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In this white paper, we discuss the prevalence of depression among adolescents and common signs and symptoms of depression. We differentiate depression from other disorders and discuss healthy strategies and unique intervention options that parents can implement to help their teen overcome depression. Lastly, we discuss wilderness therapy as a safe, effective and comprehensive treatment option for teens with depression.

This white paper is written for parents, guardians, or for anyone who is responsible for a teen with depression.

Depression in Teens:
Help Your Teen Find Their Way to Hope, Happiness, and Well-Being

Let’s face it, the teenage years are notoriously difficult years for parents and children alike. Hormones are raging, boundaries are being tested, and adolescents are making their first steps into adult privileges and responsibilities. While some parent-child conflict is normal during the teenage years, there comes a point where anger turns from a valid emotional response into a level of turmoil that should be addressed promptly.

Anger is part of our emotional spectrum, and is a normal, healthy emotional response to outside stressors. In fact, anger helps us to “deal” with threats when we feel crossed or challenged. It is when we let our emotions effect our actions that anger can become harmful in teens. In fact, according to Harvard Medical School, nearly two-thirds of U.S. adolescents have experienced an “anger attack” involving threatening violence, engaging in violence, or destroying property at some point in their lives. Even more alarming is the fact that nearly eight percent of these adolescents have “regular outbursts” like these.

1. Normal Teenage Emotions vs. Problematic Anger, Outbursts, and Defiance
2. Signs Your Teen’s Anger Is Out of Control
3. Ways to Help Your Teen Control Their Anger
4. The Importance of Early Intervention
5. Effective Treatment Options
6. What is Wilderness Therapy and How Does It Help Teens with Anger?
7. How to Support Your Teen Through Treatment
Depression Defined:
11 Signs Your Teen is Depressed

Depression is defined as a mood disorder causing a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, the signs and symptoms of depression include:

1. Persistent sad, anxious, or “empty” feelings
2. Feelings of hopelessness or pessimism
3. Feelings of guilt, worthlessness or helplessness
4. Irritability and restlessness
5. Loss of interest in activities or hobbies once pleasurable
6. Fatigue and decreased energy
7. Difficulty concentrating, remembering details, and making decisions
8. Insomnia, early-morning wakefulness, or excessive sleeping
9. Change in appetite
10. Thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts
11. Aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems

These signs of depression could manifest themselves in a variety of ways. Perhaps your teen has a decrease in their appetite or a lack of interest in spending time with friends. It’s also common for teens with depression to feel a great deal of shame and as a result, they may display a lowered level of commitment or energy towards academics. Another example of depression in teens is self-medication, a lack of motivation, and difficulty feeling hope for future.

Types of Depression in Teens and Related Disorders

If one or more of these signs of depression are present in your teen’s life, it’s likely he or she is depressed. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders identifies two specific types of depression: Major Depression and Persistent Depression. A Major Depressive episode is defined by lasting at least two weeks whereas Persistent Depression must last a year or more. Major Depression is more severe in its moment to moment symptoms and Persistent Depression is more severe in duration. These two types of depression diagnosis can be difficult to differentiate and are also tied to other disorders such as anxiety.
Related Disorders: Anxiety vs. Depression

Anxiety and depression often coexist in teens. Anxiety can lead to depression and likewise, depression can lead to anxiety. As a result, these two related disorders are often confused and misunderstood. While anxiety is marked by fear and worry; depression is marked by sadness and lack of motivation.

For example, a person with anxiety that liked to play sports could still have a desire to engage in sports, but is nervous about actually playing. Their lack of engagement could be caused by an overwhelming anxiety over past or future performances. A person with depression however, may simply have no motivation or interest in the sport even if historically, the individual has enjoyed the sport.

According to Dr. David Burns: “Anxiety results from the perception of danger. You can’t feel anxious unless you tell yourself that something terrible is about to happen.” He goes on to say that, “when you’re depressed, you feel like the tragedy has already happened.”

Related Disorders: Anxiety vs. Oppositional Behavior

Individuals with depression might appear cynical and could display oppositional traits. In trying to differentiate between oppositional behavior and depression, it’s helpful to know some basic signs or symptoms of depression such as an increase or decrease in appetite or a change in sleeping habits. A teen who is simply being oppositional will not exhibit these symptoms. An individual that struggles with oppositional defiance is more likely to argue with an authority figure because they enjoy the stimulation of trying to irritate another person.

Depressive individuals, on the other hand, are generally not interested in irritating others unless they have depression and opposition co-occurring. For example, teenage boys who view depression as weakness may use oppositional behavior as a mask that hides the depression.

Related Disorders: Depression vs. Self-Harm

Suicide threats and self-harm are often related to depression however some teens will use this as leverage in an oppositional struggle. It can be extremely difficult to differentiate true suicidal depression from a teen who is trying to manipulate his or her parent’s emotions. The average parent will likely be bias and ill-equipped to make this call. For this reason, in any situation where your child is threatening bodily harm or suicide, it is absolutely essential that you seek professional help.
Common Mistakes Parents Make When Responding to Their Depressed Teen

It can be very difficult for a parent of a depressed teen to know how to best respond and help their teen. Typically the way parents respond to their teen is based on their parenting style. If you imagine parenting on a spectrum with one side being a nurturing-based parenting style (rescuing parents) and the other side an authority-based parenting (authoritarian parent) then the pitfalls you are likely to encounter will generally fall into your corresponding parenting style.

The Rescuing Parent of a Depressed Teen
On the nurturing side, you have the “rescuing parent”. This parent can feel the pain of the depression as the child feels it. This parent will do what they can to alleviate the depression and any problems that come along with it. An example of this is one rescuing parent who allowed her teen to not attend school because she felt the pain of depression and attending school was too much for that teen. In addition, this mother completed the homework for their teen so the teen would not get behind on their school work. Although this parent is clearly acting out of love for their child, in removing the obstacle for their teen, they also teach the individual that someone else will solve the problem for them. It takes the responsibility away from the individual and puts it on the parent. As a result, this parent is unintentionally sending the message the teen is incapable or too fragile to handle the challenge. This can be problematic because your teen needs to know that they are capable and resilient. Simply getting the teen out of bed and doing something, even if it is difficult, will certainly be better for the individual than remaining unengaged and lethargic.

The Authoritarian Parent of a Depressed Teen
On the other end of the spectrum is the “authoritative parent.” An example of this is when hearing that the child is sad, this parent tells the child to “cowboy up.” This parenting style believes that as an authority figure, they can simply tell their child to stop moping around and expect obedience. One such parent became so frustrated that he yelled at his child for not attending school and in turn, verbally dismissed the reality of the teen’s depression. This type of parent is not emotionally attentive to the child and expects the child to muscle through the challenge. It’s important for authoritative parents to remember that ignoring your child’s depression will not make it go away.

The Ideal Parent for a Depressed Teen
The ideal place on the parenting spectrum is a healthy balance between nurturing and authority. Your teen needs to know that you love him, that you hear him and that you can appreciate the difficult time he is going through. However, your teen also needs to feel the healthy boundaries and a continuation of “rules” and the expectation to fulfill responsibilities with support.
6 Healthy Ways Parents Can Help and Support Their Depressed Teen

There are six main ways parents can help their teen with depression. In the sections below we will discuss six strategies that can help depressed teens. Medication can also be a helpful treatment tool, but that decision should be made by you and your doctor. Please consult with a psychiatrist for a professional evaluation to see if medication is right for your teen.

1. Cognitive Therapy, Thinking Errors, and the Power of Positive Thought
2. Behavior and the Power of Doing
3. Fostering Accomplishment
4. Support Your Teen in Engaging in Positive Activities
5. Help your Teen Develop Positive Relationships
6. Create Meaning in Your Teen’s Life

Cognitive Therapy, Thinking Errors, and the Power of Positive Thought

One of the most basic premises of psychology is, “If you can change the way you think then you can change the way you feel.” This way of thinking is termed “Cognitive Therapy.” Cognitive Therapy often looks at what are termed cognitive distortion or thinking errors that are destructive to the individual.

Dr. Burns, author of New Mood Therapy, provides 10 cognitive distortions or thinking errors:

1. All or nothing thinking
2. Overgeneralization
3. Mental filter
4. Disqualifying the positive
5. Jumping to conclusions
6. Magnification and minimization
7. Emotional reasoning
8. Should statements
9. Labeling and mislabeling
10. Personalization

These thinking errors can be related to your teen as a way to observe the self-talk that your adolescent uses. Do you hear your teen say things like, “I’m stupid” or “nobody likes me?” As long as you’re adolescent thinks this way then certain behaviors and emotions will follow. It is difficult to be happy or friendly if you believe you are stupid or that nobody likes you. Likewise, if your depressed teen believes, “It does not matter what I do; I will not be successful” then it is likely he or she will put in little effort to be successful.

Once you have identified your teen’s negative self-talk then you can help the adolescent find the distortion or error to the belief. Help your depressed teen discover a new way to think that would be more helpful. Such an approach is often referred to as positive psychology.
Positive Psychology and Depression in Teens

Positive psychology does not focus on talking about depression. Positive psychology instead focuses on cultivating well-being through accomplishment, engagement, positive relationships, positive emotions, and meaningful work and play. Instead of sitting around and talking about depression, positive psychology provides opportunities for the teen to engage in healthy activities and relationships that promote feelings of well-being.

If one of the biggest attributes to depression is focusing on the negative and discounting the positive, then positive psychology cuts to the very core of depression.

Behavior and the Power of Doing

A common problem related to depression is procrastination. This is also known as Anhedonia, which is defined by a lack of interest in pleasurable activities. A depressed person often will perceive a task to be more painful or challenging than it really is and also display a lack of interest in pleasurable activities.

A way to counteract this phenomenon and a great coping skill for teen depression, is to simply do. A downward spiral for depression can occur when a teen feels a lack of motivation to do what needs to be done. Once he or she puts something off, they will likely feel overwhelmed with the thought of catching up. Next comes shame of incompetency, feelings of inadequacy, and then comes the quitting of the task. Again, one of the best things you can do for depression is to simply do.

Exercise Can Help Depressed Teens

In addition to simply taking action, research has also shown that cardiovascular exercise three times a week for 20 minutes can be as effective as medication or therapy (Blumenthal, Babyak, and Moore.) One study found that after 10 months, individuals who exercised reported significantly lower levels of depression than those that took medication. Lastly, exercise helps to release positive endorphins which create feelings of positive well-being. It can also be a form of a social release for teens with depression when they exercise with friends.

Fostering Accomplishment

For many teens struggling with depression, they constantly feel hopelessness and an overwhelming feeling of I can’t do this." In contrast, accomplishment fosters feelings of I can. When an individual overcomes a seemingly overwhelming task, this increases the belief that one can do hard things.

Parents can support their teen in fostering a feeling of accomplishment by encouraging them to engage in positive and supportive learning environments. Provide opportunities for your teen with depression to find achievement through sports, dance, debate, art, robotics, sailing, rock climbing, or science clubs. In doing so, your teen’s engagement at clubs at school can satisfy their need for accomplishment, positive relationships, and engagement which will likely bring about positive emotions.
Support Your Teen with Engagement in Positive Activities
Related to helping your teen find accomplishment is the principle of engagement. Engagement is related to doing something that you like simply because you enjoy it. Engagement also brings in a "State of Flow" which incorporates the concept of having a challenge that matches the skill level of the individual. (Csikszentmihalyi). You can tell you have reached this state when you lose track of time and space because you are so engaged in the activity. This creates a state of happiness that helps one forget the immediate feelings of helplessness and sadness.

You can help your teen develop engagement by encouraging him or her to engage in an activity they will excel at and enjoy. If your teen with depression does not have an activity that he or she likes, help him or her find something they are inclined to enjoy so they can develop a sense of engagement.

Help your Depressed Teen Develop Positive Relationships
Isolation is a sure sign of depression and can compound the situation. Encourage your teen to develop positive relationships. If he or she does not have friends, find a way to help him or her physically meet other people. Meeting people online or having computers be the only source of friendship is a weak level of interaction that does not allow for face-to-face contact or the non-verbal communication of relationships. Brene Brown, a psychologist and shame researcher, said, "I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship." As a parent or caretaker of a depressed teen, it is critical that you are one of the positive relationships in your teen's life.

Create Meaning in Your Depressed Teen's Life
The final way parents can help their depressed teen is by helping their teen develop meaning in their life. American psychologist, educator, and author Martin Seligman relates meaning to being connected to something greater than ourselves. This can range from being a part of a sports team, a religion, or even an advocate to some sort awareness. Therapist Brene Brown echoes this sentiment when she said, "Connection is why we're here; it is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives."

How can you foster meaning in your adolescent? As mentioned earlier, doing an act of service for others is one of the deeper levels of connection. Feeling heard and hearing others also creates the invisible cords that bind us together. Connection involves understanding our deeper emotions and thoughts and allowing others into our inner world. There are some psychologists that argue that depression and inner turmoil stems solely from the lack of connection to others in our lives.
Wilderness Therapy as Treatment for a Depressed Teen

Sometimes there is only so much a parent can do. If you have exhausted the above options and your teen still continues to struggle with depression, wilderness therapy may be the best treatment option moving forward. Wilderness therapy has steadily gained popularity over the years as a clinically proven and safe treatment method for teens struggling with depression through providing a comprehensive approach, by fostering independence in a controlled and supportive environment, and by creating a sense of community and connection for it’s participants.

**Wilderness Therapy: A Comprehensive Approach**

Wilderness therapy provides a successful intervention for teens with depression because it combines the above strategies of cognitive therapy, positive thought, and the power of doing in a multi-disciplinary approach. Wilderness therapy for teens provides them with regular opportunities to participate and engage in activities that foster accomplishment, form positive relationships, and create a sense of meaning in their life.

**Wilderness Therapy: Fosters Independence in a Controlled and Supportive Environment**

A core concept of wilderness therapy and why it is so successful is because it actively engages the student in “doing”. Wilderness therapy creates a situation where each person is responsible for their own personal, physical, and emotional welfare in a controlled and supported environment. Teens with depression who attend a credible wilderness therapy program are supported by an empathetic staff who are trained to strike a positive balance between nurturing and authority in a highly effective way.

**Wilderness Therapy: Creates a Sense of Community and Involvement for Depressed Teens**

There is a sense of community and group cooperation that comes from a credible wilderness adventure program. The participation of every student is required to complete basic tasks such as making dinner over a fire or building a group shelter. Such tasks establish a common goal and require an active participation in work. This allows for depressed teens who arrive at the wilderness program to start experiencing positive emotions, connection, and a sense of accomplishment that they have been missing for a while.

**Conclusion**

Depression can take a toll on both the individual and their parents. It is important for parents of depressed teens do to their best to understand their teen’s perspective and provide them with love and support they need. If parents of a depressed teen feel overwhelmed or if they have not seen their teen make healthy progress after a consistent effort, wilderness therapy may be the best treatment option. Depression does not have to be a life-long sentence; a credible wilderness therapy program can help your teen find happiness and health once again.
Resources


Brown, Brené Ph.D., LMSW. Daring Greatly.

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https://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly_csikszentmihalyi_on_flow?language=en#t-886008


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This white paper was sponsored by Outback Therapeutic Expeditions. Outback offers nomadic wilderness therapy in a safe, controlled setting for adolescents dealing with a range of behavioral, emotional, and psychological issues.

ABOUT OUTBACK THERAPEUTIC EXPEDITIONS

Outback Therapeutic Expeditions offers a unique therapeutic experience based on a nomadic and primitive skills model. The soothing rhythms of life in the wilderness provide a catalyst for authentic and lasting change. Each child is matched with a licensed therapist and receives a comprehensive individual treatment plan. Clinical studies confirm that our methods create long-lasting change and emotional healing.

Living in small groups away from the distractions and influences of the outside world, students are able to focus on themselves and the choices that brought them here. The insights and skills that they develop are carried with them when they return to the outside world.

Our Roots and Wings program carves an integral role for each teen’s family as they work through the misunderstandings and pain that brought them to this point. Our three-day Family Expedition allows parents and siblings to join the student in the wilderness for powerful, intensive family therapy. At Outback, we believe that the family is vital to the healing process and plays an important role in bringing about positive change for each child.