

## Depression - teenagers

Young people may feel depressed for all sorts of reasons and their moods may vary, from feeling a bit blue to feeling overwhelming sadness and hopelessness. Some may even feel suicidal. Depression may be triggered by a major stressful event, such as a death or broken relationship. Sometimes, however, it may have no obvious cause.

Around one in five teenagers experiences depressive moods, but clinically significant depression in young people is often not recognised. Research shows that three per cent of Australians aged between three and 16 years have a depressive disorder each year.

Although it is often difficult to communicate with someone who is feeling low, it is important not to ignore a young person's feelings. Knowing that family and friends care and are willing to give support can be the first vital step to getting better.

**If at any time you are worried about your mental health or the mental health of a loved one, call Lifeline 13 11 14.**

### Different types of depressive disorders

The three main types of depressive disorders are:

- **Depressed mood** – feeling sad or 'blue' is an emotion common to people of all ages. The feeling generally results from problems or loss. People usually feel better after talking about the problem or doing something they enjoy. A depressed mood doesn't usually interfere with daily activities. This is part of human experience and is not an illness.
- **Dysthymia** – this is a mild type of depression in which a young person's mood is regularly low. The main symptom of dysthymia is a low, dark or sad mood on most days for at least two years. The young person may lose interest in things they have enjoyed doing and appear 'down' most of the time. They have less energy, find it difficult to concentrate and have trouble eating and sleeping. The most common factor is feeling bad about themselves and having less confidence and enjoyment in their lives. Dysthymia is much more serious than a depressed mood.
- **Major depressive episode** – this illness is a change in the person from their usual self. Some people describe depression as 'living in a black hole' and some other depressed people don't feel sad at all – instead they feel lifeless, empty and apathetic. Whatever the symptoms, depression interferes with the young person's ability to work, study, eat, sleep and have fun.

### Signs and symptoms of major depression in teenagers

Some of the symptoms and signs of major depression that young people may experience include:

- Severe sleeping problems
- Loss of enjoyment in usual activities
- Feeling hopeless or worthless
- Increasing drug and alcohol use
- Neglect of personal appearance
- Excessive worry about health
- Complaints about constant physical pains like headaches
- Carelessness about physical safety
- Behaviour problems
- Preoccupation with death and suicide.

The more symptoms a young person has, the stronger they are and the longer they have lasted, the more likely it is that the young person is dealing with depression. If you are concerned about how you are feeling, or how someone you know is feeling, please seek help.

## Young people at risk of depression

Depression can affect anyone, but some teenagers are more likely to become depressed if:

- They have a close relative who has suffered from depression
- They have had a major life stress or several stresses.

Examples of major life stresses include family break-up, school failure, bullying, experience of prejudice and social isolation because of sexual preferences, child abuse, loss of a parent, accident, broken relationship or moving to another area.

## Suicide risk factors

Depression is a major risk factor for suicide. Warning signs that may mean a young person is seriously thinking about taking their life include:

- Talk or threats of suicide
- Hints such as 'I won't be a problem for you much longer'
- Previous attempts, especially if the person was alone at the time
- Careless risk-taking behaviour
- Sad or angry mood that doesn't go away
- Giving away personal possessions
- Suddenly clearing out belongings and getting them in order
- Becoming suddenly cheerful without reason after being depressed.

## How to help a depressed teenager

When young people are suffering with depression, they aren't always able to ask for help and may even refuse your help at times. It is important that you:

- Take their depression seriously.
- Offer unconditional love and concern.
- Take time to listen when they want to talk about their feelings.
- Show them you are available without being 'pushy'.
- Encourage them to do things you know they enjoy.
- Notice the little things they are doing that you approve of.
- Support and encourage them to get help without nagging.
- If the young person won't go for help and you are worried about them, go by yourself first and get some advice on how to best handle the situation.
- Take seriously any talk about suicide and actions such as giving away special things – do whatever is needed to ensure their safety, even if it is against their wishes.
- Make sure you don't keep a gun in your home.

## Tips for parents, carers and friends

Living with or caring for a young person who is suffering depression can be very stressful. If you find yourself getting angry, frustrated or anxious:

- Take a step back and think about what is happening before reacting.
- Remember that your relationship with the young person is important and they need your ongoing support.
- Think about your own views. Are you wondering why they are treating you so meanly or shutting you out or why you should have to put up with their terrible attitudes and behaviour (this kind of thinking from you will only make the situation worse)? Are you thinking, 'Something must be wrong for this person to be behaving like this' (this kind of thinking from you will help you keep an open mind and lead to a search for the cause)?
- Ask people close to you for support.

- Ask someone the young person is close to (such as another relative or friend) to help provide support, but make sure the young person knows that you're not rejecting them.
- Make sure you do things for yourself – you need to take care of your own needs if you are to help others.
- Get professional help if you need to.

## Professional help and depression

There is a range of different treatments available for depression, including counselling and therapies. Antidepressant medications should be given with caution to young teenagers because of possible side effects. The right treatment depends on the individual needs and the situation of the teenager. It is important to persist until the right treatment is found, as young people are often particular about whom they will talk to.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Psychiatrist
- Counsellor
- Headspace [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)
- Your local community health centre
- Find a GP near you who specialises in young people and mental health issues through the [beyondblue](#) website
- [beyondblue](#) Info Line Tel. 1300 22 4636
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 55 1800
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- Mental Health Foundation Tel. (03) 9427 0407
- Alfred Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service Tel. (03) 9526 4400
- SANE Mental Health Information Line Tel. 1800 18 7263 (1800 18 SANE), Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm
- Reach Out.

## Things to remember

- Depression in young people is often not recognised.
- Stresses that sound small to adults may be very important to teenagers and should be taken seriously.
- When young people are suffering with depression, they aren't always able to ask for help and may even refuse your help at times.
- If a young person you know won't go for help and you are worried, go by yourself first to get advice on how to best handle the situation.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

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