**COPING WITH DEPRESSION**

*Depression is quite common among teenagers. Sometimes normally happy teenagers will be sad about something for a day or two, and then they will be back to normal without any need for parents to take any action. However, other teenagers become more severely depressed, sometimes as a result of some distressing or unusual events. This tip sheet gives you some suggestions on how to decide whether your teenager is depressed and what to do about it if they are.*

**WHAT IS DEPRESSION?**

Depression is an emotional state where a person feels sad, listless, and discouraged for long periods of time.

Between 15 and 30% of teenagers become depressed at some time, and many will also experience anxiety problems. There is a separate tipsheet for Coping with Anxiety.

If can be difficult for teenagers to talk about how they feel. They may appear angry and aggressive, while at other times they may seem tired, irritable, or withdrawn. They may have difficulty sleeping, show little interest in food, and say very little. They may avoid peers and social activities or refuse to attend school.

Teenagers who are depressed may start to think about harming themselves or taking their own life. When someone is depressed they can sometimes believe that everything is hopeless and there appears to be no possibility that life could become enjoyable again. Suicide may be seen as a solution to this problem.

Suicide is one of the leading causes of death from external causes. It is particularly high for adolescents and young adults. Up to 60% of secondary school students report having suicidal thoughts, and up to 7% attempt suicide in a 12 month period. The most common methods of suicide are hanging, carbon monoxide poisoning (e.g. from a car exhaust), shooting or taking tablets or poisonous fluids. Males are more at risk, and more likely to be successful in a suicide attempt.

**WHAT CAUSES TEENAGERS TO BECOME DEPRESSED?**

Depression sometimes occurs when someone or something a teenager enjoyed is suddenly lost of not available any more. Examples can include:

* Breaking up with a girl friend
* Having a fight with a group of friends
* Being dropped from a sporting team
* The death of a close relative
* Parental divorce or separation
* Moving house
* The loss of a much-loved pet

Others seem to sink further and further into gloom, and may withdraw from all other activities. This can lead to depression. Changes in the brain often occur that seem to make it difficult for depressed people to help themselves.

They typically think that there is nothing that can be done to change a difficult situation and it seems even more hopeless to them.

Sometimes parents can unknowingly make things worse. Being too restrictive or critical, or being inconsistent with discipline and rules can contribute to your teenager become depressed.

**HOW TO PREVENT YOUR TEENAGER BECOMING DEPRESSED**

* **Create a positive family environment**

Parents can help prevent depression in a number of ways:

* Encourage teenagers to have realistic beliefs about their capabilities
* Encourage teenagers to develop good problem solving skills
* Talk openly about feelings about how to cope with upsetting events
* Make positive comments about things your teenager does well, especially when they are dealing with loss or disappointment
* Encourage teenagers to maintain their interest in appropriate social and recreational activities when things are not going well for them
* Make sure there are plenty of positive interactions with parents and other family members
* Have consistent rules and appropriate discipline so that teenagers feel their world is secure and predictable at home

Accept that your teenager needs some time to grieve when a loss occurs that is or could be permanent. Do not try to hurry the grieving process along and allow time for your teenager to get over it. Respect their wishes to be left alone for a while, but be prepared to talk to them if they want to talk about the issue that has upset them.

**WHAT TO DO IF YOU THINK YOUR TEENAGER MAY BE DEPRESSED**

* **Monitor your teenagers emotions and behaviour**

Look out for changes in your teenager’s normal behaviour patterns. These changes may be sudden, or more gradual and therefore difficult to notice.

Watch for:

* Less social activity
* Less contact with friends
* More time alone in room
* Increased irritability
* Changes in sleep patterns
* Changes in eating patterns

If you think your teenager may be depressed, ask others if they have noticed any changes in your teenagers behaviour.

* **Talk to your teenager**

See if you can identify any recent events in their life that may have upset your teenager. Ask about:

* Schoolwork, exams or assignments that have just been completed
* Friends and relationships, especially close friendships that seem to have suddenly ended or faded
* Decreases in regular activities that your teenager has previously been enthusiastic about
* Upcoming social events, especially any that they seem uninterested in where they would normally have been keen to go

Check to see if they have been disappointed about missing out on selection for a team or a competition, or if they are worrying about failing at something.

When asking about these issues, take care not to ask too many questions. Listen carefully to what your teenager says. This is a good way to show you that you are concerned. Listen for comments that indicate your teenager may:

* Feel bad about themselves, or that they believe they are unloved or unwanted, such as *no one cares about me, it’s hopeless, i’ll never be any good*
* Believe nothing they do can improve things, such as *There’s no point, it doesn’t matter anyway, I don’t care what happens*

Sometimes, teenagers may not want to talk at all, and try to avoid discussing what might be wrong. Ignore their lack of interest and continue your attempt to discover what may have caused them to feel sad or upset.

* **Encourage regular school attendance**

Depressed teenagers may not want to get out of bed or go to school. Be firm about your teenagers attendance at school.

* **Talk to someone at school**

If you suspect that there are problems at school, sharing your concerns with your Director of Learning can help you get a clearer picture of what is happening.

**HOW TO HELP YOUR TEENAGER MANAGE DEPRESSION**

* **Encourage your teenager to find things they enjoy**

Encourage your teenager to go out or join in an activity at every opportunity. Do not be discouraged if your teenager responds to your attempts with a lack of interest. You may have to continue to take some responsibility for getting your teenager involved again. This may take some effort on your part.

* **Encourage your teenager to replace negative thoughts**

Look for and challenge any negative thoughts that your teenager reports. Examples of negative thoughts include *it’s no use trying because things will never get better. Everything’s awful and there’s nothing I can do about it. I’ll always feel this way so why bother?*

Help your teenager identify these negative thoughts. Look out for words like *always, never, everything, nothing, everybody, nobody* and phrases like *no use, no point, no good*. These all indicate beliefs that prevent action that will help them overcome their depression.

Do not get into an argument with your teenager if they cannot see their belief is false. You will usually end up saying to each other something like *yet it is ... no it isn’t ...yes it is ...* and so on.

* **Consider medication**

If your teenager is so depressed that your efforts fail to get them going, they may benefit from antidepressant medication. You will need to take your teenager to see a general practitioner or psychiatrist who will assess them and prescribe medication as necessary.

Medication will usually not be enough on its own to help your teenager get back to normal. However, it may make it easier to get them involved with activities and peers. Together, this combination may help your teenager overcome their depression.

* **Look out for signs of suicide or self-harm**

Look out for comments such as *life’s not work living. No one would miss me if I wasn’t here. I might as well be dead*. Sometimes these statements are ways of getting attention and they should be taken as a serious warning that something is wrong. If these statements are ignored, a teenager may make a serious attempt to harm themselves, and this can sometimes lead to death, even if it was not meant to.

Look carefully at whether you are giving your teenager lots of positive attention when they are behaving appropriately. If teenagers get positive attention from parents regularly, they won’t usually need to take such a drastic step as harming themselves to get attention. However, if parents pay lots of attention to their teenager only when they threaten to harm themselves, this might encourage further threats and attempts.

For other teenagers, these comments are statements of fact and they may take their lives quite suddenly. Signals that indicate a teenager may be planning suicide can include:

* Giving away their possessions, especially ones they value highly
* Showing no interest in events coming up in the near future
* Sudden improvements in their mood after being depressed for some time

If you suspect that your teenager may attempt suicide, lock away or remove any obvious means that they might use. However, this is only useful as a short-term strategy. It is no substitute for proper treatment and you should seek professional advice urgently.

If you find it difficult to persuade your teenager to seek treatment, you may have to contact your family doctor or local Mental Health Centre yourself. Be prepared to go with your teenager as they will often regard it as pointless and hopeless, and simply not seek help if left to do it themselves.

**POINTS TO REMEMBER**

Daily disappointments and loss are all part of life and teenagers need to be able to cope with the negative events of daily living. Often there is no need for parents to take any action, other than to provide understanding and support.

When teenagers experience long periods when sadness and depression appear to take over their lives, parents need to take action. This may include encouraging their teenager to seek professional help.

**KEY STEPS**

* Create a positive family environment
* Monitor your teenagers emotions and behaviour
* Talk to your teenager
* Encourage regular school attendance
* Talk to someone at school
* Encourage your teenager to find things they enjoy
* Encourage your teenager to replace negative thoughts
* Consider medication
* Look out for signs of suicide or self-harm