Teen depression and suicide

As a parent who has always taken responsibility for your child's well being and happiness, it can be extremely difficult to accept that a teen is severely depressed, or that he or she may be contemplating suicide. There is a natural tendency for a parent to try to deny the seriousness of the problem. Teens are naturally moody, so it is easy to try to dismiss problems as "normal teen blues".

It is critical for parents to understand that clinical depression is an extremely serious condition and to realize that teen suicide is becoming increasingly common. According to some sources, one in three teens has considered suicide, and one in 12 high school students has attempted it.

Causes of Depression and Suicide

- Teens are subject to many stresses and anxieties that can lead to generalized depression. These can include problems with peers, body image anxiety, low self-esteem, a fear of not being taken seriously and pressures to succeed in school or to obtain acceptable employment.
- Severe depression or suicidal thoughts can occur when these stresses combine with a major loss or failure of some kind in the teen's family, school or social life.
- Major losses can include the break up of a dating relationship, rejection by peers, the death of a family member or close friend or other school or family turmoil.
- Failures can include poor grades, inability to win friends or dates or a specific school, family or personal failure.
- Teens that are at particularly high risk of suicide include those with clinical depression, drug or alcohol abusers, abuse victims and violent or otherwise delinquent teens.
- The greater the combination of stresses, losses or failures, the higher the risk of suicide becomes.

Recognize the Signs of Clinical Depression

They can include:

- Sadness
- Apathy, inertia or complete lethargy
- Disregard for appearance or well being
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Withdrawal from family and possibly also from friends

How to Help a Teen with Depression

- Try to play the role of a counsellor; be there not to interfere but as an ally and support source.
- Encourage your teen to talk about his or her anxieties and concerns. Listen… Listen. Listen!
- Don't belittle your son or daughter's concerns. Even if you think your teen is over-dramatizing, realize that the concern is extremely serious to him or her.
- Reassure your teen that it is ok to make mistakes sometimes. Point out that we learn more through our failures than we do through our successes.
- Support your teen through actions as well as words. Give your teen a quick hug or back-rub. Bring him or her a cup of tea, a plate or cookies or fruit.
- If the depression shows no sign of lifting after a short while, consult a doctor.

Suicide Risks

A teen who is at risk for suicide will demonstrate some or all of the signs of clinical depression, but to an even stronger degree. Signs may include:

- Overwhelming sadness
- Increased crying
- Severe mood swings
- Loss of appetite
- Changes in sleep
- Poor hygiene and a disregard for their well-being
- Withdrawal from family, school and friends
- Poor grades
- Delinquent behaviour

If you recognize the above signs in your teen, you should consult with a medical professional as soon as possible.

When to Get Help

If your teenager does any of the following, seek the help of a crisis counsellor, doctor or the police:

- Talks about committing suicide or in other ways suggests the act by saying that he or she would be better off dead, etc.
- Begins to give away treasured personal possessions
- Writes a suicide note

Mental health issues among teens are common. If a teenager in your life is severely depressed, or you fear that he or she may be contemplating suicide, get help immediately. Clinical depression is an extremely serious condition. Your teen might need your help and support to re-gain their mental health.