



DEPRESSION IN TEENS AND COLLEGE AGE STUDENTS

The incidence of depression increases during the teen years, right after puberty begins. It affects about 4% of young people, with more girls affected than boys. One out of four young adults will experience a depressive episode by age 24. Depression is caused by a variety of factors, including genetics, environment and adverse life stressors. Teens that have chronic illnesses or have experienced trauma are at greater risk of developing depression.

As any parent will tell you, it is difficult to define normal teenage behavior. They are experiencing so many changes – social, physical and emotional – and their moods and interests change quickly as well. This makes it difficult for a parent to discern if their teen’s behavior is normal or if it is a symptom of depression.

The symptoms of teenage depression can include feeling sad, lethargic, sleepy, irritable, or grouchy. They may be extremely sensitive in their relationships, overreact to disappointment, act aggressively, display anti-social behavior, become more isolated from family, do self-destructive things (drugs, alcohol), or no longer care about their appearance. While it’s true that you can see all these things in normal teenagers, parents should be concerned if they see these behaviors frequently, if they become more intense and if your teen is no longer functioning well in home, life or school.

When your teen goes away to college they are exposed to many stressors that can lead them to develop depression or other mental illnesses. Moving away from friends and family, taking care of yourself for the first time (money, laundry, etc.), having to make new friends, and being academically challenged can be overwhelming. It’s harder to know how your teen is doing when they are away but you should know that surveys have shown that about 50% of college students report feeling so depressed that they have trouble functioning. Many colleges have established good mental health awareness programs and services to aid students. It’s a good idea to know ahead of time how these issues are handled.

If you are concerned that your teen might have depression, it’s a good idea to talk to his or her school or primary care doctor. Also, many middle schools and high schools have screening programs where, with parental permission, your child can fill out a questionnaire to determine if there are valid concerns. From there you can contact a mental health professional for an assessment in order to obtain a diagnosis and treatment. Treatment options usually include psychotherapy and/or medication.

As with any treatment for your teen, be sure to ask questions, conduct some research of your own and talk to other parents. Treatment can be very effective.

Not treating depression can lead to serious consequences such as doing poorly in school, drug or alcohol abuse and even death. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents. While girls have a higher rate of attempting suicide, boys complete more suicides.

If communities want to do something positive on this issue they can look at how mental health screening and services are being provided in the schools, ensure that there are enough school support staff (social workers, counselors, school psychologists) to assist students, and check to see if mental illness is included in the health curriculum. Colleges can ensure that there are policies in place to assist students and that mental-health services are available, including a 24-hour hot line.

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