

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

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

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 wonder 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 widespread among all teenagers. However, children who have

experienced multiple losses, as many adopted children have, are more vulnerable to depression. Moreover, feelings about identity as an adopted person may impact your teen. They might struggle with who they are as adoptees and where they fit in.

How is Depression Defined?

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

Continued on page 2

- Hormonal changes
- Being bullied at school
- Substance abuse
- 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, share your thoughts with your teen, identify some of the risk factors you see, and encourage them 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 talk with them. They may not be willing to open up about their feelings, and they may not feel comfortable admitting that they are feeling depressed. Offer support and encouragement.
- Listen without judgment: When your child starts to open up, hold back on criticism and don't offer 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 affecting your 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 your child ever suffered from a long-term illness or disability, whether physical or mental?
- Previous issues: Were there previous difficulties at home, in past placements, at 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 so many times before?

These questions will hopefully provide some awareness of 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 practical resources.

The treatment process may sometimes feel overwhelming and frustrating, 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 you 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 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 you are there and want to hear when something is wrong. Don't be discouraged if it takes time before your child confides 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 journaling. These can be a great help for those who aren't as comfortable 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 [Resource Library](#)

- *The Face in the Mirror: Teenagers and Adoption*, by Marion Crook
- *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 & Terry Miller
- *Ups and Downs of Raising a Bipolar Child: A Survival Guide for Parents*, by Judith Lederman & Canaida Fink
- *Recovering From Depression: Workbook for Teens*, by Mary Ellen Copeland & Stuart Copans
- *Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew*, by Sherrie Eldridge
- *Bipolar Disorder Survival Guide*, by David Miklowitz

Additional Resources

- [Tip Sheet on Responding to Youth and Young Adult Mental Health Needs](#)
- [National Alliance on Mental Illness: Teens](#)
- [Wisconsin Wayfinder: Essential Children's Resources](#)
- [Review of Depression: A Teen's Guide to Survive and Thrive](#)
- [Child and Adolescent Mental Health](#)
- [Anxiety and Depression Association of America](#)
- [Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance: Depression Statistics](#)

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [About Wisconsin Wayfinder Children's Resource Network](#)