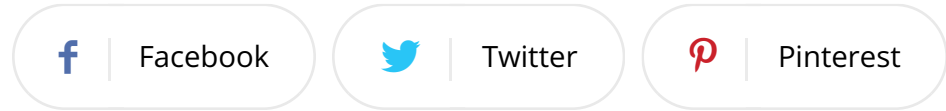


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Health: Teen Depression

By **Cathy Cassinos-Carr** - April 19, 2011



Teenagers. What on earth do they have to be depressed about?

That's what a lot of people think. And that's part of the problem.

Last year, a study out of San Diego State found that five times as many high school and college students reported experiencing mental health issues in 2007 than did same-age youth during the Great Depression. One of the issues showing the biggest jump? Depression, which increased from 1 percent to 6 percent.

How these numbers play out locally is anybody's guess. But we do know this: Teen depression is a reality, and the numbers "certainly aren't going down," says Robert McMahon, Ph.D., a local clinical psychologist with a passion for helping adolescents. "The problem is prevalent enough that a lot of teenagers need help."

So just what's eating at today's teens? Researchers from the San Diego study speculate that part of the problem is a culture that increasingly glamorizes wealth, looks and status, creating pressure and feelings of inadequacy for those who haven't "got it." Other experts suggest that today's helicopter parents, while well meaning, have raised young adults who lack real-world coping skills, which can lead to anxiety and/or depression.

McMahon and Matthew Soulier, M.D., a UC Davis psychiatrist with a primary interest in adolescents, offer some additional causal factors:

- Increased pressure to excel. "I think there's a drive to be 'the best' in a way there wasn't before," says Soulier. "There's no question there's a lot of pressure." It's no longer enough to sing in the choir or play on the basketball team, Soulier says; these days "you have to have a coach. You have to excel, build the perfect résumé, get into the right college. The expectations are so big."

- Technological overstimulation. Bugged that your teen is texting 24/7? That may be the least of your problems, suggests McMahon. "Technology provides constant exposure to a whole world of dark content—bizarre pornography and other extreme ways of thinking that wasn't as prevalent a generation ago," he says. As adolescents try to forge an identity, he says, exposure to these radical ideas and behaviors "is not always a good thing."

- Information overload. With cell phones, laptops, tweets and texts providing an endless digital sludge of instant information, technology also breeds overload, and that can be stressful, says McMahon. "We don't just cover local news anymore; it's international," he says. "The world has become much more complicated." Being exposed to a constant, complex web of content can be confusing and stressful for anyone, and may be especially overwhelming to a young, developing mind.

But you can't blame it all on life in the 21st century. Many teens get depressed for the same reasons they always did, including genetic predisposition, traumatic events and family strife.

Such was the case for Matt Gallagher, who began to exhibit signs of depression at age 16, around the time of his parents' divorce.

"I think when we separated and started the divorce process, [Matt] felt a bit abandoned by his dad," recalls Matt's mother, Susan Gallagher. Being the oldest of four kids also didn't help. "I think I was unwittingly, unknowingly putting a lot of pressure on him to help out with the younger kids," admits Gallagher. "Our life was really chaotic at the time."

When her previously sunny-dispositioned, socially popular son began sleeping for days, withdrawing from friends and displaying angry outbursts, it was clear something was wrong. "He had always been such a happy kid," says Gallagher. Ultimately, Matt found help through individual and group therapy, plus short-term medication. Family therapy also was a critical part of his treatment, notes Gallagher, who took specific steps to alleviate Matt's stress. "I had to take some of the pressure off of him, take away some of his household responsibilities and change the family dynamic so he could get well," she says. Giving up smoking pot also was an important part of Matt's recovery, she says.

The story has a happy ending: Matt, now 21, is attending American River College and doing well. But he worked hard to get there. "Matt's really a brave kid, and it took a lot of self-awareness and honesty on his part, and an understanding of the illness," says Gallagher. "It was a painful process, but he has that self-determination."

In retrospect, Gallagher says, she realizes she didn't pick up on the depth of Matt's problem as quickly as she might have—which, given her professional position, is ironic: She's the executive director of Mental Health America of Northern California. "I knew we were struggling," she says. "But I didn't realize to what point."

Parting Thoughts

Gallagher's story illuminates a key point, repeated frequently by the experts interviewed for this article: Pay close attention to your kids. And really, really listen.

"Not many parents are willing to take a step back and listen to their kid—truly listen," says Soulier. "Not many are asking themselves, 'What's it really like for my kid's life now?'" Much information can be gained, he says, simply by keeping a dialogue with your kids during both good and bad times, "not just waiting for 8 p.m. lecture time."

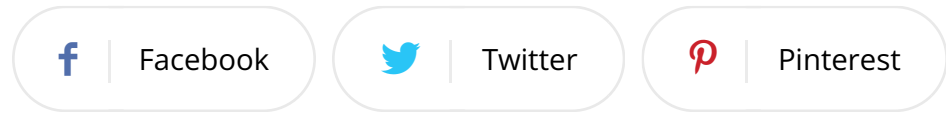
Teenagers can't be happy all the time. But if you notice your son or daughter having more bad times than good, isolating themselves, losing interest in things, sleeping a lot or starting to fail in school, "it's not a good sign," says McMahon.

Where to find help? Your child's school psychologist and pediatrician are good starting points, suggests Soulier. From there you may be referred to a therapist or child psychiatrist, though meds aren't always necessary. "A lot of garden-variety depression can be treated by a therapist [without medication], especially if the depression centers around a specific event, such as a breakup," says Soulier.

Mind-body approaches also can be helpful. In his Sacramento practice, McMahon and his wife, Marla McMahon, Psy.D. (also a clinical psychologist), offer such forward-thinking therapies as yoga for teenage girls, focusing on decreasing stress and common concerns such as body image.

And one more thing: Whatever you do, don't tell a depressed teen to "just snap out of it," says Soulier. "It doesn't work, and in fact can push your kid further away from you."

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M	T	W	T	F	S	S
26	27	28	29	30	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31	1	2	3	4	5	6

MON 31 **A Taste of the Delta Tasting Tour**
April 15 @ 11:30 am - December 31 @ 3:30 pm

MON 31 **Exhibit It! A Community Art Exhibit**
July 5 @ 11:30 am - August 18 @ 5:00 pm


MON 31 **"Meow Meow Meow" The Cat, Wild and Domestic.**
July 7 - July 31


MON 31 **Slice: A Juried Exhibit of Regional Art 2023**
July 11 @ 11:30 am - August 20 @ 5:00 pm

MON 31 **Geeks Who Drink Trivia Night at The Flamingo House Social Club**
July 17 @ 8:00 pm - September 25 @ 10:00 pm

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