

# Teen Depression: A Guide for Teenagers

## Learn Tips and Tools for Helping Yourself or a Friend

The teenage years can be tough, and it's perfectly normal to feel sad or irritable every now and then. But if these feelings don't go away or become so intense that you can't handle them, you may be suffering from depression. The good news is that you don't have to feel this way. Help is available and you have more power than you think. There are many things you can do to help yourself or a friend start feeling better.

## What depression feels like

When you're depressed, it can feel like no one understands. But depression is far more common in teens than you may think. You are not alone and your depression is not a hopeless case. Even though it can feel like depression will never lift, it eventually will—and with proper treatment and healthy choices, that day can come even sooner.

## Signs and symptoms of teen depression

It's hard to put into words how depression feels, and people experience it differently. There are, however, some common problems and symptoms that teens with depression experience.

- You constantly feel irritable, sad, or angry.
- Nothing seems fun anymore, and you just don't see the point of trying.
- You feel bad about yourself—worthless, guilty, or just "wrong" in some way
- You sleep too much or not enough.
- You have frequent, unexplained headaches or other physical problems.
- Anything and everything makes you cry.
- You've gained or lost weight without consciously trying to.
- You just can't concentrate. Your grades may be plummeting because of it.
- You feel helpless and hopeless .
- You're thinking about death or suicide. (If this is true, talk to someone right away!)

## Is your friend depressed?

If you're a teenager with a friend who seems down or troubled, you may suspect depression. But how do you know it's not just a passing phase or a bad mood? Look for common warning signs of teen depression:

- Your friend doesn't want to do the things you guys used to love to do.
- Your friend starts using alcohol or drugs or hanging with a bad crowd.
- Your friend stops going to classes and afterschool activities.
- Your friend talks about being bad, ugly, stupid, or worthless.
- Your friend starts talking about death or suicide.

## When teen depression turns deadly

If your feelings become so overwhelming that you can't see any solution besides harming yourself or others, you need to get help *right away*. And yet, asking for help when you're in the midst of such strong emotions can be really tough. If talking to a stranger might be easier for you, call **1-800-273-TALK** to speak in confidence to someone who can understand and help you deal with your feelings.

## Coping with suicidal thoughts

In the meantime, the following suggestions can help get you through until you feel ready to talk to someone:

- **There is ALWAYS another solution, even if you can't see it right now.** Many kids who have attempted suicide (and survived) say that they did it because they mistakenly felt there was no other solution to a problem they were experiencing. At the time, they could not see another way out, but in truth, they didn't really want to die. Remember that no matter how horribly you feel, these emotions will pass.
- **Having thoughts of hurting yourself or others does not make you a bad person.** Depression can make you think and feel things that are out of character. No one should judge you or condemn you for these feelings if you are brave enough to talk about them.
- **If your feelings are uncontrollable, tell yourself to wait 24 hours before you take any action.** This can give you time to really think things through and give yourself some distance from the strong emotions that are plaguing you. During this 24-hour period, try to talk to someone—anyone—as long as they are not another suicidal or depressed person. Call a hotline or talk to a friend. What do you have to lose?

- **If you're afraid you can't control yourself, make sure you are never alone.** Even if you can't verbalize your feelings, just stay in public places, hang out with friends or family members, or go to a movie—anything to keep from being by yourself and in danger.

Above all, do not do anything that could result in permanent damage or death to yourself or others. Remember, suicide is a "permanent solution to a temporary problem." Help is available. All you need to do is take that first step and reach out.

## **Talking to an adult you trust about teen depression**

### **If you are suffering and don't know where to turn...**

In the U.S., call the NINEline.org hotline for children and teens at **1-800-999-9999**. It's free, confidential, and available from 4:00 PM to 8:00 PM, Eastern Time, seven days a week.

It may seem like there's no way your parents will be able to help, especially if they are always nagging you or getting angry about your behavior. The truth is, parents hate to see their kids hurting. They may feel frustrated because they don't understand what is going on with you or know how to help.

Many parents don't know enough about depression to recognize it in their own kids, so it may be up to you to educate them. Letting your parents know that you are feeling depressed will probably motivate them to get you the help you need.

If your parents are abusive in any way, or if they have problems of their own that makes it difficult for them to take care of you, find another adult you trust (such as a relative, teacher, counselor, or coach). This person can either help you approach your parents, or direct you toward the support you need. If you truly don't have anyone you can talk to, there are many hotlines, services, and support groups that can help.

No matter what, talk to someone, especially if you are having any thoughts of harming yourself or others. Asking for help is the bravest thing you can do, and the first step on your way to feeling better.

### **The importance of accepting and sharing your feelings**

It can be hard to open up about how you're feeling—especially when you're feeling depressed, hopeless, ashamed, or worthless.

It's important to remember that everyone struggles with feelings like these at one time or another. They don't mean you're weak, fundamentally flawed, or no good. Accepting your feelings and opening up about them with someone you trust will help you feel less alone.

No matter what it feels like, people love and care about you, and if you can muster the courage to talk about your depression, it can—and will—be resolved. Some people think that talking about sad feelings will make them worse, but the opposite is almost always true. It is very helpful to share your worries with someone who will listen and care. They don't need to be able to "fix" you; they just need to be good listeners.

## **What you can do to feel better: Tips for depressed teens**

### **Beating depression, one day at a time**

You can't beat depression through sheer willpower, but you do have some control—even if your depression is severe and stubbornly persistent. The key to depression recovery is to start with a few small goals and slowly build from there.

Depression is not your fault, and you didn't do anything to cause it. However, you do have some control over feeling better. Staying connected to friends and family, making healthy lifestyle decisions, and keeping stress under control can all have a hugely positive impact on your mood.

In the meantime, you might need therapy or medication to help you while you sort out your feelings. Look into your treatment options with your parents. If medication is being considered, do your research before making a decision, as some antidepressants used for adults can actually make teens feel worse.

### **Try not to isolate yourself**

When you're depressed, you may not feel like seeing anybody or doing anything. Just getting out of bed in the morning can be difficult, but isolating yourself only makes depression worse. Make it a point to stay social, even if that's the last thing you want to do. As you get out into the world, you may find yourself feeling better.

Spend time with friends, especially those who are active, upbeat, and make you feel good about yourself. Avoid hanging out with those who abuse drugs or alcohol, get you into trouble, or who make you feel insecure. It's also a good idea to limit the time you spend playing video games or surfing online.

### **Keep your body healthy**

Making healthy lifestyle choices can do wonders for your mood. Things like diet and exercise have been shown to help depression. Ever heard of a "runners high"? Exercising releases a rush of endorphins, which makes you feel

instantly happier. You actually get a rush of endorphins from exercising, which makes you feel instantly happier. Physical activity can be as effective as medications or therapy for depression, so get involved in sports, ride your bike, or take a dance class. Any activity helps! Even a short walk can be beneficial.

As for food, an improper diet can make you feel sluggish and tired, which worsens depression symptoms. Your body needs vitamins and minerals such as iron and B-vitamins. Make sure you're feeding your mind with plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Talk to your parents, doctor or school nurse about how to ensure your diet is adequately nutritious.

#### **Avoid alcohol and drugs**

You may be tempted to drink or use drugs in an effort to escape from your feelings and get a "mood boost," even if just for a short time. However, substance use can not only make depression worse, but can cause you to become depressed in the first place. Alcohol and drug use can also increase suicidal feelings. In short, drinking and taking drugs will make you feel worse—not better—in the long run.

If you're addicted to alcohol or drugs, seek help. You will need special treatment for your substance problem on top of whatever treatment you're receiving for your depression.

#### **Ask for help if you're stressed**

Stress and worry can take a big toll, even leading to depression. Talk to a teacher or school counselor if exams or classes seem overwhelming. Likewise, if you have a health concern you feel you can't talk to your parents about—such as a pregnancy scare or drug problem—seek medical attention at a clinic or see a doctor. A health professional can help you approach your parents (if that is required) and guide you toward appropriate treatment.

If you're dealing with relationship, friendship, or family problems, talk to an adult you trust. Your school may have a counselor you can go to for help, or you may want to ask your parents to make an appointment for you to see a therapist.

#### **Helping a depressed friend**

Depressed teens typically rely on their friends more than their parents or other adults in their lives, so you may find yourself in the position of being the first—or only—person that they talk to about their feelings. While this might seem like a huge responsibility, there are many things you can do to help.

- **Get your friend to talk to you.** Starting a conversation about depression can be daunting, but you can say something simple: "You seem like you are really down, and not yourself. I really want to help you. Is there anything I can do?"
- **Know that your friend doesn't expect you to have the answers.** Your friend probably just needs someone to listen and be supportive. By listening and responding in a non-judgmental and reassuring manner, you are helping in a major way.
- **Encourage your friend to get help.** Urge your depressed friend to talk to a parent, teacher, or counselor. It might be scary for your friend to admit to an authority figure that there is a problem. Having you there might help, so offer to go along for support.
- **Stick with your friend through the hard times.** Depression can make people do and say things that are hurtful or strange. But your friend is going through a very difficult time, so try not to take it personally. Once your friend gets help, he or she will go back to being the person you know and love. In the meantime, make sure you have other friends or family taking care of you. Your feelings are important and need to be respected, too.
- **Speak up if your friend is suicidal.** If your friend is joking or talking about suicide, giving possessions away, or saying goodbye, tell a trusted adult immediately. Your only responsibility at this point is to get your friend help, and get it fast. Even if you promised not to tell, your friend needs your help. It's better to have a friend who is temporarily angry at you than one who is no longer alive.

[http://www.helpguide.org/mental/depression\\_teen\\_teenagers.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/depression_teen_teenagers.htm)