

# Depression in adolescents and young people



## What the fact sheet covers:

- Signs of depression in adolescence
- Where to get help for an adolescent
- Where to get more information

## Introduction

One in four young people are living with a mental disorder and 9% of young people (16–24 years old) experience high to very high levels of psychological distress (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007). People aged 18–24 years have the highest prevalence of mental disorders of any other age group and youth suicide is the leading cause of death in young people aged 15–24 years (ABS, 2012).

Onset of depression is typically around mid-to late adolescence and it is important to recognise the early warning signs and symptoms. Early intervention can often prevent the development of a severe depressive illness.

## Developmental Impact

The teenage years are a time when individuals develop their identity and sense of self. If a depression is left to develop, it can lead to

isolation from family and friends, risktaking behaviours such as reckless driving, inappropriate sexual involvements and drug and alcohol abuse. It can also impact on school performance and study, which can have downstream effects on later career or study options.

Both biological and developmental factors contribute to depression in adolescence. If bipolar disorder or psychosis is suspected, an assessment by a health professional is recommended. See our Fact Sheet Bipolar Disorder in Young People for more information.

## Signs of depression in an adolescent

An adolescent who is depressed may not show obvious signs of depression. It is often hard to distinguish adolescent turmoil from depressive illness, especially when the young person is forging new roles within the family and struggling with independence, and having to make academic and career decisions.



Signs of a depressed mood include:

- Lowered self-esteem (or self-worth)
- Changes in sleep patterns, that is, insomnia (inability to sleep), hypersomnia (excessive sleep) or broken sleep
- Changes in appetite or weight
- Inability to regulate emotions such as pessimism, anger, guilt, irritability and anxiety
- Varying emotions throughout the day for example, feeling worse in the morning and better as the day progresses.
- Reduced capacity to experience pleasure: inability to enjoy what's happening now, not looking forward to anything with pleasure such as hobbies or activities
- Reduced pain tolerance: decreased tolerance for minor aches and pains
- Changed sex drive: absent or reduced
- Poor concentration and memory
- Reduced motivation to carry out usual tasks
- Lowered energy levels
- Withdraw from others
- Difficulty with self-care tasks (showering, laundry, eating regularly etc.)
- Suicidal ideation and/or self-harm

## Where to get help for an adolescent

If you think your son or daughter or someone you are close to, might be depressed, the first step is to either take them to a general practitioner (GP) or to the local Community Health Centre. The GP will either conduct an assessment or refer to a mental health worker who specialises in children and adolescents.

Other initial sources of help are school counsellors and trusted close family members to whom the young person feels comfortable talking. If the young person does not want to seek help, it is best to explain your concerns and to provide them with some information to read about depression.

There are also some excellent websites designed for young people, as well as confidential online and telephone counselling services. Please see our list of services at the end of this fact sheet.

It's important for young people to know that depression is a common problem and that there are people who can help. If there is any mention of suicide this should be taken seriously and immediate help sought from a mental health professional.

## Key points to remember

- One in four young people experience a mental disorder with depression being one of the most common problems.
- Depression in young people is associated with social withdrawal, drops in performance at school, drug or alcohol use and engaging in risky behaviour.
- It can be hard to distinguish depression from adolescent turmoil; if depression is suspected, an assessment should be sought from a GP or other mental health professional.
- Immediate help should be sought if a young person talks of suicide.

## Additional resources

Headspace [headspace.org.au](https://headspace.org.au)

Reach Out [au.reachout.com](https://au.reachout.com)

Kids Helpline [kidshelpline.com.au](https://kidshelpline.com.au) 1800 55 1800



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