



Parents Make A Difference!

Teens and Depression

November 2002

More than 85% of teens in southwest Wisconsin are satisfied with themselves and have a positive attitude most of the time. Nine out of 10 teens reported that if they had a personal problem, they would have someone to talk to. Eighty percent (80%) have not considered suicide.

So why do some young people become depressed? How much can a parent influence the mental health of a teen? How common are depression and suicidal feelings in teens? What are some warning signs that might be cause for concern?

What is Depression?

Feeling depressed is not the same as feeling stressed. Symptoms of stress like tension, frustration and worry tend to last only for a few hours or a few days. Depression is more severe and lasts longer.

Depressed adolescents frequently:

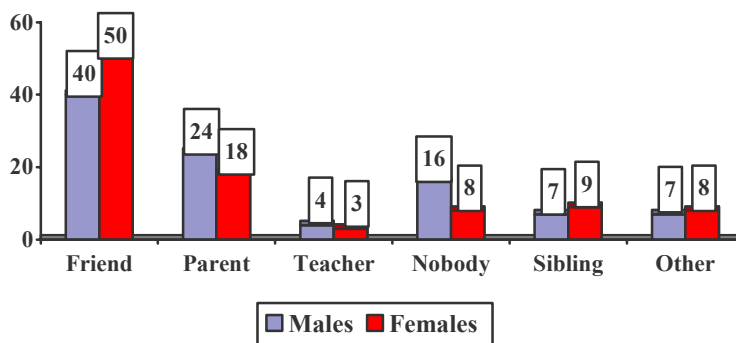
- Talk about feeling empty, hopeless, worried, guilty or worthless.
- Have difficulty thinking clearly, concentrating, making decisions, completing homework and keeping up grades.
- Verbalize physical complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, backaches, sleeping problems or weight changes.
- Display unusual behavior, e.g., restlessness, perfectionism, irritability, isolation, conflict, dropping out of sports or hobbies, drinking alcohol or using drugs.

Certain conditions in the family can also place teens at risk for depression. Examples include family history of depression or suicide, frequent family conflict, divorced parents, an alcoholic parent, chronic illness in a family member, or loss of a parent or close loved one.

Other factors that could put a teen at risk for depression include rejection from peers, sexual or physical abuse, a learning disability or low self-esteem.

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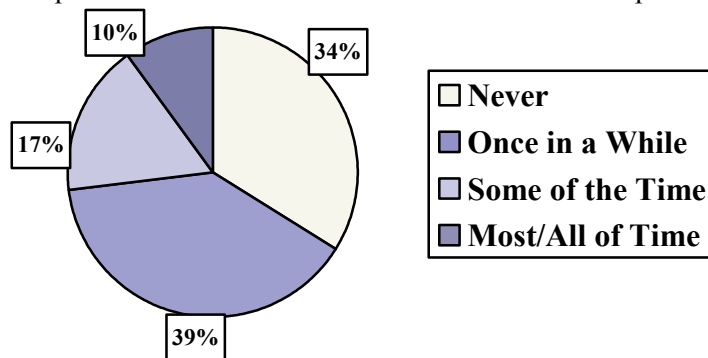
Research from the recent Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey (SWYS) of 5,704 students in 7th through 12th grades from 19 school districts shows that parents really do have an influence on how teens feel. Teens who have a close relationship with their parents are more likely to discuss problems with their parents. Frequent and open conversations can help to lessen the extent of sad moods. When teens were asked who they turn to for support, about one-quarter (24%) of males and 18% of females report they would turn to a parent or step-parent if they were having a problem and needed someone to talk to.



Teens who have a close relationship with their parents are also less likely to be depressed. Feelings of family love and support play a significant role in teen mental health. Eighty-two percent (82%) of teens who believe their families love and support them did not consider suicide in the month prior to the survey. Conversely, 53% of teen who did not feel they had family love and support did think about suicide in the month prior to the survey.

How Common is Teen Depression?

SWYS presented several questions related to depression and males tended to report feeling less depressed than females. While 44% of the males reported



never feeling sad or depressed in the month before the survey, only 24% of the females never had that feeling. More than one-third of females in 7th grade reported not feeling sad or depressed, but more than 75% of 8th through 12th grade females reported feeling depressed or very sad anywhere from once in the past month to all of the time in the past month. About half of the 7th and 8th grade boys did not feel sad or depressed in the month prior to the survey while about 60% of the older males did feel some sadness or depression.

Overall, 80% of the teens had not thought about suicide in the month prior to the survey. Of the students who thought about suicide, most did not talk about it to another person and those that did talk about it, chose to talk to a friend. Of the students surveyed, 14% have made a plan at some point to commit suicide and 9% report that they have tried to kill themselves.

What Are The Warning Signs for Teen Suicide?

Clues that an adolescent is suicidal may be verbal or behavioral and although similar to symptoms of depression, are more serious. People frequently tell others they are considering suicide, wish they were dead or say they don't want to live anymore. Someone who talks about suicide is asking for help. Always take them seriously and get professional help.

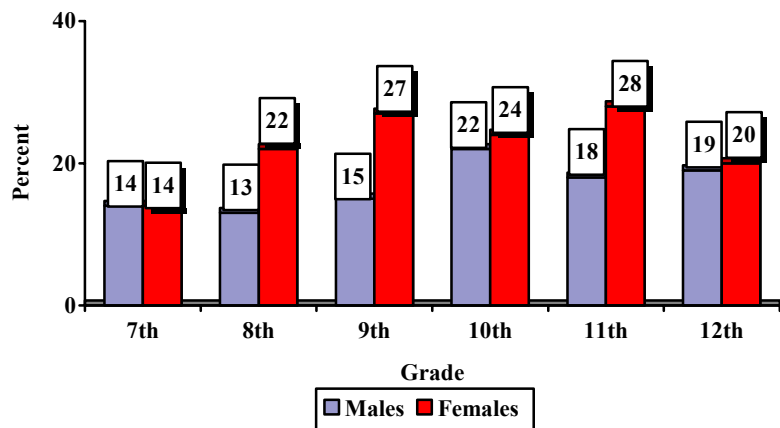
Other warning signs include:

- Altered personality or appearance.
- Any dramatic changes in behavior, e.g., academic, social or emotional.
- Excessive use of alcohol or drugs, changes in eating or sleeping habits.
- Giving away treasured possessions.
- Isolation, constant insomnia, chronic anxiety or panic.
- Family history of suicide and/or previous attempts.

What Can a Parent Do?

When you talk with your teen:

- ✓ Remember that teens may feel uncomfortable discussing their concerns at first. They may not even know how to communicate them out loud. It may take several attempts at communication before your child can or will discuss their feelings with you.



- ✓ Let teens know that you love them and are not angry or disappointed in them if they do feel depressed. The less judgmental you appear, the more likely your teen will trust you with his or her feelings.
- ✓ Be a good model of how to deal with stress. Work together with your teen to choose positive alternatives such as exercising, playing music, helping someone in need, talking with family or close friends, and painting or other artistic activities.
- ✓ Listen to your teen. Refrain from giving too much advice or direction.
- ✓ Help your teen develop problem-solving skills. Encourage them to make plans, set goals and identify options.

Remember: Parents make a difference!

"Parents Make a Difference" is a product of the Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey (SWYS), a program of the University of Wisconsin-Extension, local school districts and UW-Platteville. This newsletter is adapted from the UW-Extension "Whose Kids?...Our Kids!" Teens and Depression newsletter which was originally written by Tamara Schlessinger, Mary Huser, Donna Doll Yogerest, Karen Hintz and Stephen Small. This issue of "Parents Make a Difference" was written by Ruth Schriefer, UW-Extension Iowa County and Paulette Wijas, CICSW, Unified Community Services, Grant and Iowa County, and edited by Deb Ivey UW-Extension Iowa County, Tom Schmitz, UW-Extension Grant and Lafayette County and Christina Kenney, UW-Extension Grant County. Thanks are extended to the 5,704 7th to 12th graders from southwest Wisconsin who participated in the 2001 SWYS survey. Contact UW-Extension <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cty/grant/tap/parentresources.html> for further information, or by phone Grant County (608) 723-2125; Lafayette County (608) 776-4820; and Iowa County (608) 935-0391.