

Depression in Youth

A Parent Handout

Depression is more common among youth than many adults realize. Because adolescence brings with it mood swings and hormone-related changes, it is often difficult to recognize signs of depression or separate them from the erratic nature of adolescent development. What makes it more complicated is that different youth manifest their behaviors differently.

While depression is highly treatable, only about one in five adolescents with depression receive treatment because they rely on parents or other adults to recognize the need and help them find the treatment.

Some of what separates depression from more “ordinary” sadness or a low mood is that it lasts over time and that it is often coupled with feelings of hopelessness.

Here are some things to watch for:

- Difficulty sleeping, inability to stay awake or fall asleep
- Fatigue, low energy, low motivation, difficulty concentrating, restlessness
- Feelings of worthlessness, guilt, hopelessness
- Tearfulness, crying often
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Weight gain or weight loss
- Outbursts, anger, irritability, hostility, agitation
- Difficult coping with rejection
- Appetite gain or loss
- Loss of interests in hobbies or activities they once enjoyed
- Academic performance dropping, problems at school
- Getting into trouble or rebellion
- Risky behavior, thoughts of death or suicide
- Unexplained aches and pains that don’t respond to the usual treatment

There are a variety of ways students try to manage on their own.

- Use drugs or alcohol to manage the pain
- Cutting or self-mutilation
- Joining a peer group that reflects their depression
- Internet addiction
- Often, the lower they feel, the more they self-isolate, perhaps because they feel like nobody is noticing anyway, or perhaps because they can’t imagine that someone will really understand or be able to help.

What parents and friends can do:

- **Begin by recognizing your own frame of mind.** As parents we often want to just fix something or our own emotions can make us “push” too hard for answers. Let go of your judgments and get in a frame of mind to just listen,



comfort and support for now.

- **Remember, if it IS depression, you don't have to fix it!** You need help for your child. Your job isn't to convince them that life isn't so bad, your job is to get a handle on just how bad life seems for your child, and then to find the help s/he needs. Remembering this will help you resist the temptation to try to help them see life differently. If it were that easy, they'd have already figured it out!
- **Talk about what you notice.** Rather than asking "What's wrong?" or "Why are you in your room all the time?" just start by letting them know what you're noticing and why it concerns you. "I notice you spend more time in your room than you used to, and I'm concerned about you."
- **Listen and provide support.** Resist the temptation to have a quick answer as to why they shouldn't feel that way, or trying to give them another way of seeing things. Your goal should be to give the conversation the space for them to tell you what is way down at the bottom of the pit for them, and they won't usually start with that. They start with safer statements and, when they are encouraged to say more, can often go deeper. You want to get a grasp on how deep this is for them.
- **Try to avoid asking "why"** because it puts people on the defensive. Instead of that, ask questions like, "How long has that been true?" and "Can you tell me more about that?" and "I'm so glad you're willing to share some of this with me." Those kinds of statements and not feeling judged makes room for youth to say more.
- **Validate their feelings.** Remember, you want to know how things are for them right now. If they're not depressed, feelings are transitory and they'll probably feel differently about things with some love and support. If they are depressed, they need help beyond what parents can give, so you aren't responsible for fixing it. By validating their feelings, your child is more likely to trust your support and also more willing to accept help.]

Although there is a correlation between suicide and depression, not all suicidal youth are depressed and not all who are depressed will become suicidal. Still, keep a watchful eye and when you're concerned about your child, take time to engage them in conversation. Let them know of your concerns. See if they'll tell you what's going on.

There is also a correlation between trauma and depression, so any youth who have survived a traumatic event have a higher likelihood of depression.

It is typical of depression that people no longer have the desire or energy to reach out and connect. That means it is really important for adults to reach out to them.

