

Can parents protect their teenage children from depression?

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As parents can anything be more dreadful than thinking that a child that we nurture, plan for, make sacrifices for, comfort, hope for and worry about will one day grow into a teenager who will consciously deliberate about whether they want to carry on living?

Recent statistics suggest that one in six of our teenagers will experience so much distress in their lives that they will consider suicide.

We can feel safe when we consider the fact that most children will not act on such thoughts, and that suicidal thinking does not always accompany depression; however, the sad fact is that a significant number of children will experience depression.

An often undiagnosed problem

Teenage depression often goes undiagnosed and while there is no replacement for early diagnosis and treatment by skilled professionals, as parents we have much more of an impact on the symptoms than either we or our children realise. Whether we try to avoid our children's low mood or try to help them, it is fundamentally important to understand how we impact on them.

There is a big difference between low mood and depression.

At some point nearly all teenagers will experience low mood. Low mood as a normal reaction to the loss, set backs and failures that we all face from time to time. For most teenagers their low mood passes relatively quickly and causes little disruption.

Depression, on the other hand, is a problem that hangs on for longer periods, often causing much more disruption to our children's lives. If they experience depression they are also likely to have problems with concentration, memory, sleep, appetite, motivation, energy, and their way of thinking. Inevitably it can affect their school work and can make them more vulnerable to drifting into drug or alcohol use or into other problematic behaviours.

Depression is still widely misunderstood

Ironically, although depression is very common in our society - during our lives at least one in four of us will experience a significant period of depression - it is still clouded by misunderstanding. Depression often does not make sense to those who have never experienced it. This lack of understanding can often leave teenagers who experience depression feeling very isolated.

Depression is like a trap from which it's hard to escape.

For those teenagers who experience depression, it can feel like a trap - the more they try to escape from it, the more imprisoned they feel. It's not dissimilar to falling into quicksand. Struggling doesn't work, and the strategy that they need to get out (being still) feels counter-intuitive.

Is positive intention enough?

As parents, one of the most important issues that we have to deal with is responsibility. Our own fear that some how, we are responsible for how our children are feeling. This can create high levels of distress that leads us to try to get rid of our own uncomfortable feelings. Much of the time we can make the situation worse by using unproductive strategies such as teaching, controlling, criticising, avoiding, and over-protecting all under the rubric of *trying to help*. For more productive outcomes we will need to quickly drop and replace these outdated strategies.

Strategies that work

- Ask no questions (e.g., "What's wrong?" "What's the matter?") Instead tell your child that if they want someone to talk to, that you will be there for them.
- Concentrate on creating an environment that makes it easier for them to approach you.
- Be non-judgemental and use praise.
- Instead of trying to rationalise their feelings away, let them know that it is OK to feel the way that they do. Explain to them that the way they feel while unpleasant is normal, and is often part of growing up.
- Offer no solutions unless they are asked for.

- Tell them that low feelings, although unpleasant are produced by our body to help us.
- Approach your child, even if they push you away. Let them know that you are there for them.
- Praise them for all of their good points and tell them how much you love them.
- View yourself as being there to help, not to control.
- Let your child know that their feelings are accepted.

As parents we can have much more influence than we realise

Sometimes we don't tell our children how much we love them. Sometimes we don't apologise for things that we have done wrong, or for mistakes we have made in the past. Letting our children know that we have made errors is very important, as many children often blame themselves needlessly for things that were not their fault. It is important also that we do not seek forgiveness as a child may well try to minimise issues to protect us. They may say things such as "don't worry about it, it was nothing." Many things that cause pain are not forgotten, even if they happened several years before. It is never too late to say sorry.

How do we react to our feelings when our children tell us things about ourselves that we don't want to hear?

It is important to listen to our children and to let them speak. Sometimes they will say things that may be painful to hear. When this occurs it is easy to get drawn into a defensive position. If this occurs, we need to encourage ourselves to acknowledge our own feelings and resist the urge to defend ourselves. If we do this, we will be carrying out excellent parenting behaviour. We will be showing our child how to accept responsibility by direct modelling and demonstration. In this case, actions definitely speak louder than words!

We need to remind ourselves that our children cannot read our minds

If we find it hard to express ourselves to our children, it can be very helpful to write them a letter telling them all the things that we like and love about them, and letting them know how we feel about them. We will need to choose our compliments very carefully, without criticism and - very importantly - without trying to teach.

As parents we are the most important role models in our children's lives. We must not under any circumstances underestimate how important we are to them.

Extracted from "How to help your loved one overcome depression" by Dr Nicola Ridgeway and Dr James Manning, Foulsham publishers.