



Teen Depression: A Guide for People in the Lives of Youth

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Helping a depressed teenager

If you suspect that a teenager in your life is suffering from depression, take action right away. Depression is very damaging when left untreated, so don't wait and hope that the symptoms will go away. Even if you're unsure that depression is the issue, the troublesome behaviors and emotions you're seeing in the teenager are signs of a problem. Whether or not that problem turns out to be depression, it still needs to be addressed—the sooner the better.

Talk to the teen

The first thing you should do if you suspect a teen is depressed to talk to them about it. In a loving and non-judgmental way, share your concerns with them. Let him or her know what specific signs of depression you've noticed and why they worry you. Then encourage them to open up about what he or she is going through.

Tips for talking to a depressed teen

Offer support Let depressed teenagers know that you're there for them, fully and unconditionally. Hold back from asking a lot of questions (teenagers don't like to feel patronized or crowded), but make it clear that you're ready and willing to provide whatever support they need.

Be gentle but persistent Don't give up if they shut you out at first. Talking about depression can be very tough for teens. Be respectful of their comfort level while still emphasizing your concern and willingness to listen.

Listen without lecturing Resist any urge to criticize or pass judgment once they begin to talk. The important thing is that they are communicating. Refrain from offering unsolicited advice and ultimatums.



Tips for talking to a depressed teen

Validate feelings Don't try to talk teens out of their depression, even if their feelings or concerns appear silly or irrational to you. Simply acknowledge the pain and sadness they are feeling. If you don't, they will feel like you don't take their emotions seriously.

If a teen claims nothing is wrong, but has no explanation for what is causing the depressed behavior, you should trust your instincts. Remember that denial is a strong emotion. Furthermore, teenagers may not believe that what they're experiencing is the result of depression. If you see depression's warning signs, seek professional help. See a doctor or psychologist who is qualified to diagnose depression or rule it out.

Visit a family doctor

Make an immediate appointment for them to see the family physician for a depression screening. Be prepared to give your doctor specific information about the teen's depression symptoms, including how long they've been present, how much they're affecting their daily life, and any patterns you've noticed. The doctor should also be told about any close relatives who have ever been diagnosed with depression or another mental health disorder.

As part of the depression screening, the doctor will give the teen a complete physical exam and take blood samples to check for medical causes of their symptoms. In order to diagnose depression, other possible causes of their symptoms must first be ruled out. The doctor will check for medical causes of the depression by giving them a complete physical exam and running blood tests. The doctor may also ask the teen about other things that could be causing the symptoms, including heavy alcohol and drug use, a lack of sleep, a poor diet (especially one low in iron), and medications (including birth control pills and diet pills).

Seek out a specialist

If there are no health problems that are causing the teenager's depression, ask your doctor to refer you to a psychologist or psychiatrist who specializes in children and adolescents. Depression in teens can be tricky, particularly when it comes to treatment options such as medication. A mental health professional with advanced training and a strong background treating adolescents is the best bet for the teen's best care.



When choosing a specialist, always get their input. Teenagers are dependent on you for making many of their health decisions, so listen to what they're telling you. No one therapist is a miracle worker and no one treatment works for everyone. If they feel uncomfortable or are just not 'connecting' with the psychologist or psychiatrist, ask for a referral to another provider that may be better suited to the teenager.

Explore the treatment options

Expect a discussion with the specialist you've chosen about treatment possibilities for the teen in your life. There are a number of treatment options for depression in teenagers, including one-on-one talk therapy, group or family therapy, and medication.

Talk therapy is often a good initial treatment for mild to moderate cases of depression. Over the course of therapy, their depression may resolve. If it doesn't, explore other treatment modalities, such as cognitive-behavioral therapies, or mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression. Medication can also be considered; however, antidepressants should only be used as part of a broader treatment plan.

Don't rely on medication alone

When medication is used, it should not be the only strategy. There are other services that you may want to investigate for the teen. Family support services, educational classes, behavior management techniques, as well as family therapy and other approaches should be considered. If medication is prescribed, it should be monitored and evaluated regularly.

Source: [National Institute of Mental Health](#)

Unfortunately, some parents feel pushed into choosing antidepressant medication over other treatments that may be cost-prohibitive or time-intensive. However, unless the teen is considered to be high risk for suicide (in which case medication and/or constant observation may be necessary), you have time to carefully weigh your options before committing to any one treatment.



Risks of teenage antidepressant use

In severe cases of depression, medication may help ease symptoms. However, antidepressants aren't always the best treatment option. They come with risks and side effects of their own, including a number of safety concerns specific to children and young adults. It's important to weigh the benefits against the risks before starting a teen on medication.

Antidepressants and the teenage brain

Antidepressants were designed and tested on adults, so their impact on the youthful, developing brain is not yet completely understood. Some researchers are concerned that the use of drugs such as Prozac in children and teens might interfere with normal brain development. The human brain is developing rapidly in young adults, and exposure to antidepressants may impact that development—particularly the way the brain manages stress and regulates emotions.

Teens on Antidepressants: Red Flags to Watch Out For

Call a doctor if you notice...

- New or more thoughts of suicide
- Trying to commit suicide
- New or worse depression
- New or worse anxiety
- Feeling very agitated or restless
- Panic attacks
- Difficulty sleeping (insomnia)
- New or worse irritability
- Acting aggressive, being angry, or violent
- Acting on dangerous impulses
- Being extremely hyperactive in actions and talking (hypomania or mania)
- Other unusual changes in behavior

Source: [FDA](#)



Antidepressant medications may increase the risk of suicidal thinking and behavior in some teenagers. All antidepressants are required by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to carry a “black box” warning label about this risk in children, adolescents, and young adults up to the age of 24. The risk of suicide is highest during the first two months of antidepressant treatment.

Certain young adults are at an even greater risk for suicide when taking antidepressants, including teens with bipolar disorder, a family history of bipolar disorder, or a history of previous suicide attempts.

Teenagers on antidepressants should be closely monitored for any sign that the depression is getting worse.

Warning signs include new or worsening symptoms of agitation, irritability, or anger. Unusual changes in behavior are also red flags.

According to FDA guidelines, after starting an antidepressant or changing the dose, a teenager should see their doctor:

- Once a week for four weeks
- Every 2 weeks for the next month
- At the end of their 12th week taking the drug
- More often if problems or questions arise

For more, see [Antidepressants: Understanding Depression Medication](#)

Supporting a teen through depression treatment

As the depressed teenager in your life goes through treatment, the most important thing you can do is to let him or her know that you’re there to listen and offer support. Now more than ever, they need to know that they are valued, accepted, and cared for.

- **Be understanding.** Living with a depressed teenager can be difficult and draining. At times, you may experience exhaustion, rejection, despair, aggravation, or any other number of negative emotions. During this trying time, it’s important to remember that they are not being difficult on purpose. This person is struggling, so do your best to be patient and understanding.



- **Encourage physical activity.** Encourage the teen to stay or become active. Exercise can go a long way toward relieving the symptoms of depression, so find ways to incorporate it into their day. Something as simple as walking the dog, walking a friend’s dog, playing an impromptu sports game or going on a bike ride can be beneficial.
- **Encourage social activity.** Isolation only makes depression worse, so encourage the teen to see friends and *praise* efforts to socialize. Offer to take them out with friends or suggest social activities that might be of interest, such as sports, after-school clubs, or an art class. Isolation will not support a teen in recovering from depression.
- **Stay involved in treatment.** Make sure the teen is following all treatment instructions and going to therapy. It’s especially important that they take any prescribed medication as instructed. Track changes in their condition, and call the doctor if depression symptoms seem to be getting worse.
- **Learn about depression.** Just like you would if a teen had a disease you knew very little about, read up on depression so that you can be your own “expert.” The more you know, the better equipped you’ll be to help them. Encourage the teenager to learn more about depression as well. Reading up on their condition can help depressed teens realize that they’re not alone and give them a better understanding of what they’re going through.
- **The road to a depressed teenager’s recovery may be bumpy, so be patient!** Rejoice in small victories and prepare for the occasional setback. Most importantly, don’t judge yourself or compare the teen to others. Do your best to get them help and validate the power of your intent to support and help them.