



## Adolescent Moods: Is My Teenager Depressed?

RECENTLY AN ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED in *Pediatrics*, a leading pediatric journal, about the prevalence of teenage depression and the importance of screening for this mental health disorder. Researchers indicate that approximately four to eight percent of teenagers are depressed in any given year and, by the end of high school, approximately 20 percent of all teens have experienced a depressive episode. Unfortunately only 20 percent of teenagers receive the help they need. As a result, many depressed teenagers are going through their lives undiagnosed and untreated.

Common symptoms of depression include persistent sadness, irritability, social withdrawal and loss of interest in activities the teen once enjoyed. Unfortunately some cases of adolescent depression may be trickier to spot because persistent sadness may not be the main symptom. Instead irritability, nonspecific physical pain, aggression or rage are sometimes more prominent. Yet untreated depression can have significant long-term effects on a teen. It can produce problems at school, substance abuse as a way to

medicate oneself and suicide. Suicide is the third leading cause of death for 15-25-year-olds.

As a result, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recently recommended that if follow-up services and counseling are available, adolescents aged 12-18 should be screened for major depression by their primary care physicians. Simple questionnaires can accurately diagnose major depression in this age group. The task force, however, emphasizes the need for treatment because ample evidence suggests it can decrease symptoms of depression. These treatments may or may not include medication.

Because most teenagers are not going to drive themselves to their local physician, parents play an important role in identifying the problem and providing help for their teens. For a variety of reasons, it can be difficult for a parent to recognize a teenager's depressive symptoms. Occasional bad moods and acting-out are quite normal in this age group. But these moods and behaviors should be outweighed by good friendships, a strong sense of self, success in school or outside activities, or

enjoyment of hobbies and pastimes. Depression alters a teen's personality and usual behavior. Parents of depressed teens report that occasional bad moods transform themselves into chronic moodiness and irritability.

If parents are unsure if their teenager is depressed, they should consider how long the symptoms have been present and how severe they have been. Parents should also talk to their teen in a non-judgmental manner that emphasizes listening over lecturing. If still unsure, parents should seek professional help. There is little to lose, as the USPSTF did not find any harm arising from screening for depression. In contrast, given the significant long-term consequences of untreated depression, teenagers have a great deal to gain from taking action now.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Aranda is a licensed psychologist (#PY5983) who specializes in psychological assessments and child and adolescent therapy. More information about her can be found at [www.helpingtampafamilies.com](http://www.helpingtampafamilies.com).

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