

Your teen might not be willing to talk at first. Don't nag, but don't give up either. Experts advise a gentle yet persistent approach. Unfortunately, some of the symptoms of depression, like anger and sensitivity to criticism, make it harder for teens to open up about what's going on.

5

Seek professional help.

Depression is a serious mental health problem that needs professional treatment. With a therapist, your teen can talk about their feelings, better understand what may be causing them, and learn skills to help manage their emotions. In cases of more severe depression, your teen's therapist may also recommend consulting a doctor with experience prescribing antidepressant medication. Be sure to call for help immediately if you suspect your teen may be considering suicide: dial 988 to reach the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, dial 911 for immediate emergency response, or go to the nearest emergency room.

6 Encourage social interaction.

Depressed teens tend to avoid social activities and may lose touch with friends, which worsens depression. Suggest after-school clubs, sports teams, or classes that match their interests while also encouraging get-togethers with friends to keep them connected and help combat isolation.

7 Make time for your teen.

Carve out some time each day to give your teen your undivided attention. Showing how much you care can go a long way in giving your teen the strength to fight back against depression.

8 Support healthy habits.

Eating healthy, getting the right amount of sleep, and exercising are all powerful weapons in your teen's battle with depression. Feeling good physically will have a positive effect on their emotional health. Try to get your teen moving for at least an hour a day, whether it's going for a walk, taking an exercise or dance class, riding a bike, playing a sport, or doing yard work — anything that gets their heart rate up. Feed them nutritious meals and keep healthy snacks on hand. And, keep an eye on their sleep pattern — too much or too little sleep can negatively impact their mood and energy level.

9 Watch the screen time.

Hiding behind a phone and spending a lot of time on social media sites is a recipe for disaster in a depressed teen. Encourage your teen to put down their phone for device-free breaks. Instead, invite them to join household tasks, like grocery shopping or cooking, and give them a say in what you buy or cook (within reason, of course). Talk with them about their social media use and ask them how they feel about their social media experiences.

10 Take care of yourself and family members.

Supporting a depressed teen is stressful for parents and siblings. Lean on friends and professionals for your own support, and try to follow a healthy lifestyle (eating right, exercising, and getting enough sleep). Allow yourself time to take a break and have fun, too. It's also important to pay attention to the impact your teenager's depression may be having on siblings. Talk with them about what's going on, give them some one-on-one attention, and consider professional counseling if they seem to be having a hard time handling the situation.