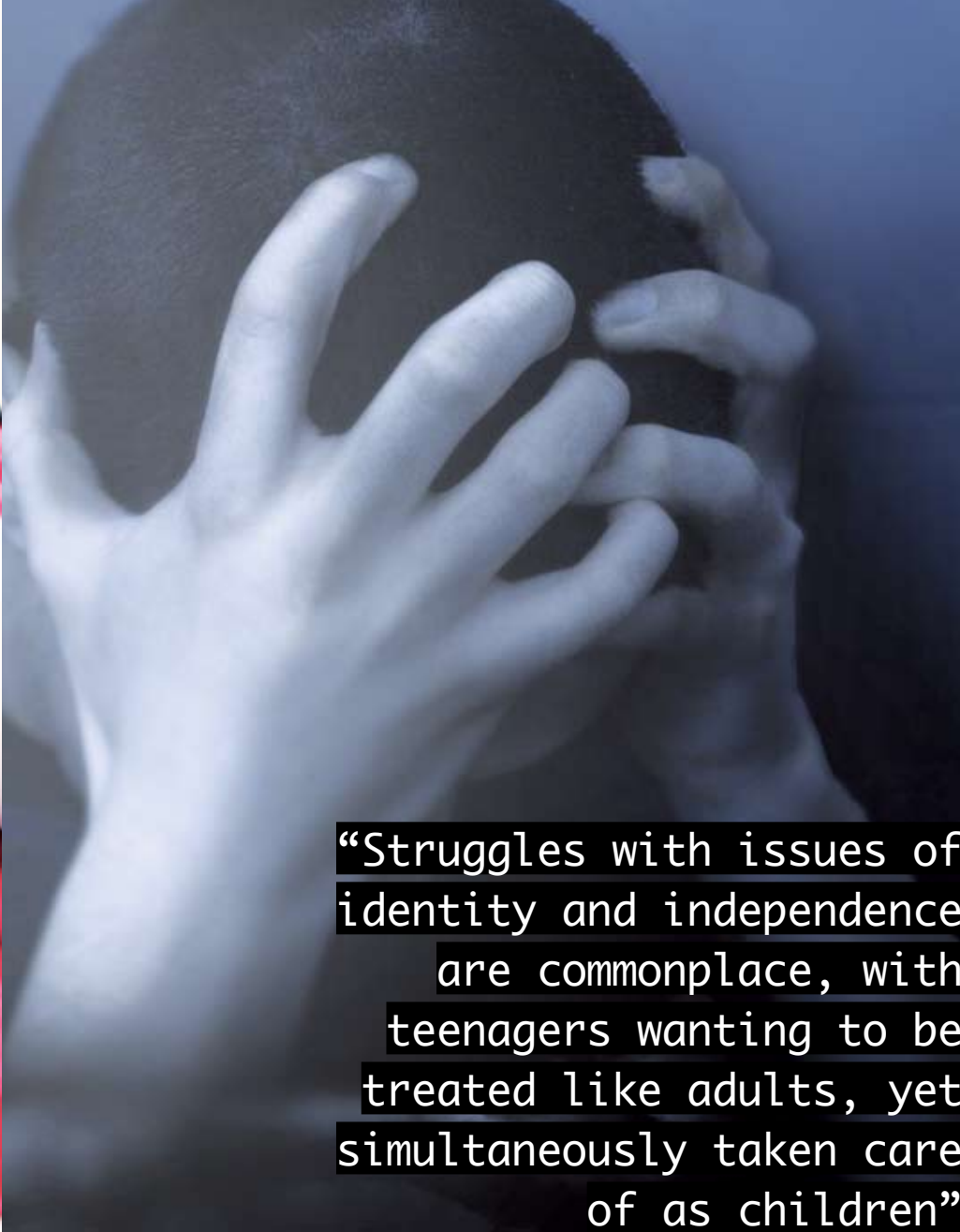


# Teenage Blues

Being moody, grouchy, and misunderstood is part of growing up and one should not be too eager to pathologize normal experiences. However, if depressive symptoms become persistent and interfere with normal social activities, schoolwork, or family life, this may indicate that a child or teenager has a mood disorder. By **Mira Khreino**



**“Struggles with issues of identity and independence are commonplace, with teenagers wanting to be treated like adults, yet simultaneously taken care of as children”**

Children and teenagers often feel overwhelmed by the greater sense of responsibility and duty towards others that comes with growing older. And, though this transitional stage can be exciting, it can also be fear-inducing and alienating. Struggles with issues of identity and independence are commonplace, with teenagers wanting to be treated like adults, yet simultaneously taken care of as children. Furthermore, the hormonal changes at puberty not only cause physical changes, but emotional confusion and mental frustration. Bad moods, irritability, and physical discomfort are all part of growing up.

So if low mood, unhappiness, tearfulness, and irritability, are seen in many teenagers, what is to differentiate between the “normal blues” and something more concerning? How is

one to recognize the difference between being sad and being depressed? Depression in children and teens can be difficult to diagnose and challenging for parents to spot, but there are ways to tell the difference between normal ups and downs and a more serious mental health problem.

The fact that a teen has negative experiences is not necessarily cause for worry. It is rather the intensity, extremity, duration, and proportion of the experience that could indicate whether there is a reason to be concerned. For example, being distressed as a reaction to something sad is perfectly normal, but if the reaction is vastly disproportionate to the experience, then this may be a sign of a deeper problem. If low or irritable mood and emotional instability are affecting normal day-to-day functioning, then a psychological assessment could be called for.



## Signs And Symptoms Of Depression

Keep in mind that not all of these symptoms have to be present for a child to be diagnosed with depression. Moreover, different symptoms may be present at different times according to situation and circumstance.

- Frequent sadness or crying
- Changes in sleep (sleeplessness or excessive sleep) or difficulty falling and staying asleep
- Loss of concentration, impaired thinking, or poor academic performance
- Feeling angry, anxious, irritable, restless, or sulky
- Mood swings and vocal outbursts
- Change in grades, getting into trouble at school, or refusing to go to school
- Change in appetite and eating habits (an increase or decrease)
- Feeling worthless, guilty, helpless, or hopeless
- Loss of energy and enthusiasm or increased fatigue
- Low self-esteem, low self-confidence, or self-doubt
- Physical complaints (such as stomach-aches or headaches) that seem to lack a cause
- Social withdrawal and isolation
- Loss of interest in previously pleasurable activities
- Increased sensitivity to rejection
- Reduced ability to function during events and activities
- A change in appearance or neglect in hygiene
- The use of drugs or alcohol
- Thoughts of death or suicide





**“There are ways to tell the difference between normal ups and downs and a more serious mental health problem”**



## Children At Risk

Depression in children and teenagers may strike due to one single cause, a combination of reasons, or, in some cases, may seem to appear out of the blue. When assessed, the most common contributing factors include physical health (e.g. an illness), life events (e.g. the loss of a parent), family history (e.g. a depressed parent), environment (e.g. war), genetic vulnerability (e.g. a susceptibility passed on by a parent), and biochemical disturbance (e.g. a brain bio-chemical imbalance in neurotransmitters).

A family history of depression increases offspring's vulnerability to the disorder. Furthermore, research shows that children whose parents have depression will be diagnosed with the disorder earlier than children whose parents do not. Children from broken homes, dysfunctional and chaotic families, and with substance abuse issues are also at a greater risk.



## The Proper Parental Response

Parents may find it very difficult to acknowledge and admit that their child is going through such a distressing time. The majority of parents feel overwhelmed at the prospect of their teen suffering from a mental health problem. With a reluctance to broach the subject, parents are left wondering what may be wrong instead of talking to their teenager; however, most of the time, talking to your child is the necessary first step to giving them an open platform to be heard and better understood.

Unfortunately, there is still a significant amount of social stigma associated with mental health problems, and this may be a stumbling block for many parents in seeking treatment for their child. Denial is common in parents, which, sadly, is to the detriment of the suffering teen. In order for the teenager to grow as healthily as possible, early treatment is crucial.

Untreated depression in children can have long-term damaging consequences, mentally, emotionally, socially, and educationally. School grades and social interaction at this pivotal point can have a knock-on effect on the future of a youth.

- Approach your child very mindfully. Focus on their experience and feelings instead of trying to pacify your own fears.
- Try your best not to trivialize what they are going through. Your child's concerns and your own are not the same! Be supportive of their experience and make them feel valued and respected.
- Be aware that many young people feel they will be rejected if they do not feel or think a specific way. Ensure them that

they are loved and accepted for who they are.

- Reassure them that depression does not mean that they are a bad person, weak in any way, or that it is because they have done something wrong.
- A child may be masking depression by acting up or exhibiting angry behavior. Pre-teens are more susceptible to masking, while teens are more likely to show sadness or low mood and hopelessness. Please note that, at such a sensitive time, parents should be particularly vigilant for signs that may indicate their child is at risk of suicide. These include the presence of many depressive symptoms; withdrawal; hopelessness; risk-taking behavior (including sexual); substance abuse; focusing on negative themes; giving away possessions; and talking about death or suicide.

Talking therapies which have been shown to be effective in the treatment of pre-adulthood depression include counselling, family therapy, or individual cognitive behavioral therapy. In more severe cases, a psychiatrist may deem it fit to prescribe anti-depressant medication. Currently, only two pharmaceutical drugs have been FDA-approved to be administered to younger people suffering from depression: Fluoxetine (Prozac) and Escitalopram (Lexapro/Cipralex). Prozac is approved for ages eight and older, while Lexapro is approved for kids 12 and older. Do not administer any medications to your child unless they have been prescribed by a medical professional.

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Help me



## Where To Learn More

An excellent source of more information is the Balanced Mind Parent Network's website. A practical guide written by parents whose children have suffered from depression, it gives parents of children with mood disorders a community for support and guidance. The site contains information on the condition and advice for parents, providing tips on active listening and communication skills as well as treatment options.

Another helpful Internet resource is Erika's Lighthouse's Study Guide, which "addresses the basics of depression, including the science, the stigma associated with the illness, how to cope with depression, how to cope with the everyday stresses of life, how to help a friend, and bullying-related depression." The site also has an interesting video produced by teens themselves called "Real Teenagers Talking about Adolescent Depression," providing the teen sufferers' perspective and experience.

## Tips For Young People Experiencing Low Mood

- Sit in a quiet place and take slow, deep, long breaths to calm the body and mind.
- Listen to relaxing music.
- Write down feelings and emotions or express them through playing a musical instrument, drawing, or painting.
- Talk to someone – a friend, sibling, counselor, coach, mentor, teacher, or parent. They can offer a different perspective on things.
- Take a walk or do a sport, such as running, football, basketball, or cycling.
- Read a book or play a computer game.
- Take a long hot bath to relax the muscles and relieve tension. ■

