



Teenage depression

Dr Paul Martiquet, Medical Health Officer

The teenage years can be

tough. There are the challenges of establishing an identity and independence,

planning for an unknown future and discovering the complexities of relationships. Still, most teens balance these with friendships, success in school or outside activities and manage to develop into healthy, productive adults.

During this time, it is perfectly normal, even expected, that there will be occasional bad moods and irritability or acting out, but depression is altogether different. Stress at home, school or in other parts of life can lead to depression. There is even a genetic element to depression. It can cause an overwhelming sense of sadness, despair or anger. Fortunately, there is help available.

Identifying depression is not as simple as doing a blood test or scan of some sort. Diagnosing depression is about recognizing various symptoms. The main feature of depression is an ongoing depressed or irritable mood, loss of interest and pleasure that persists on most days for at least two weeks. Major depression can also be a part of a different mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

Teenage depression can look very different from that in adults. For one, irritability is more likely than sadness to be the predominant mood. A depressed teenager may be hostile, easily frustrated, or prone to angry outbursts. Depressed teens frequently complain about physical ailments such as headaches or stomach aches.

Depressed teens are plagued by feelings of worthlessness so tend to be very vulnerable to criticism and rejection.

Another difference is that unlike adults who tend to isolate themselves when depressed, teens will usually keep up at least some friendships, though they may socialize less or start hanging out with a different crowd. They may also pull away from parents.

Friends, teachers and family members can help identify depression in the teens around them. There are warning signs to look for. These include not wanting to do the things you both used to love to do. He or she might start using drugs or alcohol or engage in risky behaviours such as shoplifting, unprotected sex and driving recklessly. He might stop going to classes or participating in after school activities. She might talk about being bad, ugly, stupid or worthless. There may be comments about death or suicide.

It is believed that about 20 percent of adolescents experience a major depressive disorder which can last for many weeks up to a year or longer. It may reoccur in adulthood. It becomes especially important to be able to identify and treat teenage depression as the long term consequences can be extensive.

Teenage depression is not just bad moods and occasional melancholy. Left untreated, it can lead to problems at home and school, even life-long problems. If you see signs of depression, don't wait. The price of ignoring it is too great.

***If you see signs of depression,
don't wait. The price of ignoring
it is too great.***