

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: How do I know if my junior high child is depressed?

ANSWER: Depression is the name for an emotional illness that effects adolescents by severely disturbing their moods for a period of at least two weeks. Depression is the most common emotional problem in adolescents according to Dr. Peter Jensen, Director of the Center for Advancement of Children's Mental Health at Columbia University. Serious depression affects 2% to 5% (some say as high as 8%) of adolescents every year. Girls are twice as susceptible as boys. Depression is different than simply feeling "sad" or "melancholy" in both (1) the length of time and (2) the intensity of the symptoms.

Adolescence is a time of change and turmoil...physiologically, psychologically, emotionally and socially. Expectations and pressures often lead to disappointments and "blocked goals" (i.e. Life not unfolding the way a person hopes.) In theological terms: Our souls were not made to have to handle life in a sinful world, yet we must. At times, this is overwhelming. In addition, biological and hereditary factors also contribute to a predisposition to depression. Chemical imbalances in the brain can lead to depression as well.

Depression in adolescents often presents itself in different ways than adult depression. In particular, the adolescent is irritable and testy more often than melancholy. Emotional and behavioral warning signs of adolescent depression include the following:

Emotional: sadness, fluctuations between periods of apathy and talkativeness, anger, verbal attacks on others, overreaction to criticism, poor self-esteem, inappropriate guilt feelings, lack of self-confidence, feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, purposelessness, pessimism about the future.

Behavioral: suicidal thoughts or plans, refusal to cooperate in general, agitation, restlessness or extreme lethargy, sleep disturbances, appetite changes, withdrawal from friends and family, violent behavior, drug use, neglect of personal appearance, persistent boredom, decline in school work, dramatic change of friends, and a growing inability to cope with everyday activities and pressures.

Adolescent depression affects the interrelationships of the entire family. The road back from depression can be long and hard. Often, adolescents tend to isolate themselves through behaviors that infuriate and exhaust the adults around them. Their friends tend to "give up" on them because of repeated failures in attempting to lift the depressed mood. This misunderstanding and repeated failure actually help spiral the adolescent into a deeper depression. In addition, the adolescent often has ambivalent feelings about recovery. There is something "safe", predictable, even comforting about their funk. The way a depressed adolescent thinks and interprets information and events is different than healthy adolescents. His/her way of looking at life seems true and reasonable to him/her.

Recent studies have shown the same rate of cure whether medication, psychotherapy, or a combination of the two is used to treat depression. As believers in Christ, however, we must be concerned with far more than just a cure. **Depression overflows into the spiritual life of the adolescent causing him/her to question the goodness, the strength, even the existence of God. This can be devastating to the adolescent's faith.** This is a time for parents and professionals to help adolescents think through and "feel through" some of the deep issues in life rather than trying to logically argue them out of their depression.

If you believe your adolescent is suffering from depression:

1. Seek professional help early. Have your child screened by a professional who can help you decide on specific treatment options.
2. Be involved in the treatment. Depression overflows into the life of the entire family.
3. Talk with your child and let him know that you care and want to help.
4. Realize there are emotional, physical and spiritual effects. There is no quick fix.
5. Keep any deadly medications and guns locked up.
6. Talk to your child about the dangers of drugs and alcohol to which they are particularly vulnerable at this point in time.

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