

TEENS AND MAJOR DEPRESSION

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What is depression?

Major depression is not just an adult disease. It also affects 1% of the preadolescent population (ages 12-15 years) and 7% of teens before the end of adolescence (ages 15-18 years). Numbers like these should prompt us to learn more about depression so that we can recognize the symptoms quickly in teens.

Major depression is considered to be a disease, but it is not really like other diseases, because it alters a person's judgment. However, like other diseases, it must be explained, demystified, and treated quickly. The teenager and his family must understand the issues involved in both the illness and the treatment. There is no reason for needless suffering or isolation.

Feeling down vs. depression

Feeling down is different from depression. Feeling down is a normal response to the psychological and social pressures that we all face in our lives at one time or another. It is a temporary situation that doesn't stop a person from experiencing pleasure from certain activities or at certain times, despite being down in the dumps. A teenager can feel down over grades, conflicts with family and friends, everyday problems, etc.

The disease that is known as depression, or major depression, is characterized by serious problems affecting normal functioning and a marked lack of interest in normal activities.

Teens may withdraw, or just the opposite, they may not be able to be alone. They may have trouble concentrating, be afraid of everything, or become irritable and aggressive. Some behaviour problems (e.g.: drug addiction, running away, etc.) may actually be depressive equivalents, and therefore, a depressive episode must be ruled out before a condition can be called a conduct disorder.

Warning signs

Factors that can contribute to an increased likelihood of a teenager developing depression:

- Having a family member who suffers from mental illness;
- Having been the victim of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse;
- Losing a parent as a young child, either through death, divorce, or abandonment;
- Having a chronic illness;
- Having a family member who has committed suicide.

The diagnosis of depression is not based on a single symptom, but on a variable set of symptoms that change over time within a given context. A teenager who suffers from depression can present with some of the symptoms associated with major depression.

Symptoms

Symptoms that appear during depression:

- Sustained difficulties in relationships with family and friends;
- Abnormal irritability and apathy toward everyday things;
- Poor personal hygiene and not keeping his room tidy;
- Delinquent behaviour: such as like skipping school, violent behaviour (verbal and physical), and alcohol and drug abuse;
- Appetite changes;
- Attention and concentration problems;
- Sleep problems: insomnia or hypersomnia (sleeping all the time);
- Mood changes: sadness, irritability, and aggressiveness;
- Suicidal behaviour or pervasive suicidal thoughts – wanting to die in order to end the suffering.

Treatment

The treatment for depression in teens usually includes both a pharmacological and a psychological component.

1. Pharmacological treatment

The doctor will prescribe one or more medications that act on neurotransmitters (anti-

depressants or other medications). Neurotransmitters are the chemicals that are used by neurons to communicate and carry out brain functions. This communication is altered during depression. The purpose of the medications is to properly restore this communication. You should know that these medications don't start to work right away. Sometimes you have to wait a few weeks for them to reach their full effect. When effective, they help the teenager to gradually get his life back in balance in the following areas:

- Sleep;
- Appetite;
- Normal energy level;
- Normal concentration level (this sometimes takes longer);
- Enjoying activities again;
- Realistic plans;
- Interest in pursuing studies, etc.

2. Psychological treatment

Cognitive therapies aimed at correcting the misconceptions and false perceptions surrounding depression are effective, and they complement the pharmacological treatment. Other types of therapy (group therapy, analytically-oriented therapy, etc.) may also be indicated in certain cases.

It is important to consider a healthier lifestyle for any teenager who suffers from depression, particularly in terms of schedule, diet, sleep, exercise, and not taking drugs (especially marijuana).

Where to go for help

Roles of the various people involved in helping a teenager who suffers from depression

Parents are often the first ones to notice a problem with their child's functioning. Although the parent-child bond can sometimes influence their perceptions, they are still in the best position to observe what is happening. Therefore, it is important for them to express their fears or doubts to a qualified person. Parents are always essential in the process of evaluation and care.

The family doctor is often the first person to be consulted for the various physical symptoms that go along with depression (fatigue, pain, etc.). He will carry out a medical workup in order to rule out any physical ailment that may explain the symptoms (thyroid problem, infection, anaemia, etc.), and will pursue the evaluation with the teenager and his parents. He can then request a consultation with a psychiatrist, or begin treatment after a reasonable amount of time.

A psychiatrist is a doctor who specializes in mental disorders, and is the best person to coordinate all aspects of the treatment.

School practitioners (nurse, psychologist, social worker) are often the first to be consulted by the teenager. They play a crucial role in welcoming, supporting, and caring for the teenager in distress. They will steer him to the appropriate specialists.

The teenager can also meet with and confide in a **trusted teacher**, who can advise and support him in getting help from a doctor or an organization.

The CSSS youth mental health teams are specialists in the problems that teens face. Don't hesitate to contact them.

Organizations like Revivre, Kids Help Phone and Tel-Jeunes provide information and support for clients and their families. They

are available anytime for information concerning resources, referrals, help, and support at various levels.

Siblings and friends can help!

A teenager who is not feeling well will often confide in a friend, sister, brother, etc. who can help him through the bad time, and who will not allow him to be alone or isolated. They can put him in touch with an adult who can take the necessary steps.

If you recognize the signs and symptoms of depression in your teenager, consult a general practitioner or a child psychologist. Recognizing the illness and having it treated quickly by qualified professionals is the best thing you can do.

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