

After many years working with children and adolescents, it appears there is no use for a teenager or adolescent in American society today. There was a time when a family was valued by society for the number of children it had. Today it appears that low income and uneducated families have more children. In the past, children were assets, assuring the continuity of the family line. Teenagers actively participated in maintaining the family through assuming responsibility for a number of tasks in the home, farm, or community. They contributed to the identity of the family. They felt needed and part of the community. Parents would showcase their children and teenagers wherever the opportunity arose, for example, at church, at picnics, or at community fairs. They in general were proud and the children were proud, too.

Teenagers felt needed and built their concept of self around this. They established their future goals, explored their fantasies, and chose their friends within the framework of their identity. Schooling was a means to this end and was, for all practical purposes, a finite experience, finite in the sense that there was a beginning, middle, and an end. Finite in the sense that goals were clear, generally centered around the concept of success (better living and better future for yourself and your family). Finite in the sense that the time commitment was clear and the number of years of involvement, practical, within a dozen years of concentrated schooling the world was at their feet. The dreams of wealth, respect, power, travel, security, and excitement were the fuel which helped teenagers to value the years of preparation, for one day the world would be theirs.

Today's teenagers are not without dreams or fantasies, but somehow they do not seem as attainable. The journey is longer. The educational route now takes decades – high school, college, graduate school and even then there are many uncertainties and

obstacles. The problem still exists even with high tech resources that young people and children are exposed to.

And along the way there is little use for young people, for they are in preparation. They are being molded, without permanent shape. They are not seen for who they are, but for what they can or should be. Who they are is the identity of teenagers today confronted with multiple cultures (culture they growing up and parents origin of family), the ambiguity of community social, education, the dissolution of family, the hostile commercialism of society, and the insecurity of relationships (family, girl/boy friends).

And this identity is fragile, threatened by fear of rejection, feelings of overwhelming failure, and of being different. Panicked by a sense of isolation, teenagers make a commitment to lifestyle, to friends, to sports, to gangs, to music, or to fashion. The adult confrontation promotes the isolation, the separateness, the differences, and the “you don’t understand me” attitude. Beginning of depression is a common concomitant to this struggle, and it is often aggravated by the very things that we think should relieve it.

Being with friends may only heighten the fear of eventual rejection. Participation in sports may in the teenager’s mind only spell impending failure to live up to the expectations of parents, coaches, teachers, and friends.

The paradox becomes clear by doing, you undo, undoing in the sense that the teenager now risks losing what identity he or she has attained. With the undoing, the outward spiral of growth and exploration turns inward on itself and the anxious and depressive symptoms begin to manifest themselves. Because many or almost all the teenager’s messages of their feeling are not direct. Then it is this indirectness which

catches us off guard, both as professionals and as parents trying to help them. Then we fail to recognize for example, the significance of psychosomatic symptoms, school failure, drug abuse, sleep problems, changed eating patterns, loss of interest in pastimes or sports. Adolescents can fool even the most astute of professionals and parents, giving rise to the disregard of or the minimization of complaints and risk. I hope, as a mother and professional, to be able to help parents and other understand and recognize adolescents' and teenagers' sources of depression and importance of treatment before failure or they end up treating themselves with street drugs and have drug problems.

These insights provide parents with knowledge which they need to highlight their own teenager's behavior. The early identification and the use of appropriate remedies within the family or through professional help lessens the pain and redirects the spiral of adolescent growth outward to excitement and new experience.

We are accustomed to thinking adolescence as a highly emotional time teens often experience very dramatic mood swings in response to hormonal changes, physical changes, and psychological growth and maturation. One day life is fabulous, the next day life is the pits. However, if the "blues" persist for more than two weeks, your teen may be suffering from depression. It is estimated that up to 10% of our adolescent population may suffer from depression and suicide is the second leading cause of death among teens in the United States.

The symptoms for teen depression are similar to those of adult depressions and can include feelings of hopelessness, sadness and anxiety, loss of interest in food or compulsive overeating, changes in sleeping habits, tendency toward isolation, decline in

scholastic performance, rebellion and acting out, use of drugs or alcohol, sexual promiscuity and a preoccupation with death and dying.

Depression is often at the heart of suicidal ideation. When a teen is depressed, they feel overwhelmed and hopeless. Initiating the smallest task can feel as if one has been asked to climb Mount Everest. The sadness can feel bottomless leaving the person both emotionally and cognitively vulnerable. People don't always make good choices for themselves when they are depressed and that is when suicide can appear to be seductive cure for the emotional pain.

When assessing your teen's behavior, be as objective in your evaluation as possible. There is no shame in being diagnosed with depression. Clearly denial is not a useful parental coping skill in this instance. Your initial step may be in visiting your teen's pediatrician or family doctor. They can assist you in assessing your teen's behavior and in referring you to other health care resources for assistance.

There are a variety of treatment options for depression including prescription medication and individual and family counseling. You and your healthcare provider will decide on the most appropriate course of treatment for your teen.

It is vital for parents to maintain good communication with their teen. It is important to know what your children are thinking and how they are feeling. Teenagers need to know that there is someone to talk to, someone who will listen to them without judgment. Doctors and therapists can fill that bill in a pinch, but children really long to build good relationships with their parents (no matter what they say). If you communicate well with your teenager then keep up the good work. If communication has become difficult or nonexistent then a chat with a minister, teacher, or family counselor

might be of assistance in reestablishing the lines of positive communication. Your teenager's life might depend on it.

Lots of teens or adolescents ask "How do I know if I'm depressed or anxious?" If you have any of the following feelings everyday for more than two weeks, talk to someone, for example, a counselor in school, your doctor, or your parents.

Do you...

- 1) Feel sad a lot or cry all the time?
- 2) Have trouble sleeping or sleep too much?
- 3) Find it hard to concentrate, make decisions, or remember things?
- 4) Change how you normally eat?
- 5) Feel guilty for no reason?
- 6) Feel life is meaningless?
- 7) Think about killing yourself (suicide)?
- 8) Wishing you were dead most of the time?
- 9) Feeling no one understands you?

Please call or do something about it. Start by talking to someone you trust, such as a friend, teacher, minister, etc.