

Theme: Depression
Question: What are some of the best ways to support a family member who is depressed? What should be avoided?

Teens and parents in conversation

HomeWord



Volume 7, Number 3



Teen Talk

by Abby Stoddard

I have struggled and still do struggle with depression, which to me means struggling to regain my spiritual side. I saw that I had this hole in my spirit, and I tried to fill it with the newest and coolest clothes and other stuff, and by having the “right” friends. Yet, every time I looked back into myself, that hole was still there.

I started receiving help with my depression in grade school when my mother noticed I was having problems. I was too young to understand my problems, but I received therapy for about six months. Then during the summer after seventh grade, I hit the bottom of the barrel again. I just didn’t seem to find anything that could keep me happy. I withdrew from my sister, my closest friend then and now, and I sometimes couldn’t even enjoy spending time with my other friends. I was constantly miserable, and I cried a lot. I also was tired most of the time, even though I just sat around the house. I sort of wanted to go outside and do something, but just couldn’t muster the energy.

If you have a friend who is battling depression . . .


I began seeing a psychiatrist again, one whom I am still seeing. I take some medication, which at first scared me, but now I don’t even notice its effect. And I know, along with the therapy, it helps.

I wish people had not let me sit around and do nothing. It would have helped if they had kept me active. I suggest family members give the troubled person project to do. I think an art project is an excellent idea. Buy some clay or paint and give the person who is depressed an activity in which they can be creative. It will take their mind off their sorrow at least for a while. Or make sure they are involved in clubs and activities at school. Help them find something they are passionate about and encourage them to pursue their passions. Of course, I’m not sure I can suggest any permanent cure, as I have yet to find one for myself.

I always got depressed when I didn’t have enough structured activities to keep me busy. During summer vacation, I actually missed school, because it gave my life stability. This ▼


Parent Talk

by Leif Kehrwald



Darkness. Can there be many things more painful to a parent than knowing your child lives in darkness and cannot find his way out? Can there be many things more painful to a child?

We use the word *depression* too freely. A person has a rough day, comes home, plops on the couch, and says, “What a depressing day.” Another person receives a bit of bad news, and remarks, “I’m so depressed.” Another wakes up to dreary rain for the third day in a row, and says, “How depressing.” Depression is worse than a rough day at work, a bit of bad news, a string of rainy days. Depression crawls all the way inside and takes over to the point where it doesn’t matter if it’s still dreary outside—there is nothing but darkness inside.



I am not a licensed counselor or a degreed psychologist, but I’ve read enough to know that depression is more than sadness or loneliness. And I’ve been around depression enough to recognize the signs of darkness in the ones I love and live with.

When I began to see the darkness in my son, I tried to chalk it up to the typical throes of adolescence. Laziness to the point of sloth, grunted responses to all my questions, hours in his room, chores and schoolwork slipping, occasional bursts of anger, and so on. I am somewhat of an expert on adolescence, and I could find a developmental reason for each behavior.

“The darkness gets ahold of you, doesn’t it?”

Teenager, boy, ultra self-conscious—normal, right? But there was a look in his eyes I couldn’t dismiss. Or rather, an emptiness in his eyes. “Hello, Son! Anybody home in there?” Could it be . . . depression?

As I said, I’ve been around darkness and depression, and I’ve learned a couple of things. One, *you can’t talk* to the person about the “problem” when he or she is in the grips of the darkness. Two, when the intensity of the grip lightens up, *you can’t assume* the depression is gone. It’s not. Three, when the intensity of the grip lightens up, *now you can talk*.

To put it another way, when a person is depressed, I think the darkness comes in waves. In the midst of a ▼

Teen Talk *continued*

past summer (between ninth and tenth grade) was much better because I had play practices, driver's education classes, and a job to keep me occupied.

If you have a friend who is battling depression, stay in touch, call the person often. Just hanging out with the person for a day can be a big help. Talk to the person, even when he or she doesn't want to talk to you. Send letters and cards. It may take some time, but it's a really good idea. Knowing that you care, and that you are

praying for your friend, will brighten her or his day so much! Don't give up on your friend who is struggling with depression, because when he or she gets better, your relationship will be ten times as strong.

I am still in search of my own spirituality—turning that hole into wholeness—in the hope that it will lead me to a long-term solution. Until then, I figure I'll just keep praying.

Abby Stoddard is a sophomore at Pius X High School, in Milwaukee.



Seek Help if These Signs Persist

- **Frequent sadness, tearfulness, crying.** Teens may show their pervasive sadness by wearing black clothes, writing poetry with morbid themes, or having a preoccupation with music that has nihilistic themes. They may cry for no apparent reason.
- **Hopelessness.** Teens may feel that life is not worth living or worth the effort to even maintain their appearance or hygiene. They may believe that a negative situation will never change and be pessimistic about their future.
- **Decreased interest in activities; or inability to enjoy previously favorite activities.** Teens may become apathetic and drop out of clubs, sports, and other activities they once enjoyed. Not much seems fun anymore to the depressed teen.
- **Low self-esteem and guilt.** Teens may assume blame for negative events or circumstances. They may feel like a failure and have negative views about their competence and self-worth. They feel as if they are not "good enough."
- **Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure.** Believing that they are unworthy, depressed teens become even more depressed with every supposed rejection or perceived lack of success.
- **Increased irritability, anger, or hostility.** Depressed teens are often irritable, taking out most of their anger on their family. They may attack others by being critical, sarcastic, or abusive. They may feel that they must reject their family before their family rejects them.

(Focus Adolescent Services, "Teen Depression: Warning Signs, Information, Getting Help," at www.focusas.com/Depression, accessed 7 September 2001.

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Parent Talk *continued*

heavy wave, all you can really do is stay present to the person, keep him or her safe, and don't take personally what he or she says or does. But when the wave subsides, talk with the person about the problem and the kind of grip it has over him or her.

I said to my son, "The darkness gets ahold of you, doesn't it?" He looked me in the eye, and there was a glint of recognition. Finally, something in those eyes. He said, "Yea," but didn't want to share his woes then. So, of course, I offered to be a sounding board anytime he wanted one.

As it turned out, he did want to unload his burdens, just not with his old man. He discovered that one of his friends was seeing a counselor and actually liked it. So, on another day,

after a wave had subsided, my son said to me, "Dad, do you know of a counselor I could see?"

Fortunately, I have some contacts, and was able to hook him up with a counselor near his school. He and Paul visited for an hour once a week for a couple of months. I don't know what they talked about, but as time went by, the grip of the darkness seemed to lighten up. The eyes didn't seem so empty. Through his conversations with Paul, and his own personal effort, my son's gotten his life back on track, and shows a lot of motivation, purpose, and promise.

Will the darkness return? Perhaps. The experts would probably say it's likely. But if and when it does, my son knows some concrete steps to take to deal with it. And I've learned a thing or two myself.



Early Diagnosis Is Essential

Depressive illness in children and teens is defined when the feelings of depression persist and interfere with a child or adolescent's ability to function. It is important to remember that the behavior of depressed children and teenagers may differ from the behavior of depressed adults.

Depression is a real illness that requires professional help. Comprehensive treatment often includes both individual and family therapy. Some mental health professionals may also recommend the use of antidepressant medication. For teens with milder forms of depression, a brief period of psychotherapy may be all the treatment that is needed.

For help, parents should ask their physician to refer them to a mental health professional who can diagnose and treat depression in children and teenagers.

(Focus Adolescent Services, "Teen Depression")

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