

By Kim Alan Dawson

Nobody knows exactly what's going on in adolescents who get depressed, but there are some pretty good ideas and research on the subject. Before telling you about these, I'd like to ask you to imagine yourself as a teen. For any teens reading this article, this should be easy! For those whose teen years are long-gone, I'm going to remind you what it could be like to be young again.

The teen I'd like you to imagine feels kind of crazy and doesn't know why. Along with the normal changes in body weight and the appearance of the body, there is a sexual awakening, when only a year or two before, there was no sexual interest at all. On top of these quite normal changes, however, this teen is going through some very troubling experiences. It's been tough to concentrate on schoolwork for quite a while now. Old hobbies and social life are no longer interesting. A feeling of great sadness has persisted for a few months and often leads to the embarrassment of breaking down in tears. This teen seems very easily irritated and may even have broken things around the house. There is trouble sleeping combined with oversleeping so that school or work gets missed. Thinking life isn't worth living is combined with feelings that nobody seems to listen. The parents of this teen are very concerned and don't know what to do.

I don't know about you, but I'm wondering whether this teen is depressed or not. To answer this question, I have to tell you about the root of all this upheaval in the teen years. So, what's normal to expect during adolescence?

During the teen years, the person is – at a number of levels – caught between childhood and adulthood. For this reason, Erik Erikson called this stage of life an “identity crisis”. (Some people might be a lot older and *still* be struggling with whether they are children or adults). The experience during the teen years is very much like sitting down to work on a home computer and discovering that none of the keys work the same as they did the last time. Most people can imagine the understandable confusion and intense frustration this situation would cause.

Recent research on the adolescent brain suggests that this is basically what is going on inside the head of the teen. During the teen years, the brain of a child (which could not think much for itself) is being transformed into the brain of an adult (which can think and make decisions much more independently). So, like the person who sits down at a computer that's functioning by a previously unknown set of rules, the teen brain is confused, frustrated, and doesn't know why. Often, the teen brain hasn't been prepared to expect these changes.

As a result, life can sometimes seem so confusing that it appears to lack meaning. It can seem like there are no real answers. The rules that made sense in childhood no longer make sense to the youth because the wiring of the brain has literally changed. Being able to consider new information, the absolute answers given by parents no longer seem to hold water. So, the youth makes claims for independence. This can include comments like “you can't control me” or “you can't boss me around any more”.

Another thing teens do is experiment. In order to become independent like an adult, it's necessary to test the waters! This can be quite frightening for parents, friends,

and teens themselves, but it is normal. Experimentation with different sorts of peers or with drugs can be a part of normal adolescence. So far, all this is pretty normal, though very unsettling.

But what makes the difference between teens with and without depression? First, symptoms must be severe and occur together for quite a long time to be called depression. Signs of sadness, loss of interests, sleep disruption, trouble concentrating, and irritability and aggression, are NOT indicators of depression if they are observed one at a time and for less than two weeks. So, the teen in an identity crisis is probably not depressed, but the imaginary teen described at the beginning of this article probably is.

Second, depression in other members of the family can make a difference. This raises the risk of depression because of a “genetic load” in the family.

Third, there is an environmental part to depression, too. Most adolescents cope with short periods of unhappiness by getting the support of parents and friends, by getting enough exercise, and by staying involved in healthy activities. In some teens, their problems may escalate to full-blown depression because they haven’t been taught ways to cope with upset. If they can’t cope and they don’t find any social support, then the real problems start.

The perception that nobody is there for them can lead to helplessness and hopelessness. These are major predictors for suicidal thinking and suicide attempts. Suicide – the most troubling aspect of depression – is the second leading cause of death in adolescents. But fortunately, most teens (about 4 out of 5) get through the upset of adolescence – even the occasional thought of suicide – by using the coping strategies and support systems at their disposal.

Now, depression is not just grief over the death of a loved one. Also, the effects of some street drugs or physical illnesses can look like depression. On top of that, some teens use street drugs because they’re feeling sad and they want to feel better.

The situation can get quite complicated, and it takes an experienced mental health clinician to determine whether the person is depressed. So, if you see some of the signs and symptoms experienced by the teen described earlier in this article, it would be wise to take that person to the doctor and obtain a referral to Child & Youth Mental Health. Due to an increased risk of suicide during depression, it isn’t wise to let the youth stew over it. If you think your child is suicidal, you can call 9-1-1, 1-800-SUICIDE, or get them to the family doctor as soon as possible.

Even more important, YOU – as a parent – can do a lot for your teen. My hope is that parents who have children entering the teen years can use this article as food for conversation with their children. Be there to listen to the young person’s experiences. At a time of risky contact with peers, supportive conversations with you can help maintain the family home as the focus of support. This is the point Gordon Neufeld & Gabor Maté make in their new book, “Hold on to Your Kids: Why Parents Matter.” Doing these things can provide teens with healthy ways of coping that can make the difference between a bit of unhappiness and a full-blown depression.

*Kim Alan Dawson is a registered psychologist with a private mental health consulting practice located at [www.mentalhealthconsulting.ca](http://www.mentalhealthconsulting.ca).*