

TEENAGERS AND DEPRESSION

Dear Dr. K.,

My teenage son isn't acting like his usual self. How would I know if he's depressed?

Karen, New Orleans

Dear Karen,

As you probably know, just being a teenager brings with a certain amount of moodiness as a result of growing and hormonal changes. But, if you've taken that into consideration, you're very wise to think about depression if your son isn't being his usual self.

Depression can affect anyone. Years ago, it was thought that younger children could not get depressed because their brains hadn't developed that much but this has been proven wrong and teens are no exception. Depression is something that gets in the way of daily functioning. About five per cent of teens suffer from depression at any given time. This occurs more in teens who have suffered a loss, have a lot of depression running in their families or who have already shown they have some emotional or learning difficulties. Some research suggests that if one parent has depression, up to 40% of the children will become depressed before they reach 20. If you or your spouse have been treated for depression, watch for it in your son or daughter since you, since you have been there, know the early signs and symptoms. Depression in teenagers can differ from that in adults. Signs of depression include frequent sadness and crying, feeling hopeless, loss of interest in activities that they once enjoyed, decreased energy, isolating themselves in their room a lot or not talking on the phone as much (or not texting), feeling bad about themselves, being more sensitive, being irritable, not seeing their friends as much, making excuses to stay home from school, a drop in grades, decreased concentration, not eating or sleeping, frequent complaints of illnesses such as headaches or stomach aches, talk of or trying to run away from home and (the most important) talking about being dead.

Teenagers who cause trouble at home or at school may actually be depressed but not know it. Often, teenagers will *behave* differently (show their feelings in how they act)

Ask Dr. K®: Writings For Your Mental Health

rather than complain or even know they're depressed. Using drugs and/or alcohol can also be a sign of feeling sad with the substance being the "medication" that makes them think they feel better.

There's no doubt that the worst thing is when a teenager feels so hopeless and alone that he or she thinks of or tries suicide. Risk factors to consider include previous suicidal behavior, a history of psychiatric problems or drug abuse, a family history of suicide, a loss of a parent through any means, a history of abuse, violence or neglect or social isolation.

As a parent, what you can do if you suspect your son or daughter is depressed is show them that you're willing to listen whenever they might want to talk. If you think they are behaving differently, ask them about it but make it more of a comment than forcing them to admit something. Do not pressure your teenager to talk. Don't be critical or judgmental when they talk to you, just listen.

Encourage them to be active and social. Praise the things they do.

If you think your son or daughter is depressed, you might contact a teacher at school to see whether they notice any changes. If so, call your pediatrician, a mental counselor or a psychiatrist to have them talk with your teenager. At this point, if you think your teen is depressed, *you* make the appointment despite what the teen says. Get him or her to talk with a professional and you make sure you also have time to discuss your concerns and why you have them.

Depression is very treatable with most people feeling better within weeks. Online, checkout www.nimh.gov. Go to that website and search 'teen depression'.

Dr. K.