



## Teenager's Guide to Depression

Tips and Tools for Helping Yourself or a Friend



The teenage years can be tough, and it's perfectly normal to feel sad or irritable every now and then. But if these feelings don't go away or become so intense that you can't handle them, you may be suffering from depression. The good news is that you don't have to feel this way. Help is available—and you have more power over your mood than you think. There are many things you can do to change the way you feel and start feeling better today.

### What is teen depression?

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Teen depression is much more than feeling temporarily sad or down in the dumps. It's a serious and debilitating mood disorder that can change the way you think, feel, and function in your daily life. When you're depressed, you may feel hopeless and helpless and it can seem like no one understands. But depression is far more common in teens than you may think. You are not alone and your depression is not a hopeless case. Even though it can feel like depression will never lift, there are plenty of things you can do to help yourself start to regain your balance and feel more positive, energetic, and hopeful again.

## Signs and symptoms of teen depression

It can be hard to put into words exactly how depression feels—and not all teens experience depression the same way. There are, however, some [common problems and symptoms](/articles/depression/depression-symptoms-and-warning-signs.htm) that you may experience if you're depressed:

- ▶ You constantly feel irritable, sad, or angry.
- ▶ Nothing seems fun anymore, and you just don't see the point of trying.
- ▶ You feel bad about yourself—worthless, guilty, or just "wrong" in some way.
- ▶ You sleep too much or not enough.
- ▶ You have frequent, unexplained headaches or other physical problems.
- ▶ Anything and everything makes you cry.
- ▶ You've gained or lost weight without consciously trying to.
- ▶ You just can't concentrate. Your grades may be plummeting because of it.
- ▶ You feel helpless and hopeless.
- ▶ You're thinking about death or suicide. (If this is true, talk to someone right away!)

### Is your friend depressed?

If you're a teenager with a friend who seems down or troubled, you may suspect depression. But how do you know it's not just a passing phase or a bad mood? Look for common warning signs of teen depression:

- Your friend doesn't want to do the things you guys used to love to do.
- Your friend starts using alcohol or drugs or hanging with a bad crowd.
- Your friend stops going to classes and afterschool activities.
- Your friend talks about being bad, ugly, stupid, or worthless.
- Your friend starts talking about death or suicide.

## Coping with suicidal thoughts

If your negative feelings caused by depression become so overwhelming that you can't see any solution besides harming yourself or others, you need to get help *right away*. And yet, asking for help when you're in the midst of such strong emotions can be really tough. If talking to a stranger might be easier for you, call **1-800-273-TALK** in the U.S. to speak in

confidence to someone who can understand and help you deal with your feelings. To find a suicide helpline outside the U.S., visit [IASP](http://www.iasp.info/resources/Crisis_Centres/) (http://www.iasp.info/resources/Crisis\_Centres/) or [Suicide.org](http://www.suicide.org/international-suicide-hotlines.html) (http://www.suicide.org/international-suicide-hotlines.html).

In the meantime, the following suggestions can help get you through until you feel ready to talk to someone:

**There is ALWAYS another solution, even if you can't see it right now.** Many people who have attempted suicide (and survived) say that they did it because they mistakenly felt there was no other solution to a problem they were experiencing. At the time, they could not see another way out, but in truth, they didn't really want to die. Remember that no matter how horribly you feel, these emotions will pass.

**Having thoughts of hurting yourself or others does not make you a bad person.** Depression can make you think and feel things that are out of character. No one should judge you or condemn you for these feelings if you are brave enough to talk about them.

**If your feelings are uncontrollable, tell yourself to wait 24 hours before you take any action.** This can give you time to really think things through and give yourself some distance from the strong emotions that are plaguing you. During this 24-hour period, try to talk to someone—anyone—as long as they are not another suicidal or depressed person. Call a hotline or talk to a friend. What do you have to lose?

**If you're afraid you can't control yourself, make sure you are never alone.** Even if you can't verbalize your feelings, just stay in public places, hang out with friends or family members, or go to a movie—anything to keep from being by yourself and in danger.

### Help is available

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Above all, do not do anything that could result in permanent damage or death to yourself or others. Remember, suicide is a "permanent solution to a temporary problem."

All you need to do is take that first step and reach out. See: [Are You Feeling Suicidal?](/articles/suicide-prevention/are-you-feeling-suicidal.htm) (/articles/suicide-prevention/are-you-feeling-suicidal.htm).

## Why am I depressed?

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Despite what you may have been told, depression is not simply caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain that can be cured with medication. Rather, depression is caused by a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors. Since the teenage years can

be a time of great turmoil and uncertainty, you're likely facing a host of pressures that could contribute to your depression symptoms. These can range from hormonal changes to problems at home or school or questions about who you are and where you fit in.

As a teen, you're more likely to suffer from depression if you have a family history of depression or have experienced early childhood trauma, such as the loss of a parent or physical or emotional abuse.

### Risk factors for teen depression

Risk factors that can trigger or exacerbate teen depression include:

1. Serious illness, chronic pain, or [physical disability](/articles/healthy-living/living-well-with-a-disability.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/living-well-with-a-disability.htm)
2. Having other mental health conditions, such as anxiety, an [eating disorder](/home-pages/eating-disorders.htm) (/home-pages/eating-disorders.htm), [learning disorder](/articles/autism-learning-disabilities/learning-disabilities-and-disorders.htm) (/articles/autism-learning-disabilities/learning-disabilities-and-disorders.htm), or ADHD
3. [Alcohol](/harvard/the-dangers-of-teenage-drinking.htm) (/harvard/the-dangers-of-teenage-drinking.htm) or drug abuse
4. Academic or family problems
5. Bullying
6. Trauma from violence or abuse
7. Recent stressful life experiences, such as [parental divorce](/articles/parenting-family/children-and-divorce.htm) (/articles/parenting-family/children-and-divorce.htm) or the death of a loved one
8. Coping with your sexual identity in an unsupportive environment
9. Loneliness and lack of social support

### If you're being bullied...

The stress of bullying-whether it's online, at school, or elsewhere-is tough to live with. It can make you feel helpless, hopeless, and ashamed: the perfect recipe for depression.



(/articles/abuse/bullying-and-cyberbullying.htm)

[Bullying and Cyberbullying: \(/articles/abuse/bullying-and-cyberbullying.htm\)](/articles/abuse/bullying-and-cyberbullying.htm) How to Deal with a Bully and Overcome Bullying

If you're being bullied, know that it's not your fault. Bullying is abuse. Period. And you don't have to put up with it. You deserve to feel safe, but you'll most likely need help. Don't try to tackle bullying on your own. Talk to your parents about what's happening or turn to another adult you trust. It could be a teacher, counselor, pastor, coach, or the parent of a friend.

### [Is your social media or smartphone use fueling your depression?](#)

While it may seem that [losing yourself online \(/articles/addictions/smartphone-addiction.htm\)](/articles/addictions/smartphone-addiction.htm) will temporarily make depression evaporate into thin air, it can actually make you feel even worse. A 2014 study found a correlation between high social media usage and depression and anxiety. Teens tend to compare themselves unfavorably with their peers on social media, which promotes feelings of depression and isolation.

## Overcoming teen depression tip 1: Talk to an adult you trust

Depression is not your fault, and you didn't do anything to cause it. However, you do have some control over feeling better. The first step is asking for help.

### Talking to your parents about depression

It may seem like there's no way your parents will be able to help, especially if they are always nagging you or getting angry about your behavior. The truth is, parents hate to see their kids hurting. They may feel frustrated because they don't understand what is going on with you or know how to help.

- ▶ If your parents are abusive in any way, or if they have problems of their own that makes it difficult for them to take care of you, find another adult you trust (such as a relative, teacher, counselor, or coach). This person can either help you approach your parents, or direct you toward the support you need.
- ▶ If you truly don't have anyone you can talk to, there are many hotlines, services, and support groups that can help.
- ▶ No matter what, talk to someone, especially if you are having any thoughts of harming yourself or others. Asking for help is the bravest thing you can do, and the first step on your way to feeling better.

## The importance of accepting and sharing your feelings

It can be hard to open up about how you're feeling—especially when you're feeling depressed, hopeless, ashamed, or worthless. It's important to remember that many people struggle with feelings like these at one time or another. They don't mean you're weak, fundamentally flawed, or no good. Accepting your feelings and opening up about them with someone you trust will help you feel less alone.

No matter what it feels like, people love and care about you, and if you can muster the courage to talk about your depression, it can—and will—be resolved. Some people think that talking about sad feelings will make them worse, but the opposite is almost always true. It is very helpful to share your worries with someone who will listen and care. They don't need to be able to "fix" you; they just need to be good listeners.

### If you're suffering and don't know where to turn...

**In the U.S.**, call the [TeenLine](https://teenlineonline.org/talk-now/) (<https://teenlineonline.org/talk-now/>) at **(800) 852-8336**. It's free, confidential, and available from 6:00 PM to 10:00 PM, Pacific Time, seven days a week.

**In the UK**, call the [Childline.org.uk](http://childline.org.uk) (<http://childline.org.uk>) helpline for children and teens at **0800 1111**.

**In Australia**, call the [Lifeline.org.au](https://www.lifeline.org.au/) (<https://www.lifeline.org.au/>) 24-hour helpline at **13 11 14**.

**In Canada**, call the [KidsHelpPhone.ca](http://KidsHelpPhone.ca) (<http://KidsHelpPhone.ca>) helpline at **1-800-668-6868**.

## Tip 2: Try not to isolate yourself—it makes depression worse

When you're depressed, you may not feel like seeing anybody or doing anything. Just getting out of bed in the morning can be difficult, but isolating yourself only makes depression worse. Make it a point to stay social, even if that's the last thing you want to do. As you get out into the world, you may find yourself feeling better.

**Spend time face-to-face with friends who make you feel good**—especially those who are active, upbeat, and understanding. Avoid hanging out with those who abuse drugs or alcohol, get you into trouble, or who make you feel insecure.

**Cut back on online time.** Think about how you feel after spending hours upon hours playing videos games or checking social media. Not too great, right? Spending too much time online is not good for your mental health. Even if you're interacting with friends, it's no replacement for in-person contact. So be smart about your online time. There's a time and place for it—just don't let it take over your life.

**Get involved in activities you enjoy (or used to).** Getting involved in extracurricular activities may be the last thing you feel like doing when you're depressed, but you'll feel better if you do. Choose something you've enjoyed in the past, whether it be a sport, an art, dance or music class, or an after-school club. You might not feel motivated at first, but as you start to participate again, your mood and enthusiasm will begin to lift.

**Volunteer.** Doing things for others is a powerful antidepressant and happiness booster. [Volunteering \(/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm\)](/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm) for a cause you believe in can help you feel reconnected to others and the world, and give you the satisfaction of knowing you're making a difference.

### Tip 3: Keep your body healthy

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Making healthy lifestyle choices [can do wonders for your mood \(/articles/depression/coping-with-depression.htm\)](/articles/depression/coping-with-depression.htm). Things like eating right, getting regular exercise, and getting enough sleep have been shown to make a huge difference when it comes to depression.

**Get moving!** Ever heard of a "runner's high"? You actually get a rush of endorphins from exercising, which makes you feel instantly happier. [Physical activity \(/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm\)](/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm) can be as effective as medications or therapy for depression, so get involved in sports, ride your bike, or take a dance class. Any activity helps! If you're not feeling up to much, start with a short daily walk, and build from there.

**Be smart about what you eat.** An unhealthy diet can make you feel sluggish and tired, which worsens depression symptoms. Junk food, [refined carbs, and sugary snacks \(/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-carbs.htm\)](/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-carbs.htm) are the worst culprits! They may give you a quick boost, but they'll leave you feeling worse in the long run. Make sure you're feeding your mind with plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Talk to your parents, doctor or school nurse about how to ensure your diet is adequately nutritious.

**Avoid alcohol and drugs.** You may be tempted to drink or use drugs in an effort to escape from your feelings and get a "mood boost," even if just for a short time. However, as well as causing depression in the first place, substance use will only make depression worse in the long run. Alcohol and drug use can also increase suicidal feelings. If you're



[addicted to alcohol or drugs](/home-pages/addictions.htm) (/home-pages/addictions.htm), seek help. You will need special treatment for your substance problem on top of whatever treatment you're receiving for your depression.



(/articles/depression/coping-with-depression.htm)

[Coping with Depression](/articles/depression/coping-with-depression.htm): (/articles/depression/coping-with-depression.htm)

Overcoming Depression One Step at a Time

**Aim for eight hours of sleep each night.** Feeling depressed as a teenager typically disrupts your sleep. Whether you're sleeping too little or too much, your mood will suffer. But you can get on a better sleep schedule [by adopting healthy sleep habits](/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm). (/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm)

## The link between worry and teen depression

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Stress and worry can take a big toll. Unrelenting stress, doubts, or fears can sap your emotional energy, send your anxiety levels soaring, affect your physical health, and even trigger or worsen depression. Managing the stress in your life starts with identifying the sources of that stress:

1. If exams or classes seem overwhelming, for example, talk to a teacher or school counselor.
2. If you have a health concern you feel you can't talk to your parents about—such as a pregnancy scare or drug problem—seek medical attention at a clinic or see a doctor. A health professional can help you approach your parents (if that is required) and guide you toward appropriate treatment.
3. If you're dealing with relationship, friendship, or family problems, talk to an adult you trust. Your school may have a counselor you can go to for help, or you may want to ask your parents to make an appointment for you to see a therapist.
4. If your own negative thoughts and chronic worrying are contributing to your everyday stress levels, you can [break the habit](/articles/anxiety/how-to-stop-worrying.htm) (/articles/anxiety/how-to-stop-worrying.htm) and regain control of your worrying mind.



## Tips for helping a depressed friend

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Depressed teens typically rely on their friends more than their parents or other adults in their lives, so you may find yourself in the position of being the first—or only—person that they talk to about their feelings. While this might seem like a huge responsibility, there are many things you can do to help.

**Get your friend to talk to you.** Starting a conversation about depression can be daunting, but you can say something simple: "You seem like you are really down, and not yourself. I really want to help you. Is there anything I can do?"

**Know that your friend doesn't expect you to have the answers.** Your friend probably just needs someone to listen and be supportive. By listening and responding in a non-judgmental and reassuring manner, you are helping in a major way.

**Encourage your friend to get help.** Urge your depressed friend to talk to a parent, teacher, or counselor. It might be scary for your friend to admit to an authority figure that there is a problem. Having you there might help, so offer to go along for support.

**Stick with your friend through the hard times.** Depression can make people do and say things that are hurtful or strange. But your friend is going through a very difficult time, so try not to take it personally. Once your friend gets help, he or she will go back to being the person you know and love. In the meantime, make sure you have other friends or family taking care of you. Your feelings are important and need to be respected, too.

**Speak up if your friend is suicidal.** If your friend is [joking or talking about suicide](#) (/articles/suicide-prevention/suicide-prevention.htm), giving possessions away, or saying goodbye, tell a trusted adult immediately. Your only responsibility at this point is to get your friend help, and get it fast. Even if you promised not to tell, your friend needs your help. It's better to have a friend who is temporarily angry at you than one who is no longer alive.

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