

1 Teen Depression

Factsheet for parents and teachers

Every young person probably feels "down in the dumps" from time to time when things appear to go wrong at school, home, with friends, teachers or family. Feelings that "when it rains, it pours" and that "life isn't fair" are not uncommon during these years. These feelings can be particularly evident when an adolescent is thinking about and testing values and priorities that exist around them in society. This sort of feeling is appropriate to this developmental stage and on its own isn't usually any cause for concern.

Adolescent Pressures

There is some indication that adolescents experience more loneliness than other age groups. The position of the young person in today's society can contribute to a sense of meaninglessness, powerlessness and isolation. They are neither children nor adults. School failure can create a strong sense of rejection, a lack of meaning or challenge can create boredom or apathy; social expectations may be unrealistic, and conflicting messages from family and loved ones may magnify the struggle for independence.

The young person is confronted with developmental changes in relationships with others. They seem to constantly be adjusting to the losing or breaking off one social relationship and the surfacing or formation of new ones.

Adolescence is often a period of complicated and demanding conflicts. Teens undergo a shake up physically, psychologically, emotionally and socially. They are vulnerable to being overwhelmed by the many changes and pressures brought to bear during this critical time

Adolescent depression is not caused by a single incident or factor, but is usually associated with genetic vulnerability and ongoing environmental stresses such as those described above.

<http://www.trippin.co.nz>

Symptoms of adolescent depression

Depression is an illness and is quite distinct from sadness or a depressed mood. The illness presents many of the same symptoms, but it varies in length of time and intensity.

If the adolescent displays some of the following symptoms for more than a few weeks and is doing poorly in school, seems socially withdrawn and not interested in once-enjoyed activities, they should be assessed for the possibility of depression.

Symptoms to watch out for include:

- Ongoing sadness.
- Fluctuation between apathy and talkativeness.
- Anger and rage, verbal sarcasm and attack.
- Overreaction to criticism.
- Feelings of being unable to satisfy ideals.
- Poor self-esteem.
- Loss of confidence.
- Feelings of helplessness, hopelessness or guilt.
- Intense ambivalence between dependence and independence.
- Feelings of emptiness in life.
- Restlessness and agitation.
- Pessimism about the future.
- Death wishes, suicidal thoughts, plans or attempts.
- Rebellious refusal to work in class or cooperate in general.
- Sleep disturbances.
- Increased or decreased appetite, severe weight gain or loss.

A young person's depression is different from an adult's and it is sometimes more difficult to diagnose because:

- Adolescents do not always understand or cannot express feelings very well.
- Symptoms are often dismissed as "just growing up."
- The young person may not be aware of the concept of depression and not report anything wrong.
- There is a strong tie between "getting into trouble" and feeling depressed. It is difficult to sort out if the teenager is depressed because of being in trouble, or in trouble because of being depressed.

Depression in adolescence can result in poor academic performance, truancy, delinquency, alcohol and drug abuse, disobedience, self-destructive behaviour, sexual promiscuity, rebelliousness, grief, running away, alienation, feelings of inferiority and loneliness.

Young people may attempt to escape depression and loneliness in a number of ways.

Some poor or less helpful ways include:

- Denying a need for relationships and refusing to talk about how they feel.
- Denying that they are lonely or depressed.
- Using drugs or alcohol as a form of escape.
- Engaging in self harming behaviour

These strategies may only lead to new problems, deeper levels of despair and erosion of relationships with others.

Some better ways of coping include:

- Maintaining open and honest communication with those who are concerned.
- Trying to maintain social relationships.
- Regular exercise, healthy food and adequate sleep.
- Challenging negative thinking when it is present

Depression may get worse and last several months or even several years unless it is properly treated.

Treatment of adolescent depression

Depression is a very treatable illness. Each individual's experience is different, so treatment must be flexible enough to recognise these differences.

The two most common ways of treating depression are with medication, psychotherapy (a skilled form of counselling), or a combination of both.

For many people, medication is useful in treating the symptoms. Only a doctor can prescribe antidepressant medication.

Psychotherapy is also effective in treating stress-related depression. In this treatment, a person has the opportunity to explore events or feelings that are painful or troubling and which might have contributed to the depression. The role of the therapist is to help the person look beyond the problem and explore these feelings.

Its important to remember that an adolescent who is surrounded by close friends and family who understand the depression and are supportive will likely have an easier time than someone who is isolated.

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