



# Discerning the difference between sadness and depression and then getting your teen help quickly is key

**BY DONNA KIESLING**

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Parents of teenagers get accustomed to riding the teeter-totter of their offsprings' emotional highs and lows, but sometimes the moodiness signals a deeper problem.

Barbara Deiotte, a social worker at Munster's Wilbur Wright Middle School, has seen an uptick in teenage depression.

"My personal thoughts are that today's lifestyle is more stressful -- everything is kind of fast," Deiotte said, referring to possible reasons for the increase.

"Or maybe we're more aware (of depression)."

With teens, "depression can be a very temporary response" to stress associated with hormones or conflict with parents, she said. "That will come and go. It's normal adolescent angst.

"That's different from a persistent depressed mood where it's getting in the way of school performance, getting in the way of relationships with family and friends -- or if they're self-medicating."

"(Teen depression) is very much on the rise," Gary Nelson, a minister, pastoral counselor and author based in West Virginia, said.

"One out of five adolescents suffers from clinical depression. The suicide rate also has increased in recent years among adolescents and teenagers.

"This is one of the top killers of teenagers in our country today."

Muddying those statistics, according to Nelson, is that teens may be using alcohol or drugs to ease their anguish, resulting in fatalities such as auto accidents.

"We use 'depression' to describe two different things," he said.

"We all get depressed. Clinical depression is different. Depression for a lot of teens will come out as anger. They look like troublemakers."

## **Depression's downward spiral**

Nelson, author of "A Relentless Hope: Surviving the Storm of Teen Depression," uses his own experience with his son Tom, now in his late 20s and married, to illustrate how teen depression can accelerate in a frightening way.

An honor student and "incredible baseball player," Nelson traces Tom's struggle to middle school when he would say he was too sick to attend school, something that increased in frequency during high school.

"He spent hours and days in his room by himself, troubled by depression and anxiety," Nelson remembered. "He was also shy and sensitive, kind of laid back."

So when Tom hurled three baseballs at the wall, it was a shock.

"We're not a violent family," Nelson said.

"We're not even yellers and screamers. That got Tom to realize he needed help."

Once, Tom battered his door down with a barbell and threw himself on his bed sobbing. His treatment included antidepressants that stopped those feelings of rage.

Parents must remember that depression, not their child, is the enemy.

"These are not teens trying to be the way they are. There is this monster that has their child. That is not their child," Nelson said.

The road was not easy, but Tom went on to get his GED.

"Therapy, for him, didn't do a lot," Nelson remembered.

"What helped was getting a job. For some reason, he was not able to sit in a classroom. His anxiety would go through the ceiling.

"Most experts think there's a genetic predisposition (to depression), or possibly some environmental trigger," he said, adding puberty may be a factor.

### **Other possible reasons for teen depression**

Risk factors for teen depression include stressful events such as divorce or family money troubles.

"I saw a little bit of it with the flood," Munster's Deiotte said.

Jim Nelson, a psychology professor at Valparaiso University (no relation to Gary Nelson), listed several risk factors, including victimization or exposure to violence, meaning those who are bullied or living in a home with a high level of conflict are in greater danger of depression.

"Teens tend to blame themselves or feel helpless," he explained.

Also, "there's a lot more pressure" on kids, pastoral counselor and author Gary Nelson, said.

"Whatever you (as a teen) do, you sell your soul to that particular activity.

"I see kids just overwhelmed -- not just to get to college, but to have college half done by the time you get there."

In some schools, kids also fear being shoved into lockers or even being shot, and gangs and drugs are much more prevalent, he said.

In addition, "I think (depression) has been around, but we're better at identifying it. It's been hidden."

### **Get your teen help as soon as possible**

Because many school guidance counselors are not trained to diagnose depression, Gary Nelson recommended finding someone the teen can talk to, such as a family doctor, clergyperson or psychologist.

"Early intervention can make a difference, can reinforce new pathways in the brain that can be lasting," Nelson said.

"Others may have to stay on medication and coaching. Getting help doesn't have to mean they're locked into things for 10 years."

VU's Jim Nelson said not only has depression increased, but also the age has decreased at which it first manifests itself.

And the recurrence rate is higher for those who first struggle with the disorder as teens, than for those who

experience it later in life.

"The earlier the problem starts, the more serious it's likely to be," he said.

"It's also a problem, because adolescents are really at a key time of life, when they're sorting out relationships, jobs. It can affect a great deal of a person's life."

### **What seems to ease depression**

Factors that seem to decrease the chance of depression include a strong connection with family or living in a home where the parenting style is warm and involved.

"(Having parents) with a lot of warmth but also a lot of expectations is better than those with warmth who let the kid do whatever they want," Jim Nelson said.

Religious involvement and participation, such as attending church weekly and belonging to youth groups, also can decrease depression risk (as well as the risk for drug or alcohol use).

A person's coping style, or how they approach problems, comes into play. Those who are "problem-focused," meaning they actively try to solve problems, are at less risk for depression than the "emotion-based," those who spend time dwelling on problems or avoiding them but taking little action.

"There's a problem with social connectedness and support," he said, commenting on possible causes.

"There's more fragmentation in terms of social connectedness. Social relationships are one of the main things that help people deal with stress, and teens are very sensitive to peer and social issues. If you don't have any friends, it's more difficult for teens."

### **BREAKOUTS**

Warning signs of teen depression

"Many of these symptoms are normal for teens, but (in depression), they're more intense," said author and pastoral counselor Gary Nelson.

Wilbur Wright Middle School counselor Barbara Deiotte said to be alert to when moodiness or depression persist.

- \* Slips in academic performance
- \* Failure to follow directions
- \* Lying
- \* Saying "everything's boring"
- \* Depression lasting for weeks
- \* Losing one's temper frequently
- \* Losing interest in activities and friends
- \* Excess fatigue or sleeping
- \* Weight gain or loss
- \* Excessive irresponsible behavior or difficulty concentrating
- \* Isolation

### **About that social isolation**

Society needs to realize depression may be a cultural problem, VU psychology professor Jim Nelson, said.

Studies show high levels of Internet use and, somewhat surprisingly, social networking may play a role in exacerbating depression.

"There's something about that, that isn't working for people," he said.

"People are recognizing the social fragmentation, but there are no political conversations or community things," he said. "There has to be more awareness."

Studies have shown that kids feel better when they can do something that's good for other people.

"I don't think throwing money at (the problem) is the answer. People need to attend to their social life. If they're so busy they don't have time for friends and family, that's a warning sign your life has become out of balance."

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