Gay and lesbian teens: at risk for depression and suicide

The teenage years can be tough for both teens and parents under any circumstances. Social and academic stresses, worries about body development, and general hormonal changes can lead to behaviour challenges for parents and generalized depression for teens.



Add to these circumstances the bullying that gay or lesbian teens are frequently subject to, along with acute anxiety and emotional confusion, and it's not difficult to see why depression and suicide have become a serious problem. In fact, suicide attempts are up to four times more common among gay, lesbian and bisexual teens.

If you are the parent of a gay or lesbian teen who has recently "come out" to the family, you may be experiencing your own confusion and anxiety as you come to terms with new realities. Recognize that your teen is likely to be facing far more difficult emotional and social challenges right now. Focus on helping your son or daughter get through this challenging period, and keep a sharp eye on your teen's emotional and mental health.

Remember, you don't have to face the challenges alone. There are numerous resources out there to help parents in your situation. Let's get started today!

Tips and tools you can use

It is estimated that approximately 70 per cent of eventual suicide victims give some clue about their intentions before they act. Given these statistics, it's critical that parents learn to recognize and understand the signs of depression and suicide. In this instance, information and understanding can literally help to save a life. Here are some excellent tips and strategies:

Causes of depression and suicide

Depression and suicide in gay and lesbian teens are usually caused by the cumulative burden of a number of different challenges. The greater the number of stresses, losses or failures, the higher the risk of suicide becomes. Stresses may include:

- Typical teen issues of school/job and peer pressures, body image anxiety, and the desire for independence coupled with anxieties about their ability to actually function alone in the world.
- Taunting and other forms of bullying based on their sexual orientation.
- Fear that they will never be accepted by the outside world. This is particularly common among gay and lesbian teens living in rural communities, where homophobia can be widespread and homosexual support services may be non-existent.
- Loneliness as many previous friends turn away from them. Fear of rejection may also stop your teen from approaching new people.
- Feelings of being different from the rest of the family or even unloved. If your teen has only recently "come out" to you, he or she is likely to have suffered agonizing concerns over whether or not the family would be accepting.
- Recent major losses, such as the break-up of a dating relationship or close friendship. The trauma can be compounded by the fact that many teens have not "come out", so they are unable to confide in others and receive the support they need.

Signs of clinical depression

- **Changes in feelings.** Your teen may seem very sad and lonely, and may express guilt, worry, anger, helplessness, and self-blame or self-hatred.
- **Apathy.** Your teen may lose interest in things previously enjoyed, and may be extremely lethargic and continually tired.
- **Withdrawal.** Your teen may begin to isolate him or herself, and may withdraw from family and friends.
- **Truancy from school.** Your teen may use constant excuses of headaches etc to stay home from school, or may be absent from school without your knowledge.
- **Behaviour changes.** You may notice sleeping and eating changes, or a growing disregard for appearance or well being.
- **Drug or heavy alcohol use.**

Helping a teen with depression

- **It is critical to try to help build your teen's sense of self-worth.** Reiterate your love for him or her on an ongoing basis, and make it clear that your son or daughter is not abnormal or "bad" in any way.
- **Express your support for your teen and your willingness to help him or her overcome challenges.** Try to play the role of a counsellor, there not to interfere but as an ally and problem-solving facilitator.
- **Encourage your teen to seek out additional external support** from a school counsellor and also from the gay and lesbian community. Your teen will feel less isolated if he or she becomes involved with a community of people who have faced the same challenges.
- **Help your teen look in the phone book for gay and lesbian resources.** Alternatively, call your community or regional hotline and ask for contact information for gay and lesbian organizations.
- **Encourage your teen to talk about his or her concerns and challenges.** Practice ACTIVE listening! Make it clear that communication lines are always open.
- **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 or a plate of cookies or fruit.

If the depression shows no sign of lifting after a while, consult a doctor.

Risk signs for suicide

A gay or lesbian teen who is at risk for suicide is likely to demonstrate some or all of the signs of clinical depression previously outlined. However, these are likely to be present at an even stronger level.

Signs of potential suicide may include:

- Overwhelming sadness
- Crying
- Severe mood swings
- Loss of appetite
- Sleep pattern changes—either sleeping more or sleeping less
- Poor hygiene and a disregard for their own well-being
- Withdrawal from family, school, and friends
- Complete lethargy and lack of interest in anything
- Poor grades
- Absenteeism from school

- Delinquent behaviour
- Drug or heavy alcohol use

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

When to get help

If your teenager does any of the following, seek the help of a crisis line, 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, and all the more common among young people dealing with the homophobia present in many parts of society. 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 footing in the social world, and their mental health.