

Understanding Teen Depression



If teenagers face a host of pressures, from the changes of puberty to questions about who they are and where they fit in. The natural transition from child to adult can also bring parental conflict as teens start to assert their independence. With all this drama, it isn't always easy to differentiate between depression and normal teenage moodiness. Making things even more complicated, teens with depression do not necessarily appear sad, nor do they always withdraw from others. For some depressed teens, symptoms of irritability, aggression, and rage are more prominent.

Signs and Symptoms

- Sadness or hopelessness
- Irritable, anger, or hostility
- Tearfulness or frequent crying
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Loss of interest in activities
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Restlessness and agitation
- Feelings of worthlessness and guilt
- Lack of enthusiasm and motivation
- Fatigue or lack of energy
- Difficulty concentrating
- Thoughts of death or suicide

If you're unsure if an adolescent in your life is depressed or just "being a teenager," consider how long the symptoms have been present, how severe they are, and how different the teen is acting from his or her usual self. While some "growing pains" are to be expected as teenagers grapple with the challenges of growing up, dramatic, long-lasting changes in personality, mood, or behavior are red flags of a deeper problem.

- Irritable or angry mood – As noted above, irritability, rather than sadness, is often the predominant mood in depressed teens. A depressed teenager may be grumpy, hostile, easily frustrated, or prone to angry outbursts.
- Unexplained aches and pains – Depressed teens frequently complain about physical ailments such as headaches or stomachaches. If a thorough physical exam does not reveal a medical cause, these aches and pains may indicate depression.
- Extreme sensitivity to criticism – Depressed teens are plagued by feelings of worthlessness, making them extremely vulnerable to criticism, rejection, and failure. This is a particular problem for "over-achievers."
- Withdrawing from some, but not all people – While adults tend to isolate themselves when depressed, teenagers usually keep up at least some friendships. However, teens with depression may socialize less than before, pull away from their parents, or start hanging out with a different crowd.