Is Your Teen Moody or Is It More?
Tips for Identifying and Dealing with Teen Depression

An argument with a friend. Not being chosen for a team. Moving to a new school. Being a teenager is tough. Events like these can create sadness every once in a while, and that's a natural emotion.

Teen depression is different. It's a serious mood disorder that can last for weeks, months or longer. The teen can feel sadness, discouragement, despair or hopelessness, and it can interfere with participation in normal teen activities.

Experts used to think that only adults could get depression. Now we know that eight out of 100 teens have serious depression,[1] and depression affects teens of all races and economic status.

Why Do Teens Get Depressed?

There is no single cause for depression, but we do know that it's linked to an imbalance of brain chemicals that affect mood. Many factors play a role including:

- Genetics; sometimes teens inherit genes that make it more likely for them to get depressed.
- Environment, such as an unhappy family situation or living in poverty.
- Stressful life events, such as the death of a family member or pet, parents' divorce, or moving.
- Medical conditions (or the medicines taken for them) that can affect hormone balance or present setbacks in life.
- Substance abuse.
- Undiagnosed learning disabilities.

How is Teen Depression Diagnosed?

Because teens can seem moody at the best of times, sometimes it's hard to recognize depression when it happens to someone close.

Teens who are depressed shouldn't wait and hope the feelings will go away on their own. It helps to open up to a parent or other trusted adult and share thoughts. Friends or family members need to step in if a teen seems depressed and isn't getting help. The sooner discussion with a doctor or counselor begins, and treatment starts, the sooner the teen will start to feel better.

A doctor may do a physical exam and ask questions about the teen's past health and how the teen thinks, acts and feels. Parents may be asked about the teen's symptoms. Some teens with depression have other problems, too, such as anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or an eating disorder. Because these can magnify feelings of worthlessness, the doctor may ask questions about these issues.

When Depression Is Severe

Teens who are extremely depressed may think about hurting themselves or about suicide. They need help as soon as possible. This is a medical emergency, and an adult must be notified. Many

communities have suicide hotlines where teens can get support in an emergency. You can also call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room

Watch for Signs of Teen Depression

- Depressed mood or sadness most of the time
- Lack of energy and feeling tired all the time
- Lack of interest or motivation
- Inability to enjoy things that used to bring pleasure
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Irritability, anger or anxiety
- Inability to concentrate
- Significant weight loss or gain
- Significant change in sleep patterns (inability to fall asleep, stay asleep or get up in the morning)
- Feelings of guilt or worthlessness
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Failing grades at school

Depression can cause physical symptoms, too. Some teens have an upset stomach, headaches, and aches and pains with no known medical cause. Teens with severe depression may hallucinate or have delusions.

Treating Teen Depression with Professional Help and at Home

Professional Help

The most common reason youths seek mental health services in the United States is feeling depressed.[2] The good news is that depression is treatable, and about 80% of people who get help for their depression feel better and enjoy themselves more than before.[3]

Counseling with a mental health professional, also known as talk therapy, is very effective in treating teen depression. These sessions can help teens understand why they feel depressed and learn ways to combat depression.

Doctors may prescribe medicine for teen depression. It can take a few weeks before a person feels the medicine working. The doctor will monitor the teen and may adjust dosage or type of medication.

Combining antidepressant medicine with counseling often works best. A teen with severe depression may need to be treated in the hospital.

Home Activities

Once a teen with depression has consulted a physician and is getting counseling, it's important to follow up at home. Parents can encourage teens to do these activities too!

1. Exercise for 15 to 30 minutes every day, including walking, jogging, dancing or biking. Since teens who are depressed might not feel like being active, enlisting a friend or family member to join in can help.

2. Eat a healthy diet, with lots of fruits and vegetables, and eat regularly.

3. Get a full night's sleep.

4. Take the medicines the doctor has prescribed and let the doctor know about any side effects.

5. Do something fun with a friend or play with a pet.

6. Find an activity that is humorous – a funny movie or TV show.

7. Be expressive! Paint, draw, write, sew or dance.

8. Talk about feelings with a friend or family member, or write about them in a journal.

9. Notice positive things in life – strengths or talents, natural beauty nearby, or family or friends.

10. Be patient. Depression does take time to heal.

Coping with teen depression isn't always easy. But you don't have to go it alone. We're here to help. Call or log on any time for help with any of life's challenges.

Resources

OptumHealth Behavioral Solutions
Ask your HR representative for your access code and toll-free number.
www.liveandworkwell.com

- Visit the Teen & Young Adult Center in the Life, Family & Relationships area.

- Search for these articles and more: "Can Depression Be Inherited?," "Talking to Parents About Depression" and "My Friend Is Talking About Suicide. What Should I Do?"

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[1] Wagner KD, Brent DA (2009). Depressive disorders and suicide. In BJ Sadock et al., eds., *Kaplan and Sadock's Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*, 9th ed., vol. 2, pp. 3652–3663. Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams and Wilkins.

[2] Adolescent Mental Health: Service Settings and Reasons for Receiving Care, The National Survey on Drug Use and Health Report, February 19, 2009.
[3] http://kidshealth.org/PageManager.jsp?dn=LiveAndWorkWell&lic=62&cat_id=20448&article_set=32845&ps=204#cat20448, accessed October 4, 2011.

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