



Depression in Teenagers ***by Brenda Rabalais PhD, Counselor***

Differentially diagnosing depression from sadness due to a loss can be especially challenging in teenagers. They are already going through many developmental, social, mental and emotional changes, some teens handling them well and some not so well. Developmentally, teens are learning to individuate, separate from their parents, and make more of their own choices without parental supervision. Socially, their friends become more influential in their lives and often are more important than family, they are having to cope with peer pressure concerning use of drugs, sex, alcohol, etc., and are trying to find their niche in the social continuum. Mentally, they are being challenged to do more critical thinking, make decisions that may affect the rest of their lives, and many are competing academically to get into college. Emotionally (and this is the fun part), they are on a roller coaster, with their hormones raging, the acne blaring, and true love around every corner.

So how does one know if their teenager is just going through a phase or is appropriately sad, or is suicidal? In essence...what's the difference between sad and depressed? The answer is not clear cut, it is more a matter of degree. It takes a vigilant and observant parent to notice when sadness turns into depression, or to decide when they need outside help. Sadness from any kind of loss, i.e., a romantic breakup, didn't make the football team, parental divorce, can result in symptoms such as lethargy, irritability, sleeping too much or too little, isolation, an increase or decrease in eating, distractibility and physical complaints such as headaches, stomach aches, and muscle aches.

Depression manifests itself with many of the above symptoms, but depressive symptoms last longer and are greater in magnitude than sadness. For example, when one cannot get to sleep several nights in a row, or conversely, when your teen is sleeping 15 hours a day or cannot get up in the morning after 8 hours of sleep, it's time to take some action. It's OK and normal for one to want to be alone when sad, but when a teenager totally isolates him/herself from others, quits social

activities that they used to love, this may be depression. Some other symptoms to look for in a depressed teenager include: changes in friends, begins to engage in high-risk behaviors, threatens suicide, unexplained fears, apathetic toward once-loved activities, hurting themselves, extreme irritability, uncontrolled angry outbursts, a sudden change in school performance, and alcohol and substance abuse.

So parents, get your magnifying glasses out when it comes to figuring out when your teenager needs help. Developmentally, they are supposed to be pushing you away (or in psycho-babble, individuating), but don't be deceived by their adult-looking bodies and their astute ability to argue a point. They still need your tender care and devoted attention—just not too much. So walk that tightrope of monitoring them closely while allowing them their space, with as much grace and stamina as you can muster. It's how you keep your teenager as safe as you can while allowing them to grow. ■

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