

How to prevent depression and clinical anxiety in your teenager- Strategies for parents

There is a range of factors that influence whether or not a teenager develops depression or clinical anxiety, including a few which parents have some control over. This means there are things you can do to help reduce your teenager's risk of developing these problems. Over the next few Bulletins I will share some information on depression and clinical anxiety, and outline practical parenting strategies as recommended by Beyond Blue.

What is depression?

The word depression is used in many different ways. People feel sad or blue when bad things happen. However, everyday 'blues' or sadness is not clinical depression. People with the 'blues' may have a temporary depressed mood, but they usually manage to cope and soon recover without treatment. What we are trying to prevent is *clinical depression*. *Clinical depression* (otherwise referred to as *depression* throughout these guidelines) involves feeling down or irritable for at least two weeks and stops a person from enjoying things they used to like or from taking part in usual activities, such as going out with friends or playing sport. When this happens, other symptoms also develop.

These may include feeling worthless, not sleeping well, not being able to concentrate, having an increased or decreased appetite, or thinking of suicide. The symptoms are severe enough to interfere with everyday life. For example, they make it hard for the person to focus or perform well at school or college, or to get along with friends and family.

What is clinical anxiety?

Everybody experiences anxiety at some time. When people describe their anxiety, they may use terms such as: anxious, stressed, nervous, on edge, worried, tense or scared. Although anxiety is an unpleasant state, it can be quite useful in helping a person to avoid dangerous situations and motivate them to solve everyday problems. However, anxiety can become a problem if it is severe, long-lasting and interferes with a person's life. *Clinical anxiety* refers to symptoms of constantly feeling nervous, anxious or on edge, and not being able to stop or control worrying. The anxiety is strong enough to cause trouble at school or work, in personal relationships (e.g. with family, friends) or to make it difficult to get on with day-to-day activities.

Source: Kelly, C., Kitchener, B., & Jorm, A. (2013). Youth mental health first aid: A manual for adults assisting young people (3rd ed.). Mental Health First Aid Australia: Melbourne, Australia

Strategy 1

Establish and maintain a good relationship with your teenager

- **Show affection** – its important to show your teenager that they are loved and

respected. Express your affection for your child verbally, such as telling them regularly that you love them. Adapt the way you demonstrate affection to your child according to their age and level of maturity

- **Take time to talk** – make time to chat with your teenager about their day and what they've been doing. Try to start a conversation with them at times when they appear open to conversation. Let them talk about whatever interests them. Encourage your teenager notice and enjoy the lighter and funnier side of life.
- **Know how to talk about strong emotions and sensitive topics** – it is common for teenagers to experience strong emotions. In order to manage their emotions effectively, young people need to first learn how to recognize and understand them. If you see that your teenager is feeling a strong emotion, ask about their feelings, eg "you look worried. Is there something on your mind?" or, "it sounds like you're really angry. Would you like to talk about it?" Listen to your teen when they talk about their emotions. This helps them to identify and understand what they are feeling and to manage their emotions effectively. Do not dismiss or trivialize your teenager's emotional responses. This can be interpreted as an indication that their emotions are unimportant. Model empathy by showing concern for their feelings during important discussions.

Strategy 2

- **Be involved and support increasing autonomy**
- **Be involved in your teenager's life** – being involved and taking an interest in your teens life can reduce their risk. Paying attention to your teenager will also help you identify whether they are experiencing any problems. Show an interest in your teenagers' life in a way that demonstrates that you care about them. Here are some ways you can do this;
 - ◇ Regularly engage in enjoyable activities that allow you and your teenager to spend one-on-one time together
 - ◇ Regularly try and eat dinner together as a family
 - ◇ Get to know who your teenager's friends are
 - ◇ Monitor your teenager's performance at school
 - ◇ Take an active interest in what your teenager is doing at school and in their extra-curricular activities
 - ◇ Encourage your teen to be engaged in their studies and other school activities
- **Avoid over-involvement and encourage autonomy** – it is important to balance paying your teenager attention with giving them space and privacy. Excessive control over a young person's activities, thoughts and feelings can

increase their risk of depression and anxiety. Try to monitor where they are, what they are doing, and who they are with by showing an interest in their activities rather than being intrusive.

Try to avoid encouraging your teenager to be too dependent on you. Evaluate whether you are taking over things too much by asking yourself "did I really need to step in?", and "what would have to be the worst thing to happen if I didn't step in?". Encourage your teen to help around the house by giving them age-appropriate jobs and responsibilities.