



ASK Jane

Q: Dear Jane,

My daughter, who is 16, appears to be really “down” lately. She is sleeping more than usual since she and her best friend had a fight and has been “a moodier version of herself.” How do I tell the difference between her “just going through normal ups and downs” and being clinically depressed? It seems like “depression” is such a buzzword these days, but I am starting to get concerned. Please help me!

Mother of a Teenager

A: Dear Mother of a Teenager,

It takes immense strength and bravery to ask this question. It feels scary to think about your child experiencing such deep emotional difficulty, making it a frequent topic of discussion between parents and mental health professionals. With the term “depression” being so commonly used in the news, in movies, and in everyday conversation, it may be hard to separate the noise from the facts.

First, by asking this question, you’re displaying curiosity and concern for how your daughter is thinking and feeling. This indicates you’re a caring and involved parent, a critical factor in combating adolescent depression. When their home is strong and supportive, children are more likely to feel confident when facing the world. From your question, it appears that your daughter may simply be experiencing a trough of sadness resulting from her fight. If it continues for more than a few days, however, something more may be affecting her.

All teenagers experience emotional ups and downs. They may react strongly to things we

consider inconsequential. This is to be expected. Whether it’s their first heartbreak or not being elected football team captain, children experience real and pervasive feelings, disappointments and losses. Remember, they’ve never been through these experiences before and are unsure how to handle them.

When you notice changes in your teen’s mood or behavior, take time to observe and listen. Instead of saying, “You’ve been really rotten to everyone lately,” try, “I’ve noticed you’ve really been hard on people lately. That’s hard for us to take. Is anything bothering you?” Then really stop and hear the answer. Your being supportive and lending an ear during these losses and transitions can help make all the difference. In these cases, the sadness or disappointment usually fades after a while and your child will get back to normal.

At the same time, adolescent depression is a serious mental health problem which needs addressing. Depression is characterized by a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest in activities. It can also be seen in severe symptoms such as withdrawal from family and

friends, anger, sudden changes in functioning (positive or negative), changes in peer groups and an increase in risky behavior, suicidal or homicidal ideation and/or self-harm. It may also not have an immediately discernible cause. If you notice these symptoms over an extended period, don't try to force the issue; instead, let your child know you've noticed the changes and ask what you can do to help. Let him or her know it makes you sad to see her unhappy or withdrawn. Don't criticize and don't try to play detective by reading diaries, opening letters, or searching phone logs. That can destroy the trust you need to help your teen in the first place (although it may become necessary if the depression is severe).

If you note more severe symptoms like withdrawal and self-harm, it's important to consult a mental health professional as soon as possible. (Self-harm, such as cutting, may be difficult to see, but telltale signs include wearing long sleeves even in hot weather or avoiding normal physical contact.) The sooner you do, the sooner help is available. Only a trained mental health professional can accurately diagnose depression during an in-person consultation. Prior to this consultation, it's important to speak with your child about your concerns and their feelings about attending the appointment, as they may feel reluctant, anxious or be in denial about their need for help. You should make it clear this is not about punishment or forcing change, but about understanding the causes behind the symptoms.

At this consultation, a professional will ask you and your child questions about your lives, family history, and emotional experience. Based on this consultation, he or she may diagnose depression and may prescribe ongoing therapy. A psychiatrist or medical doctor may prescribe medication. Sometimes, both approaches are used in combination. If the professional is not a medical doctor, he or she will refer you to one, as only medical doctors may prescribe medication. In every case, they will always talk with you and your child about what they noticed and recommend a course of action.

Always take your child's feelings and behavioral changes seriously. But take care to distinguish between episodes of sadness and disappointment (it can help to think back to your own childhood) and extended and unexplained actions.

Some other things to keep in mind that can help before depression strikes:

1. Keep lines of communicating open. Set aside a consistent time to ask your child about her day. Even if she acts as though she isn't interested, your pursuing the relationship is stabilizing and comforting for her.
2. Encourage your child to express her feelings. Let her know you're there to listen and not judge. This way, your daughter will feel safe coming to you with issues affecting her.
3. Disapprove of the action, not the person. There may be times you'll hear something you may not want to, or may not know how to respond to. In these instances, asking additional questions, setting limits, and communicating expectations are appropriate. Convey your own feelings in response to what you learned. However, it is essential to do so supportively, disapproving of the action, not of the person sharing with you. Doing so protects the relationship while also maintaining the role of parent.

No matter what, continue speaking with your children about your thoughts and feelings and invite them to share their own. Communication is key. Whatever the recommended course of action, your support is a necessary part of your teenager's maintaining a healthy emotional state.

JPA

Most sincerely,

Jane