

Depression can be easily mistaken for typical teen behavior. Defiance, angst and other difficult attitudes may seem like moodiness to parents and grandparents. But what if it's more?

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, an estimated 3 million teens in the United States between the ages of 12-17 experienced at least one major depressive episode in 2015. That's 12.5 percent of the adolescent population.

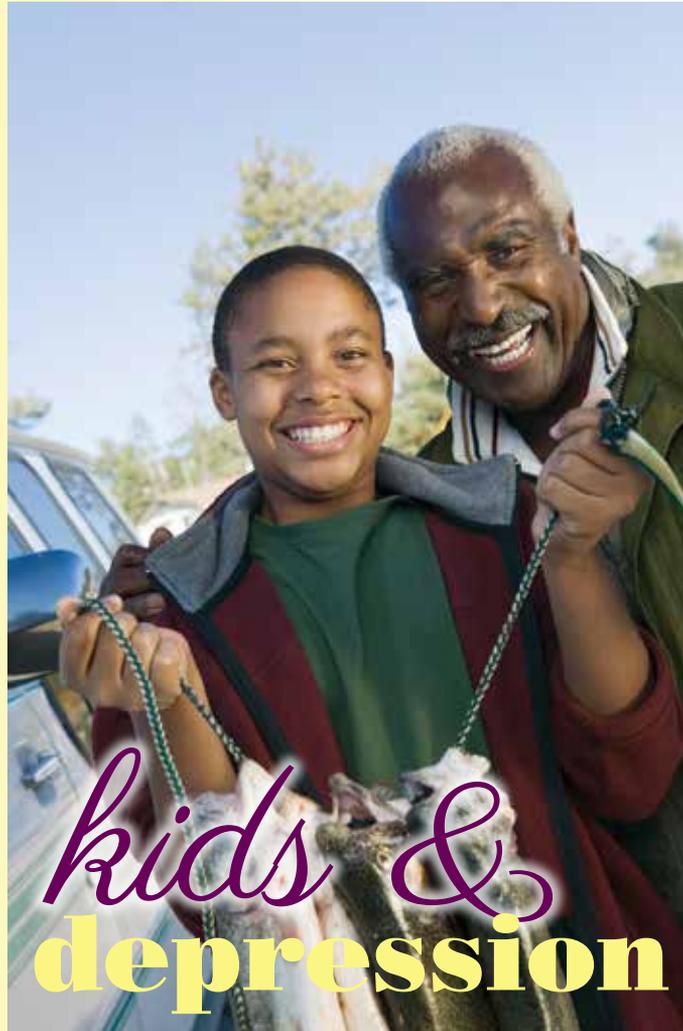
Depression takes an emotional, mental and physical toll, and your teen may not understand what's happening. He may not know how to talk to you about how he feels. If your teen is experiencing any of these behaviors, he may be depressed.

- ◆ Feelings of sadness, hopelessness, anxiety and possible indifference
- ◆ Changes in appetite (weight loss or gain)
- ◆ Fatigue or loss of energy
- ◆ Low mood or changes in mood
- ◆ Withdraws from family and friends
- ◆ Irritability, anger or hostility
- ◆ Decreased enjoyment in previously enjoyed activities
- ◆ Physical complaints, including headaches and stomach pain
- ◆ Lack of motivation
- ◆ Rebellious behavior
- ◆ Decrease in grades
- ◆ Difficulty concentrating
- ◆ Preoccupation with death or dying
- ◆ Thoughts of suicide or self-harm

According to Laura Wise Reeves, LICSW PIP, it's important to recognize that everyone's teenage

experience is different, and there are many generational differences between today's youth and his or her parents and grandparents. Reeves serves as the children's services manager at Indian Rivers Mental Health Center.

"Teens today have immediate access to information, as well as



instant connections to people and news from around the world through social media. Often, teens interact through social media, such as Facebook, SnapChat and Instagram. The internet allows people to represent or misrepresent their daily life and activities. For example, a teen's social media post (with some clever hashtag) may display her as nicely dressed with full makeup ready to go out with friends. What

it doesn't contain is it took her nearly two hours to get ready and her bedroom is in shambles behind her. She may have taken 30 different pictures with various poses to obtain the best background, smile, and overall picture.

"What she shared probably doesn't include that her parents have been

arguing in the other room or that earlier in school that week she was bullied because she did not have name-brand clothes. Her 'friends' may have decided they didn't want to come pick her up after all, so she had just started washing her face and putting up her clothes. Everyone has a story and the one picture that looks so great online leads others to believe how amazing their life must be and some may begin to compare and compete. Although some posts may result in positive comments and 'likes,' it has also been found to lead to cyber-bullying and other negative outcomes. With the constant need for technology driving youth, it seems to decrease their self-esteem, communication skills and positive interactions with others," Reeves says.

"At times, teenage years can be difficult to navigate. A teen is trying to discover who they are and who they wish to become, all while balancing the pressures of family stress, school, grades, peers, clubs, sports and more. As hormones are changing and teens are continuing to develop, you may notice symptoms. Some changes with mood, appetite, and sleep are 'normal.' As a parent or caregiver, it's important to be

aware of significant disruptions or abrupt variations in his or her regular behaviors. If symptoms last most days for a period of two weeks or longer, are displayed without an obvious justification for the reaction, or begin to impact his or her daily functioning, it may be best to seek an assessment from a primary care doctor or mental health professional.”

How do I talk to my teen about depression?

Reeves says it is never too early to begin a conversation about positive mental health. Start today by talking about general emotions with your kids and teens. Help them be able to identify feelings beyond happy, sad and angry. There are so many different emotions people may struggle to explain, including disappointment, embarrassment, frustration, anxiety and confusion.

“You don’t need to wait until you have concerns before having a discussion about mental health. We recommend talking with children of any age about emotions and healthy coping skills. It’s also important when we aren’t talking to our children to model healthy, appropriate behaviors. Be the example you wish your children to follow.”

Prior to starting this conversation, mentally prepare yourself. You will need to be patient, respectful and understanding. You will want to create a supportive, loving environment with minimal distractions. Your teen may share information you might not want to hear. Your responses will set the stage for future conversations based on your ability to listen, be supportive and not overreact.

- ◆ Begin the discussion by expressing your concern.
- ◆ Ask questions about current stressors and how your teen is feeling.

- ◆ Listen to their answers.
- ◆ Be supportive and offer help or encourage them speak to someone who might be able to help, such as a mental health provider or primary care doctor.

If you need help having this conversation, there are therapists at Indian Rivers and other agencies who can assist you.

You should seek help immediately if someone you know has expressed thoughts of suicide or self-harm. A mental health professional might be helpful if symptoms worsen or you notice impairments in the overall daily functioning of the teen.

How can I be supportive if my teen is depressed?

Listen; don’t blame. Offer choices and options for treatment. Express understanding and concern for the wellbeing of your teen and encourage appropriate help. Explain depression is not caused by the actions of the individual. It is okay to ask and accept help. While long-term treatment may be needed for some, some depressive episodes may be treated within a few months. There are a variety of treatments available, including counseling and medication therapy.

While depression is a chemical imbalance of hormones in the brain, there are factors in our environment playing a role in the way we process stress and manage our emotions.

“I would encourage everyone to monitor their time spent on social media or looking at the television, computer, or phone screen, not

just our teens – everyone. If we are constantly focused on texting, ‘liking’ and ‘sharing,’ we are not present in the world around us. We are not having real conversations with real people. We are missing the chance to connect with our family and friends. The lack of interactions with others may lead to increased feelings of isolation and loneliness,” says Reeves.

“Encourage enough sleep, around 8 hours. It is incredible the number of adolescents we see at Indian Rivers with sleep difficulty. However, once you start asking questions about their sleep routine, you may discover they are playing video games, watching TV or using social media while trying to fall asleep. Most are not able to fall asleep, while actively engaging their brain in another activity.

“Work with your teen on creating a sleep routine to assist in getting a full night’s rest,” adds Reeves. “It is recommended electronics be stopped a minimum of 30 to 60 minutes prior to bedtime.”

You should also:

- ◆ Encourage your teen to avoid drugs and alcohol.
- ◆ Role-play good responses your teen may use if offered drugs or alcohol.
- ◆ Create a secret password or code your teen can text you or say on the phone should they get in an uncomfortable situation with friends and need your help to pick them up or give them an excuse to leave.
- ◆ Promote a healthy diet and physical activity. Proper nutrition and exercise play a vital role in positive mental health. You could use these times to eat together, go on walks and interact with your teen.

For more information about Indian Rivers Mental Health Center, visit www.irmch.org. The center serves adults, adolescents and children and has offices in Tuscaloosa, Carrollton and Brent.