

Teen Depression

Teenagers, especially young teens, may exhibit several symptoms of depression and yet be unaware that they are suffering from depression.

Depression is not just sadness. It is a diagnosable illness with specific symptoms. In order to be diagnosed with depression, the individual must have symptoms for at least two weeks.

Children and adolescents sometimes don't have the language to label their own emotions. They may have been depressed for so long, they don't realize that what they are experiencing is depression. They don't understand that it's possible to feel differently.

About 4% of teenagers have a Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) at any one time. Among teens, girls are more often affected than boys. MDD frequently interferes with home, school and family life, including causing a lot of family stress.

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among teenagers, with about half of these associated with depression

National Institute of Mental Health, Treatment of Adolescent Depression Study (TADS)

Adolescent Depression

- Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure
 - Low self-esteem and feelings of guilt
 - Frequent complaints of physical illnesses such as headaches and stomachaches
 - Frequent absences from school or poor performance in school
 - Threats or attempts to run away from home
 - Major changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 8/98)

- Sad, blue, irritable and/or complains that nothing is fun anymore
- Trouble sleeping, low energy, poor appetite and trouble concentrating
- Socially withdrawn or performs more poorly in school
- Can be suicidal

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While many people think of depression as a pervasive feeling of sadness, in teens it often shows up as increased irritability.

“Most children experience fluctuations in mood and behavior as a result of normal developmental transitions. Healthy children can exhibit on occasion, any of the symptoms of more serious behavioral and emotional disorders without needing much concern. However, when these symptoms appear over an extended period of time, it is wise to have the child checked by a doctor.” (Red Flags in Children's Behavior)

Teens also show depression by dropping out of activities that they once found enjoyable, and by reporting that things that they are doing isn't fun anymore. Depressed teens may continue to try to do things with friends, and may have the expectation that the activity is going to be fun, but then finds that it isn't fun when they try to do it.

They may stop calling their friends, and may stop taking friend's phone calls. However, some teens report their most serious symptoms either at home or at school, and may say they feel fine when they are with their friends. This generally has to do with the lower expectations that are placed on them by friends as opposed to home or school.

Younger teens may not actively threaten to kill themselves, but instead might make statements saying they wished they were dead, or had never been born.

Adolescent Anxiety

- Excessive worries
- Worries about school performance
- Difficulty making friends
- Isolative
- Perfectionistic
- Rigid thinking and behavior patterns
- Phobias

Adolescents with anxiety disorders also show a high incidence of suicidal behavior. These may be the children who seem to be doing well in school, show no signs of depression, but who seem to "suddenly suicide". There are several different disorders which make up the anxiety disorders spectrum. We cannot list all the signs and symptoms of all the disorders here. If you suspect a child may have an anxiety disorder, they should be referred to a mental health professional for evaluation and treatment.

Suicidal Ideation (Hoberman and Garfinkel 1988)

In a study of 229 completed youth suicides:

- 62% had made a suicidal statement
- 45% had consumed alcohol within 12 hours of killing themselves
- 76% had shown a decline in academic performance in the past year

Teen Suicide in the U.S.

- There are 25 suicide attempts for every completion for our country as a whole
- There are between 100-200 teen attempts before completing suicide
- Girls attempt more often (3:1)
- Boys complete suicide more often (4:1)
- Every year approximately 2,000 teens suicide

Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Practice Parameters, 2002

It is a myth that people who attempt suicide, but do not complete it were “just doing it for attention”. It appears that people who eventually complete suicide may have made multiple prior attempts. While an adult may make 25 attempts before actually killing themselves, teens may make 100-200 attempts.

Although suicide is the 11th leading cause of death for the overall population, it is the 3rd leading cause of death for 15-24 year olds.

Cultural issues

- African Americans currently have a lower rate of suicide than whites,
- The suicide rate of African-American adolescent and young adult males has been rising rapidly.
- Native American and Alaskan Native youth have a very high rate of suicide.
- Attempted suicide rates of Hispanic youth are greater than those of white and African-American youth.

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Gay and Lesbian Youth

- There is no evidence gay or lesbian youth *commit* suicide more often than heterosexual teens.
- However, there is strong evidence that gay, lesbian and bisexual youths of both sexes are more likely to experience suicidal ideation and *attempt* suicide.

Alcohol and suicide

- Alcoholics have a suicide rate 50 times higher than the general population
- Alcohol dependent persons make up 25% of all suicides
- 18% of alcoholics eventually complete suicide
- States with the most restrictive policies toward alcohol have the lowest suicide rates (Lester, 1993)