

Ministering to teenagers with depression

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Depression is not simply sadness. It impacts the way a person thinks, feels and behaves over a long period of time.

Signs of depression in teenagers include struggling more than normal with decision-making or thought processes; changes from previous attitudes or behaviors; feelings of sadness that can include crying spells for no apparent reason; frustration or anger over even small matters; loss of interest in normal activities; or conflict with family and friends.

Depression is the principal cause of illness and disability in the world. The World Health Organization has been issuing [warnings about depression](#) for years, given that it affects more than 300 million people globally and is characterized by a high risk of suicide, which is the second-most-common cause of death in those ages 15 to 29.

Prevalence of depression

Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found clinical depression in teenagers [increased nearly 40 percent](#) from 2005 to 2014. The National Institute of Mental Health also estimated the number of [children](#) between ages 12 to 17 who have had a depressive episode in the past year has hit 3 million.

Stanford Children's Health notes, "[Around 11 percent of young people](#) will have experienced an episode of depression by the end of (their) teenage years." The mean age of onset today is 15. According to one measure, "[Almost 9 percent](#) of high school students have attempted suicide in the

past year.”

Teenagers with depression struggle to go to school or social gatherings, or to participate in any activities. Depression in teens is now much more than a phase. It is a real condition that can interfere with daily life, lead to suicidal thoughts and behaviors, and go on to affect a person throughout life.

Benefits of parental support

It is clear teenage depression can affect an individual’s social networks, most notably, the family. Unfortunately, the emotional and behavioral consequences go largely ignored for family members of depressed teenagers. Nevertheless, parents should provide continual warmth, care and support.

It is important for teenagers to know depression is not their fault, and they can reach out to their parents and trusted adults for help and support.

Parents may think they have little to offer their teens, but recent studies suggest otherwise. [A 2016 study](#) found “[teens with high levels of parental support](#) had lower depression symptoms and lower cortisol and C-reactive protein levels—two physiological markers associated with depression—than teens with less supportive relationships.”

Depression and a sense of self

Some describe the impact of experiencing mental health problems as redemptive or transformational in the sense it ultimately has led to a greater sense of self-discovery or empowerment for them—in spite or because of negative aspects of depression. It is important to note: This has been the experience of some individuals but may not be the experience for

all.

Some reinterpret the suffering often associated with mental health problems in a way that sees the whole experience as a journey or pilgrimage that fosters hope. [One author](#) stated: “Nonetheless I am convinced that the depression can be a pilgrimage; an audacious journey in which one must be prepared to be broken in order to live again (or indeed in) some cases live for the first time.”

Biblical framework for depression

From a biblical standpoint, all of the symptoms associated with depression must be addressed within the framework of a person’s relationship to God. In the Bible, spirituality always has to do with a person’s relationship with God, and that relationship impacts all aspects of life.

Of course, the fact someone is experiencing depression does not mean it is a result of their relationship with God or their faith. However, spirituality is not a separate component of a Christian’s life. It energizes, shapes and directs his or her life. As we see in the book of Job, spirituality and mental health often go hand in hand and influence each other.

Pastoral care of depressed teenagers

As a pastor, you can be a significant resource for a teenager in your congregation who has depression. Who else can help a teenager experiencing depression truly to understand and respond biblically to many different effects of depression, if not the pastor?

You might not be the lead person helping a member experiencing depression, but in a real sense, the centrality of their relationship with the Lord means you need to help them think through all of the effects of

depression from a faith-based perspective. You can be the person who helps the depressed individual process mental, relational, behavioral and physical aspects of depression from a God-centered perspective.

The teenager most likely also will get help from mental health professionals, but never assume the involvement of other professionals diminishes the significance of your role. Their involvement actually highlights your significance if other helpers are not Christians.

While a person's faith is not the cure for mental health struggles, it can be a coping mechanism and resource. Pastors can support those who suffer along their journey.

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