

# **Symptoms and Warning Signs of Teenage Depression**

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Depression is probably one of the most common and pervasive struggles teenagers deal with over the course of their adolescence. Yet most youth workers don't know much about adolescent depression or how to help a teen hurting in this way. Many people, including parents and youth workers, dismiss it as a part of the hormonal emotive roller coaster brought on by this developmental stage. Depression is an "affect" disorder, and while that can sound scary, it should be noted all people experience depression in some form during the course of their lives.

In its mildest form, depression is as common as an ordinary cold. Medical health professionals estimate that one in eight American teenagers suffer from some form of depression; that's more than 3.5 million teens. This is only an estimate based on diagnosed cases of depression.

Many more teens likely experience some form of depression than the statistics reveal. Estimates may be low because, as noted previously, adolescent depression is often chalked up to normal teenage emotional immaturity. It can also go unreported because teenagers may not have the capacity to label their feelings. When asked, they may replay that they don't know what they feel, or that they feel—bad. Depression or any form of sadness is often retranslated into some form of angst.

There are a number of symptoms parents and youth workers should be on the alert for, which are indicative of any type of depression. The degree to which these symptoms are present could indicate the extent to which a teen is depressed.

**Emotional Disposition.** Depressed teens often have pervasive feelings of sadness, despair, hopelessness, guilt, shame, worthlessness, anger, or fear, and also feel hurt, unloved, and irritable.

**Verbal Cues.** Written and orally expressed, verbal cues are often the best clues for adults into the despair depressed teens are experiencing. Verbal cues also are good indicators of teens' thought patterns and self-perception.

"Nobody likes me."

"Something bad is going to happen."

"I'm never going to be happy again."

"Life sucks—I'm such a loser."

"I just don't want to get out of bed anymore."

**Behavioral Cues.** Isolating and withdrawing from friends and family; constantly tearing up or crying; easily set off, bothered, or angered; moping and spending hours in front of the TV; failing to complete schoolwork or other tasks of responsibility; and having difficulty remembering things; are some of the behaviors of a depressed teen.

**Changes in Sleep Patterns.** This can present in two ways, either sleeping more (longer periods of time to more frequently throughout the day) or sleeping less (shorter periods of time marked by insomnia or frequently waking up at night). The latter tends to be more prominent with depressed teens. They may also show signs of constant fatigue and lethargy, lacking energy and motivation. They may comment about having a heavy feeling about them.

**Changes in Eating Patterns.** This can swing either direction. Depressed teens may experience loss of appetite and not eat at all. This could evidence itself in rapid weight loss. On the other hand they may binge eat and begin to put on weight. Other changes in eating patterns could include eating more junk foods, nausea at the smell or thought of food, or eating at atypical times.

**Shifts in Appearance.** One common way depression is seen is when teens no longer seem to care about grooming and hygiene. Depressed teens who were once meticulous about their appearance won't shower, comb their hair, use deodorant, or brush their teeth. They may want to stay in the same clothes for days, even sleeping in them. Depression may also evidence itself by the appearance of teens' bedrooms. They may post morbid posters, display depressing song lyrics and poems, or desire to paint their walls black. They may also wear dark clothing, makeup (or lack of it), and accessories. While Goth is a style that some perfectly healthy, nondepressed teens adopt, it can become a magnet for depressed teens. They may show a sudden interest in piercing, branding, and tattooing as well. While these may be accept-

able fashion statements, one must be aware that depressed teens often gravitate toward lingering physical pain to take their minds off emotional pain.

**Risky Behaviors.** Depressed teens often look for ways of escape—everything from an adrenaline rush (e.g., driving fast, unprotected sexual activity, or shoplifting or other illegal activities) to take their minds off the depression to inflicting some form of physical pain (e.g., cutting, burning, pulling out hair, etc.) to overpower the depression to anesthetizing the pain of depression (e.g., experimenting with, using, and abusing alcohol and other drugs.)

**Anhedonia.** The inability to gain any kind of pleasure from anything. Depressed teens may not find joy in the things they enjoyed in the past and appear passionless. Even things like food, music, video games, and friends are no longer interesting or satisfying. This tends to be more identifiable in depressed teenage guys than girls. The loss of pleasure may also have a backlash effect. As anhedonia sets in, teens may binge in pleasurable activities to keep pleasure alive and satiate depression. For example a teen may stay up all night playing video games, or listen to the same song over and over, or masturbate much more than usual.

**Suicide.** Depression often precedes suicide. The more severe the depression, the closer the teen may come to committing suicide. Depressed teens may show signs of suicide ideation, strategy, and even attempts.

There are always warning signs and symptoms present when teenagers are contemplating or attempting suicide. Often the signs are revealed forensically (after the fact by professionals) rather than remedially. People with teenagers in their lives must be made aware of the warning signs.

*This is an excerpt from What Do I Do When Teenagers are Depressed & Contemplate Suicide, which is a part of the brand-new "What Do I Do..." series from Youth Specialties. To get the entire book or series, go to [youthspecialties.com](http://youthspecialties.com) or wherever books are sold. All rights reserved. Used by permission.*

