

Depression in Teens Who Were Adopted: What Families Need to Know

Parenting teenagers can often trigger your own memories of growing up and the roller coaster ride of emotions, drama, unpredictability, and the need to fit in. You may be realizing that being a teenager today is more complicated than ever due to the steady stream of social media in all its various forms.

Now as the parent of a teen who was adopted, your role has become even more challenging as you need to keep in mind the extra layers of teen emotions and identity issues that come with being adopted. You may be wondering what is considered typical teenage behavior and what requires more immediate attention. This tip sheet focuses on whether your teen may be going through a temporary phase, or instead, may be suffering from teen depression.

According to the American Psychological Association, approximately 20 percent of teens will go through at least one episode of teen depression by the time they graduate from high school. After age 16, girls are significantly more likely to have depression than boys.

Teen depression is wide-spread among all teenagers. However, children who have

experienced multiple losses, as many adopted children have, are more vulnerable to depression.

How is Depression Defined?

That's a good question, since depression affects teens in a wide range of levels and can happen at most any time. Depression is generally categorized under three main types: dysthymic disorder (mild depression), major depressive disorder (also called clinical or unipolar depression), and bipolar disorder (which used to be called manic depression). As a parent, recognize that depression—no matter what form—can be disruptive to a teen and your family and that there are professionals available to help you sort out treatment options.

Potential Risk Factors

Teen depression does not generally develop from one single occurrence—often

there are several risk factors. They're more evident in teens who have encountered trauma in childhood such as physical and/or sexual abuse or having an unstable or absent caregiver. Other risk factors include:

- The break-up of a romantic relationship
- Hormonal changes
- Being bullied at school
- Substance abuse



Continued on page 2

- Having a learning disorder or a family history of depression.
- Feelings of rejection and abandonment.
- Difficulty with self-identity.

Ways to Help Your Teen with Depression

[Mental Health America reports](#) that, “6 out of 10 young people who have depression and who are most at risk of suicidal thoughts, difficulty in school, and difficulty in relationships with others do not get the treatment needed to support them.” If you have concerns, talk with your son or daughter, share your concerns and identify some of the risk factors that you see and encourage him or her to talk about it.

General guidelines to consider:

Offer support and reassurance:

Communicate that you are here for them no matter what and that you love them unconditionally. Try not to ask too many questions but make it clear that you want to see them get the help they need.

Be gentle but persistent: Try not to force the issue but don't give up if your teens shut down when you try and talk with them. They will not necessarily feel comfortable admitting that they are feeling depressed and may not be willing to open up about their feelings. Offer support and encouragement.

Listen without judgment: When your child starts to open up, hold back on criticism and offering too much advice.

Validate feelings: Refrain from playing “the therapist” by trying to talk about possible reasons for their depression. Instead validate their feelings by acknowledging their sadness and pain.

As the parent of a child who was adopted, you may also want to ask yourself some

additional questions and consider how adoption might also be effecting you child's mood.

Questions to think about and help initiate conversation.

Family history: Do any birth family members have a history of depression?

Past health concerns: Has my child ever suffered from a long-term illness or disability, whether physical or mental?

Previous issues: Were there previous difficulties at home, past placements, school, or with friends?

History of abuse: Has my child ever been the victim of, or witness to, any violence or abuse?

Unresolved concerns about their adoption:

- Do they still question why they were adopted?
- Do they have questions about their birth family? Is there any missing information that they want to know about?
- Are they struggling with their identity? Are they wondering if they are more like their birth family or their adoptive family?
- Are they struggling with loyalty? Are they conflicted about loving their birth family but also loving you? Are they concerned about their siblings who are in different placements?
- Do they believe you are truly their forever family or are they still concerned that they could move again because it's happened before so many times?

These questions will hopefully provide some awareness and sensitivity towards the impact adoption may be having on your teen in addition to all the other symptoms listed above that may contribute to depression.

Continued on page 3

Next Steps

Talking to your teens is only the first step in helping them with depression. Treatment is also available. Often therapy and medication together are the most effective treatments. The tips on page three are also effective resources.

The treatment process may feel overwhelming and frustrating at times, but this is normal. Recovery can be unpredictable, but don't give up. The difference between a challenge and an opportunity is often in your perspective—you might find that working together will help give you opportunities to get closer to each other.



Tools for Teens

Encourage healthy eating habits. Too often, teens eat too much junk food, which can result in nutritional deficiencies that can become a risk factor for depression.

Make sure your children know how much you care about them.

Encourage participation in sports, clubs and other extracurricular activities in order to build a strong support group of friends.

Encourage physical activity. Exercise can help your teen's physical and mental well-being.

Praise your teen's strengths and be sensitive when addressing weaknesses. Self-esteem can be very fragile, particularly during the teenage years.

Talk with your teen and listen attentively. Let your child know that you are there and to listen when something is wrong. Don't be discouraged if it takes some time before your child begins to confide in you.

Talk to your teen about programs involving counseling sessions with a psychotherapist, a school psychologist or a school counselor.

Encourage music, art and writing in a journal. These can be a great help for those who aren't as comfortable with talking.

Try to enforce an early bedtime. A study published in the Sleep journal in January 2010 found that adolescents with earlier bedtimes set by their parents were significantly less likely to experience teen depression.

Resources on page 4

Resources

From the [Lending Library](#)

- *Bipolar Disorder Survival Guide*, by David Miklowitz
- *Depression*, by Constance Hammen
- *More than Moody*, by Harold S. Koplewicz
- *It Gets Better—Coming Out, Bullying, and Creating Life Worth Living*, by Daniel Savage and Terry Miller
- *Ups and Downs of Raising a Bipolar Child: A Survival Guide for Parents*, by Judith Lederman and Canaida Fink
- *Recovering From Depression: Workbook for Teens*, by Mary Ellen Copeland and Stuart Copans
- *Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew*, by Sherrie Eldridge

Additional Resources

- [National Institute of Mental Health](#)
- [Anxiety and Depression Association of America](#)
- [Depression Statistics from the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance](#)