

Young people, feelings and depression

Young people deal with many changes as they go through puberty and the stage of development called adolescence. Changes in the brain and hormones result in changes to their body as well as how they think and feel. It is normal for them to experience lots of emotions that can change quickly.

Some young people struggle with ongoing low feelings and may even be diagnosed with depression. Parents may feel unsure about how to help but studies show that support from parents is a big factor in helping them cope. It is also important to get professional help early if needed.

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Building good mental health

Starting early to support children and young people to look after their mental health and wellbeing is really important. Good mental health habits during adolescence provide a solid foundation for positive mental health into the future.

You can help young people to:

- eat well and get plenty of sleep. Young people need at least 9 hours each night. Those who are sleep deprived don't do as well at school and are at higher risk for depression
- be active. Even small amounts of regular physical activity can help reduce stress
- find activities they enjoy e.g. a sport or hobby, and ways to express their feelings e.g. talking, writing, art, dance or performance
- develop healthy ways to relax and unwind. Help them understand that drinking or taking drugs doesn't solve problems. It might seem they help cope with stress or tough situations but over time they can affect mental health

- deal with problems as they arise rather than let things build up
- be aware of their 'self-talk'. A positive view will help them feel better about themselves
- accept their emotions and learn to notice what these feelings are telling them. Knowing how to manage feelings takes time and practice but is an important skill that will help them do well in life
- set appropriate limits and understand about risks
- find accurate information that can help them make good decisions, especially about important things like alcohol and drugs, sexuality, relationships
- have realistic goals. Achieving even small goals builds confidence and motivation.

Being warm and loving, setting appropriate limits and finding the positives in your child or young person helps them build good mental health.



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Being connected

It is also important for young people to be connected with others. Working out who they are, finding purpose and where they belong are key tasks during this period of their development. These things are worked out through engaging with others, forming and expressing their ideas and trying new things.

Encourage your young person to:

- be involved in social and family activities
- have more than one group of people to talk to e.g. family, friends, sport teams, hobby groups
- find safe adult mentors who can assist them to work out what is important, bring new experiences into their life and help them pursue their interests and passions.

Young people and difficult feelings

It is normal for young people to feel stressed, sad, worried, scared, embarrassed, frustrated or angry at times.

These feelings can be about everyday things or in response to something they are dealing with e.g. stress at school, issues with friends or a relationship break-up. However, all young people are different and will deal with feelings in different ways.

Some are fairly easy-going and don't get too stressed by events or their feelings. Others might have strong feelings and reactions and find it harder to learn to calm down and deal with things.

While most young people experience difficult feelings, they usually don't last too long. However, if they feel

low, sad, anxious or irritable much of the time, it is not a normal part of adolescence. When they feel low, young people may:

- be tearful, sad or angry
- feel worthless or guilty
- lack motivation or energy
- lack interest in things they used to enjoy
- have low concentration or make poor decisions
- stay away from family and friends
- say they feel alone
- eat more/less than usual and gain/lose weight
- have sleep problems.

It is important to help young people deal with emotional ups and downs rather than leaving them to work things out by themselves.

Talking with your teen

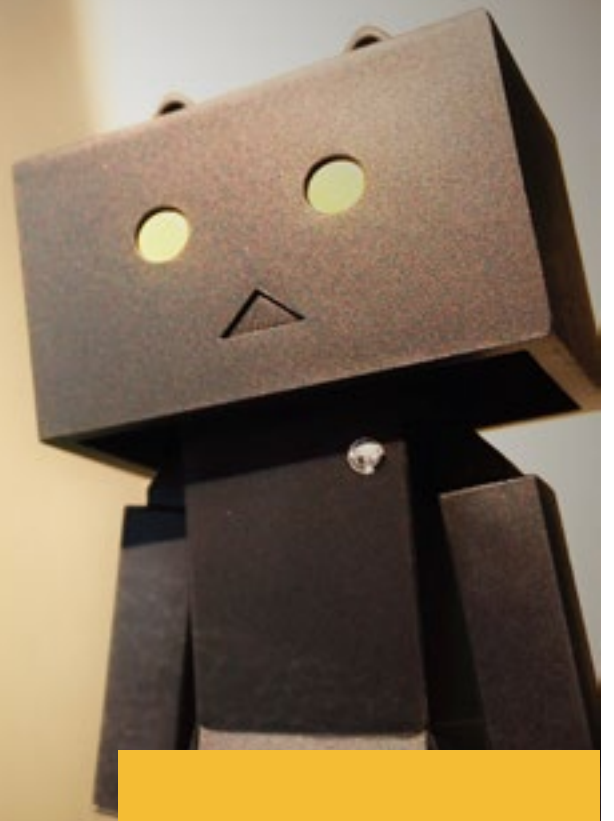
Having a trusted adult to talk to is a great way for young people to deal with their feelings and work things out. Even if they don't want to talk with you right now, let them know you love them and want to help. Be available when they are ready to talk. Remember, listening is more important than having answers.

Some young people find it hard to talk with parents about difficult things. It can help to:

- spend regular one-on-one time with them to build your relationship
- choose places or activities where you are both at ease and which make it easy to talk

- tell them you care about them and will always be there for them
- show that you've noticed how they are feeling e.g. "You seem really upset lately"
- ask open-ended questions e.g. "I wonder if there is something troubling you" or "how are things for you at the moment?" Listen to their answers and seek to understand rather than give advice or look for solutions
- acknowledge their emotions and show empathy by making comments like "I can see how that would upset you", or "that must have been hard"
- encourage them to talk with other safe adults who can support them.

Let your teen know you are there for them no matter what. Don't give up — they still need you.



Knowing when to get help

It might be time to get help if:

- talking with your teen hasn't helped and you are still worried
- their school, work, friendships or social activities are affected
- their low feelings persist.

Help your teen understand that everyone has problems at times that they can't work out alone.

Encourage them to:

- talk with their doctor, school counsellor, or to contact a youth service. Let them choose whether they want you to go with them or not. Don't be upset about their choice. It may be easier for them to talk without you there
- make contact with one of the services listed here that provide online or phone support for young people having a tough time

- download an 'app' that helps support mental health.

If your teen doesn't want to talk to you about their feelings, says nothing is wrong or won't talk with anyone else, you may have to accept it is not the right time for them to get help.

Be patient until they are ready and let them know you are always there to support them.

However, if they are at risk of harm to themselves or others, you may need to seek help even if they don't want you to.

If you are worried about your teen, talking with a health professional is a good place to start.

Depression

Some young people who feel low for periods of time may be diagnosed with depression.

People sometimes say they are 'depressed' when they feel sad or low. But depression is more than short-term sadness or a passing phase. It can be a serious condition that needs professional diagnosis and treatment. It can affect the person's thoughts, mood, behaviour and health. It leaves them feeling down for much of the time and makes it hard to cope from day-to-day.

Sometimes the causes of depression are clear, but sometimes they are not.

Depression can be caused by recent events, long-term stress or a mix of both. It is more likely if:

- someone else in the family has depression
- your teen has low self-esteem, is anxious or overly sensitive.

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Looking after yourself

Parents can feel tired, angry or upset when their teen is unhappy or depressed for long periods.

It is important to look after yourself so you are a good role model and you are best able to help them. Take time to relax and do things you enjoy. Try to exercise, eat well and get plenty of sleep. Talk with supportive family and friends. Get professional support if needed.

Be a good role model in how you take care of yourself and deal with your own emotions and challenges.



Self-harm and suicide

Most people who are unhappy or diagnosed with a mental illness do not hurt themselves (self-harm). However, some young people self-harm by scratching, burning or cutting their skin. The pain of self-harming helps the pain of their thoughts and feelings go away for a while.

Young people who harm themselves are usually trying to find ways to deal with feeling very distressed or overwhelmed. While they may not intend to kill themselves, self-harm can sometimes cause significant injury or even accidental death. If your child or young person is self-harming it is important to let them know you are worried about them and want to help. It is often necessary to seek professional help.

Some young people may also consider suicide. Mostly they don't want to die, they just want the pain of their feelings to stop. Suicidal thoughts or actions usually result from feeling hopeless about life in general rather than about a single event or just one thing in their life.

All threats of suicide or self-harm should be taken seriously.

Signs that a young person may be thinking about suicide include:

- talk or threats about killing themselves
- previous attempts
- having a plan about how they will do it, and the means to carry it out
- hints e.g. "I won't be a problem for you much longer"
- giving away their possessions or saying goodbye to loved ones.

Some people think discussing suicide with young people may put the idea into their head. But talking openly about suicide and self-harm can help them talk about their feelings and look for other ways to stop their pain. Talking also helps you find out what your teen is thinking.



This guide's content was produced by Parenting SA, Women's and Children's Health Network.

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