Parents' Guide: Teens, social media, and depression



Teenagers are known for being moody and emotionally unpredictable; a teen who is apathetic one day and passionate the next is almost a cliché. For this reason, it is often easy to write off these low moods, dramatic acts and disinterested behaviours as just normal growing pains. However, depression among teens is a real concern, and a growing one: recent studies suggest that 11.5% of teens have had a Major Depressive Episode (MDE) in the last 12 months – that's up from 8.7% in 2008. In this article, we will break down some of the contributing factors to depression in teens and offer some practical advice about signs to watch out for in the teens in your life.

Stigma and seeking help

Thankfully, many organizations and individuals are doing important work to decrease stigma around depression. There are way more positive representations of people living with mental illness – and functioning normally – than there were even ten years ago. This may mean that teens are more likely to seek help for these issues. However, stigma is still an obstacle for a lot of teens and adults alike. For more information on stigma and how to fight it, here is a list of helpful articles.

Social media and mental health

One of the biggest changes in the past ten years is the proliferation of social media. These days, teens are connected to their peers near and far at an unprecedented level. A huge factor that contributes to teen depression and anxiety is **cyber-bullying**: social media makes it easier than ever before for teens to inflict cruelty on one another and that cruelty has a strong impact on mental health.

At the same time, social media may also have some upsides for mental health: lots of teens are now using sites like Instagram, Twitter and Tumblr to share experiences of anxiety and depression. This can lead teens to understand that they are not suffering alone, further decreasing stigma and encouraging them to seek help.

This means that social media is neither all good nor all bad and so is probably best used in moderation. Work together with your teen to come up with a reasonable amount of screen time spent with smartphones and computers.

Signs to lookout for

How do you know if the teens in your life are just experiencing the normal mood swings of growing up or if they have a serious problem? Here are some internal and external signs to keep an eye out for that might be linked to depression

Internal signs: These are signs of depression that you may notice in your teen's behaviour and habits, and does not necessarily have a direct link to what is going on in the outside world.

- **Extended periods of sadness**: A major depressive episode (MDE) is defined as a period of more than two weeks of consistent low mood.
- **Loss of interest in activities**: If your teen used to love painting, music, sports or other activities but seems suddenly to not be interested in anything, this might be a sign of depression.
- **Social withdrawal.**
- **Changes in sleep patterns and/or appetite.**

External signs: These are things that affect your teen's life that may lead to depression and anxiety:

- Grief and loss of a loved one or peer.

- The end of a romantic relationship.
- Failures in school or extracurricular activities.

If the teen(s) in your life are showing signs of depression, insist that they speak to a counsellor. Even if they are not clinically depressed, speaking to an empathetic and kind professional is never a bad idea and can even prevent depression down the road.