

As a Teenager

Share your problems with someone you trust, interact with your friends and family members, adopt a healthy lifestyle and work towards a realistic & achievable goal



It is often in the darkest skies that we see the brightest stars.

The information provided in this publication is meant purely for educational purposes and may not be used as a substitute for medical diagnosis or treatment. You should seek the advice of your doctor or a qualified healthcare provider before starting any treatment or if you have any questions related to your health, physical fitness or medical conditions.

Information is correct at time of printing (September 2015) and subject to revision without prior notice.

Copyright (2015). National University Hospital
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced without permission in writing from National University Hospital.

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL
5 Lower Kent Ridge Road, Singapore 119074
Tel : 6779 5555 • Fax : 6779 5678
Website : www.nuh.com.sg
Company Registration Number : 198500843R

Depression in Teenagers

A guide for Teenagers



What is depression?

It is normal to feel sad, upset, or frustrated from time to time. However, if the sadness becomes more intense and persistent, it can affect an individual's ability to do well in school and maintain positive relationships with friends and family. A diagnosis of depression needs to be considered when there are five or more of the following features and these symptoms persist for two weeks or longer:

- Low mood, tearfulness. Some youths become more withdrawn
- Irritability, anger outbursts
- Loss of interest in hobbies
- Poor appetite or excessive eating, or changes in weight
- Poor sleep quality or sleeping excessively
- Low energy levels
- Difficulty concentrating
- Excessive guilt
- Hopelessness and thoughts of death or suicide

What causes depression?

Neurochemicals provide a link between the cells of mood-regulating centres of the brain. These neurochemicals send signals from one brain cell to another, and are essential for normal brain function.

The levels of stress hormones in the body increase when we experience stress. High levels of circulating stress hormones can disturb the normal balance of neurochemicals in the mood centres of the brain. When this happens, an individual then experiences symptoms of depression.

Usually, there is no one single cause for depression. Rather, it is often caused by a mixture of different factors. These may include:

- A family history of mood disorder (depression can run in families)
- Stressful events e.g. conflict in the family, demise of a loved one, relationship problems, pressure to excel in school, bullying, or serious medical illness
- Hormonal changes during puberty
- Abuse of alcohol and drugs

Are there treatments available for depression?

There are many effective forms of treatment for depression. These treatment methods have been extensively researched in many countries around the world. In Singapore, there are numerous centres with trained healthcare professionals who can treat depression.

In mild depression, symptoms can improve with counselling and psychotherapy ("talking treatment"). In moderate to severe depression, medication is the recommended treatment. Combination treatment with both medication and psychotherapy has also been shown to be effective.

What is the role of medication in depression?

Antidepressant medications improve cell-to-cell signaling in the mood centres of the brain. This reduces the symptoms of depression. When energy levels and concentration improve, other forms of therapy such as psychological therapy can then work better.

The multidisciplinary team approach to the treatment of depression

A multidisciplinary team approach is the best way to treat depression.

Members of the multidisciplinary team may include:

- **Psychiatrist** – A medical doctor with specialty training in Psychiatry, who oversees the management of the patient's condition and prescribes medication if needed.
- **Psychologist** – A therapist with postgraduate training in Psychology, who can provide psychological treatment for the depressed teenager to reduce his/her psychological distress.
- **Occupational therapist** – A therapist who can provide guidance for relaxation techniques, coping with stress, and using activities as a form of enjoyment and self-discovery to promote recovery.
- **Art therapist** – A therapist who uses art to encourage the expression of inner feelings and stress. The healing effect of art therapy is through the process of creating, and not the product itself.
- **Medical social worker** – A healthcare professional who offers marital and family counselling as indicated, and arranges for financial subsidy for medical bills if there is a need.

Why is it important to treat depression?

Depression can affect a person's functioning in many areas. An individual with depression has difficulty concentrating, feels tired, and is more forgetful. This can have an impact on learning and performance in school.

An individual who is depressed often feels irritable and socially withdrawn. Friendships and relationships with family members may become strained as a result.

Most importantly, suicidal thoughts can occur in severe depression. This carries a risk of self-harm and suicide attempts.

Early detection and treatment of depression increase a person's quality of life, reduce the risk of harm, and bring about improvement in daily function.

What can I do if I feel depressed?

Talk to someone

It can sometimes be difficult or awkward to talk about our problems and feelings with others. However, sharing concerns with someone you trust is often helpful. When we keep our problems to ourselves, there can be a build-up of tension within us. This can lead to expression of frustration in less healthy ways, such as anger outbursts, aggression and self-harm.

Keep a record of your thoughts and feelings

Recording events, associated emotions and thoughts in a diary, notebook or mobile phone allows us to process our thoughts more effectively. It also lets us reflect on events that have happened and consider alternative ways of looking at various problems. It can keep us aware of our feelings and how they change over time.

Find company

Make plans to meet up with friends and family members. Try not to keep to yourself as it can be lonely and lead to excessive worrying. Real-life face-to-face communication is the best form of interaction, and cannot be replaced by computer gaming and texting!

Be healthy

A balanced diet is essential to good health. Avoid cigarettes and alcohol as they can be addictive and harmful. Over time, these substances may also increase anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Stay active

Exercise regularly and engage in enjoyable activities. This can increase your energy level and lift your mood.

Set realistic goals

Successful individuals are aware of their own strengths and limitations. Keep your goals Focused, Achievable and Realistic, and you will go FAR! There can be great satisfaction in making small gains at a time, and it goes a long way in managing your stress levels.

Managing Risk

Self-harm - Deliberate self-harm in the form of cutting, burning or other methods can occur when young people feel distressed. There are many ways to overcome these urges. These include listening to music, calling a friend, folding origami, or exercising. The list goes on!

Thoughts about suicide - Thoughts and plans about ending one's own life can happen in individuals who are distressed. It is a sign that things are not going well, and is a cause for concern. This could be in the form of repeatedly thinking about death or suicide, or through other actions:

- Writing 'goodbye' notes
- Giving valuable personal belongings or pets away to others
- Collecting and keeping large amounts of tablets

These could indicate that there is a plan to attempt suicide.

If these thoughts have been on your mind, or in someone you care about, an urgent assessment is recommended.

You can seek immediate advice by calling the Samaritans of Singapore 24-hour hotline at 1800-221-4444. Emergency services at hospitals in Singapore can also provide urgent psychiatric assessment and risk management.

Services are available within the following settings:

- **School** - counsellors, teachers
- **Community** - Response, Early Intervention and Assessment in Community Mental Health (REACH), family service centres, students care centres
- **Medical** - polyclinics, family doctors, psychiatrists

Written by:
Dr Glen Cedric Roche, Resident
Dr Teng Jia Ying, Associate Consultant



Speak out, Seek help,
Stay hopeful!