

Teen Depression and Suicide

Adolescence is a period of major social, hormonal and emotional change. It is common for teens to be concerned with self-image and become sensitive to the slightest criticism. Some act out rebelliously against authority, including parents and teachers. Others experiment with risky behaviors, such as using illegal drugs and having unprotected sex.

With all of these changes going on amid the increasing pressures of family, friends, school and a future career, it is little wonder that some adolescents become seriously depressed and even suicidal.

Depression

According to statistics gathered by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), approximately 11.4 percent of individuals between the ages of 12 and 17 experienced at least one major depressive episode over the last year. If you believe that your teen may be depressed, it is important for you to notice any behaviors that may indicate so. Warning signs include:

- A radical and otherwise unexplained personality change
- Consistently sleeping more than usual or sleeping very little
- Repeated attempts to run away
- Frequent and lengthy bouts of anger or violent behavior
- Chronic boredom
- Ongoing inability to concentrate, pay attention or think clearly
- Loss of interest in activities formerly enjoyed, such as sports or hobbies
- Self-punishing behaviors, such as bingeing on food, starving, self-mutilation, etc.
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Abusing drugs or alcohol
- Selecting new friends who seem to have a negative influence on him or her
- Major fluctuation in performance at school

Fortunately, depression is a very treatable mental disorder. Experts have found that the combination of counseling and medication has a good track record of controlling depression in teens. Arrange for a psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker to evaluate your teen. Your child's primary-care physician can be helpful for prescribing medication or providing a referral.

Suicide

Each year, almost 5,000 young people kill themselves. Left untreated, a clinically depressed adolescent is much more susceptible to attempting suicide. The rate of suicide for this age group has nearly tripled since 1960, making it the third leading cause of death for people aged 15 to 24 years old. Because some accidents like car crashes actually may be suicides, it is difficult to know the real extent of the problem.

Studies show that suicide attempts by teens are the result of long-standing problems. Triggered by a specific event or trauma, a depressed teen may view the situation in an exaggerated way, believing it will last forever. For example, a teen may attempt to harm themselves after being arrested for drunk driving or after failing an examination to avoid facing their parents' disappointment. Built-up anger, resentment or fear that they have let people down can drive a teen to self-harm.

Talking with Your Teen

Some parents feel that by discussing the topic of suicide, they are putting thoughts into their teen's head. Chances are, if you suspect your teen has been considering suicide, they have already given it plenty of consideration. By discussing the subject in a frank and open manner, you are sending a clear message to your teen that you care about what they think and feel. Be sure to have a two-way discussion, not a lecture. Do more listening than talking.

"Inoculate" your teen against acting out when they fear they have disappointed or let friends or family down. Let your teen know that although you expect them to obey limits, keep their grades up, not abuse drugs and not get arrested, the consequence for these actions should not be self-harm. Emphasize that if you are disappointed in something your teen has done, making mistakes is part of growing up, and you will still love them unconditionally.

Some parents dismiss talk of suicide as an idle threat or a ploy for attention. Even if a teenager were to attempt suicide merely for attention, there is a great risk that they may accidentally go too far and inadvertently kill themselves. If the first time does not bring the desired attention, the next is likely to be more lethal.

There is a common myth that the more someone talks about committing suicide, the less likely they are to act on it. In fact, people who act on suicidal tendencies often drop subtle hints or openly discuss their plans with their peers or family. They may become preoccupied with music or peer groups that seem obsessed with death. Although this may just be a passing phase, do not be afraid to ask your teen what the lyrics, dress or behaviors means to him. Treat the subject of suicide very seriously, and help your teen find the treatment they need to address their mental health.

Warning Signs

The following is a list of warning signs that may indicate your teenager is at risk for suicide:

- Behaving in a depressed manner
- Having a peer who has killed themselves. It is rare but not unheard of for one teen to make a pact promising to commit suicide if another does.
- Threatening or talking about killing oneself or others. Experts see a link between some teen violence and suicide.
- Expressing no hope for the future
- Being bullied by an individual or group of peers. Experts are just beginning to understand the emotional damage bullying can cause teens and children.
- Talking or behaving like no one cares or that life is hopeless
- Making final preparations, such as giving away possessions, saying goodbyes, etc.
- Abusing drugs or alcohol
- Neglecting school performance
- Being preoccupied with songs, movies or video games with violent or suicidal content
- Being accused of or outed for being gay. Because of the difficulties gay teens face, they can be at particularly high risk.

How to Help

Be sure to take action immediately if you suspect your teen is considering suicide.

Because of the impulsive nature of many teen suicides, firearms are a serious threat. If you own any firearms, remove them from the house or lock them up securely. Keep the keys and ammunition in a separate, equally well-hidden space.

Remember that teens can be very resourceful in finding hiding places. Prescription medications, over-the-counter pills and anything else harmful if ingested in mass quantities also should be inaccessible to a suicidal teenager.

It is very important for parents to not treat suicide as if it is a phase that their child is going through. If you observe these behaviors in your son or daughter, do not ignore them or wait for the behaviors to change. Set up an appointment with a therapist or doctor. A teenager in immediate danger or experiencing a crisis situation should be immediately taken to the emergency room at the nearest hospital. In a life-threatening emergency, call the police.

By recognizing the warning signs, not being afraid to discuss the subject and taking action when necessary, you can help your teen navigate these often difficult and emotional years.

Resources

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: www.afsp.org
- National Alliance on Mental Illness: www.nami.org
- The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): www.nimh.nih.gov
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: www.afsp.org
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC): www.sprc.org