

Dealing with Teen Depression

Signs, Symptoms, and Tools for Helping Yourself or a Friend



The teenage years can be really tough and it's perfectly normal to feel sad or irritable every now and then. But if these feelings don't go away or become so intense that you feel overwhelmingly hopeless and helpless, you may be suffering from depression. The good news is that you don't have to feel this way. Help is available—and you have more power over your mood than you may think. No matter how despondent life seems right now, there are many things you can do to change your mood and start feeling better today.

What is teen depression?

Teen depression is much more than feeling temporarily sad or down in the dumps. It's a serious and debilitating mood disorder that can change the way you think, feel, and function in your daily life, causing problems at home, school, and in your social life. When you're depressed, you may feel hopeless and isolated and it can seem like no one understands. But depression is far more common in teens than you may think. The increased academic pressures, social challenges, and hormonal changes of the teenage years mean that about one in five of us suffer with depression in our teens. You're not alone and your depression is not a sign of weakness or a character flaw.

Even though it can feel like the black cloud of depression will never lift, there are plenty of

things you can do to help yourself deal with symptoms, regain your balance and feel more positive, energetic, and hopeful again.

If you're a parent or guardian worried about your child...

While it isn't always easy to differentiate from normal teenage growing pains, teen depression is a serious health problem that goes beyond moodiness. As a parent, your love, guidance, and support can go a long way toward helping your teen overcome depression and get their life back on track. Read [Parent's Guide to Teen Depression](#).

Signs and symptoms of teen depression

It can be hard to put into words exactly how depression feels—and we don't all experience it the same way. For some teens, depression is characterized by feelings of bleakness and despair. For others, it's a persistent anger or agitation, or simply an overwhelming sense of "emptiness." However depression affects you, though, there are some [common symptoms](#) that you may experience:

- You constantly feel irritable, sad, or angry.
- Nothing seems fun anymore—even the activities you used to love—and you just don't see the point of forcing yourself to do them.
- You feel bad about yourself—worthless, guilty, or just "wrong" in some way.
- You sleep too much or not enough.
- You've turned to alcohol or drugs to try to change the way you feel.
- You have frequent, unexplained headaches or other physical pains or problems.
- Anything and everything makes you cry.
- You're extremely sensitive to criticism.
- You've gained or lost weight without consciously trying to.
- You're having trouble concentrating, thinking straight, or remembering things. Your grades may be plummeting because of it.
- You feel helpless and hopeless.
- You're thinking about death or suicide. (If so, talk to someone right away!)

Coping with suicidal thoughts

If your negative feelings caused by depression become so overwhelming that you can't see

any solution besides harming yourself or others, you need to get help *right away*. Asking for help when you're in the midst of such strong emotions can be really difficult, but it's vital you reach out to someone you trust—a friend, family member, or teacher, for example. If you don't feel that you have anyone to talk to, or think that talking to a stranger might be easier, call a suicide helpline. You'll be able to speak in confidence to someone who understands what you're going through and can help you deal with your feelings.

Whatever your situation, it takes real courage to face death and step back from the brink. You can use that courage to help you keep going and overcome depression.

There is ALWAYS another solution, even if you can't see it right now. Many people who have survived a suicide attempt say that they did it because they mistakenly felt there was no other solution to a problem they were experiencing. At the time, they couldn't see another way out, but in truth, they didn't really want to die. Remember that no matter how badly you feel, these emotions will pass.

Having thoughts of hurting yourself or others does not make you a bad person. Depression can make you think and feel things that are out of character. No one should judge you or condemn you for these feelings if you are brave enough to talk about them.

If your feelings are uncontrollable, tell yourself to wait 24 hours before you take any action. This can give you time to really think things through and give yourself some distance from the strong emotions that are plaguing you. During this 24-hour period, try to talk to someone—anyone—as long as they are not another suicidal or depressed person. Call a hotline or talk to a friend. What do you have to lose?

If you're afraid you can't control yourself, make sure you are never alone. Even if you can't verbalize your feelings, just stay in public places, hang out with friends or family members, or go to a movie—anything to keep from being by yourself and in danger.

If you're thinking about suicide...

Please read [Are You Feeling Suicidal?](#) or call a helpline:

- In the U.S.: 1-800-273-8255
- UK: 116 123
- Australia: 13 11 14
- To find a helpline in other countries, visit [IASP](#) or [Suicide.org](#).

Remember, suicide is a “permanent solution to a temporary problem.” Please take that first step and reach out now.

Why am I depressed?

Despite what you may have been told, depression is not simply caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain that can be cured with medication. Rather, depression is caused by a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors. Since the teenage years can be a time of great turmoil and uncertainty, you’re likely facing a host of pressures that could contribute to your depression symptoms. These can range from hormonal changes to problems at home or school or questions about who you are and where you fit in.

As a teen, you’re more likely to suffer from depression if you have a family history of depression or have experienced early childhood trauma, such as the loss of a parent or physical or emotional abuse.

Risk factors for teen depression

Risk factors that can trigger or exacerbate depression in teens include:

1. Serious illness, chronic pain, or [physical disability](#)
2. Having other mental health conditions, such as anxiety, an [eating disorder](#), [learning disorder](#), or ADHD
3. Alcohol or drug abuse
4. Academic or family problems
5. Bullying
6. Trauma from violence or abuse
7. Recent stressful life experiences, such as [parental divorce](#) or the death of a loved one
8. Coping with your sexual identity in an unsupportive environment
9. Loneliness and lack of social support
10. Spending too much time on social media

If you’re being bullied...

The stress of bullying—whether it’s online, at school, or elsewhere—is very difficult to live with. It can make you feel helpless, hopeless, and ashamed: the perfect recipe for depression. If you’re being bullied, know that it’s not your fault. No matter what a bully says

or does, you should not be ashamed of who you are or what you feel. Bullying is abuse and you [don't have to put up with it](#). You deserve to feel safe, but you'll most likely need help. Find support from friends who don't bully and turn to an adult you trust—whether it's a parent, teacher, counselor, pastor, coach, or the parent of a friend.

Whatever the causes of your depression, the following tips can help you overcome your symptoms, change how you feel, and regain your sense of hope and enthusiasm.

Overcoming teen depression tip 1: Talk to an adult you trust

Depression is not your fault, and you didn't do anything to cause it. However, you do have some control over feeling better. The first step is to ask for help.

Talking to someone about depression

It may seem like there's no way your parents will be able to help, especially if they are always nagging you or getting angry about your behavior. The truth is, parents hate to see their kids hurting. They may feel frustrated because they don't understand what is going on with you or know how to help.

- If your parents are abusive in any way, or if they have problems of their own that makes it difficult for them to take care of you, find another adult you trust (such as a relative, teacher, counselor, or coach). This person can either help you approach your parents, or direct you toward the support you need.
- If you truly don't have anyone you can talk to, there are many hotlines, services, and support groups that can help.
- No matter what, talk to someone, especially if you are having any thoughts of harming yourself or others. Asking for help is the bravest thing you can do, and the first step on your way to feeling better.

The importance of accepting and sharing your feelings

It can be hard to open up about how you're feeling—especially when you're feeling depressed, ashamed, or worthless. It's important to remember that many people struggle with feelings like these at one time or another. They don't mean you're weak, fundamentally flawed, or no good. Accepting your feelings and opening up about them with someone you

trust will help you feel less alone.

Even though it may not feel like it at the moment, people do love and care about you. If you can muster the courage to talk about your depression, it can—and will—be resolved. Some people think that talking about sad feelings will make them worse, but the opposite is almost always true. It is very helpful to share your worries with someone who will listen and care about what you say. They don't need to be able to "fix" you; they just need to be good listeners.

Tip 2: Try not to isolate yourself—it makes depression worse

Depression causes many of us to withdraw into our shells. You may not feel like seeing anybody or doing anything and some days just getting out of bed in the morning can be difficult. But isolating yourself only makes depression worse. So even if it's the last thing you want to do, try to force yourself to stay social. As you get out into the world and connect with others, you'll likely find yourself starting to feel better.

Spend time face-to-face with friends who make you feel good—especially those who are active, upbeat, and understanding. Avoid hanging out with those who abuse drugs or alcohol, get you into trouble, or make you feel judged or insecure.

Get involved in activities you enjoy (or used to). Getting involved in extracurricular activities seem like a daunting prospect when you're depressed, but you'll feel better if you do. Choose something you've enjoyed in the past, whether it be a sport, an art, dance or music class, or an after-school club. You might not feel motivated at first, but as you start to participate again, your mood and enthusiasm will begin to lift.

Volunteer. Doing things for others is a powerful antidepressant and happiness booster. [Volunteering](#) for a cause you believe in can help you feel reconnected to others and the world, and give you the satisfaction of knowing you're making a difference.

Cut back on your social media use. While it may seem that [losing yourself online](#) will temporarily ease depression symptoms, it can actually make you feel even worse. Comparing yourself unfavorably with your peers on social media, for example, only promotes feelings of depression and isolation. Remember: people always exaggerate the positive aspects of their lives online, brushing over the doubts and disappointments that we all experience. And even if you're just interacting with friends online, it's no replacement for

in-person contact. Eye-to-eye contact, a hug, or even a simple touch on the arm from a friend can make all the difference to how you're feeling.

Tip 3: Adopt healthy habits

Making healthy lifestyle choices [can do wonders for your mood](#). Things like eating right, getting regular exercise, and getting enough sleep have been shown to make a huge difference when it comes to depression.

Get moving! Ever heard of a “runner’s high”? You actually get a rush of endorphins from exercising, which makes you feel instantly happier. [Physical activity](#) can be as effective as medications or therapy for depression, so get involved in sports, ride your bike, or take a dance class. Any activity helps! If you're not feeling up to much, start with a short daily walk, and build from there.

Be smart about what you eat. An unhealthy diet can make you feel sluggish and tired, which worsens depression symptoms. Junk food, [refined carbs, and sugary snacks](#) are the worst culprits! They may give you a quick boost, but they'll leave you feeling worse in the long run. Make sure you're feeding your mind with plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Talk to your parents, doctor, or school nurse about how to ensure your diet is adequately nutritious.

Avoid alcohol and drugs. You may be tempted to drink or use drugs in an effort to escape from your feelings and get a “mood boost,” even if just for a short time. However, as well as causing depression in the first place, substance use will only make depression worse in the long run. Alcohol and drug use can also increase suicidal feelings. If you're [addicted to alcohol or drugs](#), seek help. You will need special treatment for your substance problem on top of whatever treatment you're receiving for your depression.

Aim for eight hours of sleep each night. Feeling depressed as a teenager typically disrupts your sleep. Whether you're sleeping too little or too much, your mood will suffer. But you can get on a better sleep schedule [by adopting healthy sleep habits](#).

Tip 4: Manage stress and anxiety

For many teens, stress and anxiety can go hand-in-hand with depression. Unrelenting stress, doubts, or fears can sap your emotional energy, affect your physical health, send your anxiety levels soaring, and trigger or exacerbate depression.

If you're suffering from an anxiety disorder, it can manifest itself in a variety of ways. Perhaps you endure intense anxiety attacks that strike without warning, get panicky at the thought of speaking in class, experience uncontrollable, intrusive thoughts, or live in a constant state of worry. Since anxiety makes depression worse (and vice versa), it's important to [get help for both conditions](#).

Tips for managing stress

[Managing the stress in your life](#) starts with identifying the sources of that stress:

1. If exams or classes seem overwhelming, for example, talk to a teacher or school counselor, or find ways of [improving how you manage your time](#).
2. If you have a health concern you feel you can't talk to your parents about—such as a pregnancy scare or drug problem—seek medical attention at a clinic or see a doctor. A health professional can guide you towards appropriate treatment (and help you approach your parents if that's necessary).
3. If you're struggling to fit in or dealing with relationship, friendship, or family difficulties, talk your problems over with your school counselor or a professional therapist. Exercise, meditation, muscle relaxation, and breathing exercises are other [good ways to cope with stress](#).
4. If your own negative thoughts and chronic worrying are contributing to your everyday stress levels, you can [take steps to break the habit](#) and regain control of your worrying mind.

How to help a depressed teen friend

If you're a teenager with a friend who seems down or troubled, you may suspect depression. But how do you know it's not just a passing phase or a bad mood? Look for common warning signs of teen depression:

- Your friend doesn't want to do the things you guys used to love to do.
- Your friend starts using alcohol or drugs or hanging with a bad crowd.
- Your friend stops going to classes and afterschool activities.
- Your friend talks about being bad, ugly, stupid, or worthless.
- Your friend starts talking about death or suicide.

Teens typically rely on their friends more than their parents or other adults, so you may find yourself in the position of being the first—or only—person that your depressed friend confides in. While this might seem like a huge responsibility, there are many things you can

do to help:

Get your friend to talk to you. Starting a conversation about depression can be daunting, but you can say something simple: “You seem like you are really down, and not yourself. I really want to help you. Is there anything I can do?”

You don’t need to have the answers. Your friend just needs someone to listen and be supportive. By listening and responding in a non-judgmental and reassuring manner, you are helping in a major way.

Encourage your friend to get help. Urge your depressed friend to talk to a parent, teacher, or counselor. It might be scary for your friend to admit to an authority figure that they have a problem. Having you there might help, so offer to go along for support.

Stick with your friend through the hard times. Depression can make people do and say things that are hurtful or strange. But your friend is going through a very difficult time, so try not to take it personally. Once your friend gets help, they will go back to being the person you know and love. In the meantime, make sure you have other friends or family taking care of you. Your feelings are important and need to be respected, too.

Speak up if your friend is suicidal. If your friend is joking or talking about suicide, giving possessions away, or saying goodbye, tell a trusted adult immediately. [Your only responsibility](#) at this point is to get your friend help, and get it fast. Even if you promised not to tell, your friend needs your help. It’s better to have a friend who is temporarily angry at you than one who is no longer alive.



Other resources

[Depression](#) - Specifically directed towards teenagers. (TeensHealth)

[Depression in Teens](#) - How to recognize teen depression, deal with adolescent pressures, and find treatment and help. (Mental Health America)



HelpGuide

Hotlines and support

In the U.S.: Find [DBSA Chapters/Support Groups](#) or call [TeenLine](#) at 1-800-852-8336

UK: Find [Depression support groups](#) in-person and online or call [Childline](#) at 0800 1111

Australia: Find [Support Groups](#) and regional resources or call [Lifeline](#) at 13 11 14

Canada: Call [KidsHelpPhone](#) at 1-800-668-6868

India: Call the Vandrevala Foundation [Helpline \(India\)](#) at 1860 2662 345 or 1800 2333 330

In other countries: Find [child and teen helplines near you](#)

Suicide prevention help

In the U.S.: Call [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at 1-800-273-8255

UK and Ireland: Call [Samaritans UK](#) at 116 123

Australia: Call [Lifeline Australia](#) at 13 11 14

Other countries: Visit [IASP](#) or [International Suicide Hotlines](#) to find a helpline near you

Authors: Melinda Smith, M.A., Lawrence Robinson, and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D. Last updated: June 2019.