

Just Moody or Depressed?

Is my teenage daughter just moody, hormonal, and grumpy, or do I really need to worry? Most parents of teenage girls ask themselves this question at some stage during their daughter's adolescent years.

No one knows your child like you do, but during adolescence so many changes occur that it's not hard to find yourself wondering if you do or not. Hormones, cognitive changes, normal teen angst, school stress, worrying about the future, body image, peer pressure are just a few factors that affect your teenager during this period.

There are important developmental tasks which occur in adolescence. These include establishing a new and positive sense of self in response to the many changes that are occurring. Physical changes alone require adjustment and re-evaluation of body image for starters, and acceptance of this new self as a person of worth is critical. These changes bring a new awareness of self and of others' reactions to them. Sometimes our adolescent daughters (and sons) look like adults (and are even treated by some as adults) but they are not. As parents (and adults) we still need to be aware of their needs and provide them with opportunities to grow into adult roles, helping them to develop their emotional independence, discover their sources of personal strength and to move towards self-reliance.

During this time it is normal for teenagers to be a little more introspective and moody as they begin to look at themselves and try to develop a sense of where they fit, not just in the family, but in the world around them. They are wondering about how others view them and are building self-image and self-esteem. They are developing a social conscience, wondering about the state of the world and, being full of youthful enthusiasm and idealism, they may even come across as critical, rude and disgruntled.

It is important to pay attention to your teen's mood, to be sure it is not developing beyond moodiness and into depression which often presents as irritability in teenagers. Changes in grades at school, eating habits, sleeping patterns and groom-ing can also be indicators for depression and stress overload.

It is possible to be supportive of teenage children, even if they do seem a little anti-social and grumpy.

- When they do talk to you, take the time to listen to what they have to say. Be respectful of opinions and views that may now be different from your own. Part of establishing independence is about challenging the things they have always been taught and accepted without question in the past. Invariably the family values you have instilled will win through, but they need now to work things out for themselves. Listen with your heart, and be aware of your body language. Rolling eyes, heavy sighs and shaking heads will have the same effect as saying, "You're talking rubbish."
- Respect their growing need for privacy. If having their own bedroom is not an option, think about how you can create a space at your house where they can be with their friends, or just be without your company. Make their friends feel welcome at your home and encourage them to visit.
- Show your love and respect for the person they are, not just for what they can achieve.
- Don't do things for them that they can do for themselves. Importantly, teach them to manage their time, rather than managing it for them.

- When presented with problems, work on them together. Brainstorm ideas and discuss options.
- Show confidence in their judgement wherever possible and make sure they know that you believe they are capable of making choices that are in their own long term best interest.
- Pick your battles. Don't compromise when their safety is the issue, but don't demand they wear a certain outfit or "be nice" (and close the door on the messy bedroom).

It mightn't feel like it at times, but your teenagers really want your time and your approval. Attend as many sports matches, debates, concert or extracurricular activities as you are reasonably able. Praise is a good thing but many teenagers are uncomfortable with direct praise. Try couching your praise in terms of your own feelings, rather than their actual achievements. "I was so proud of you out there today." "I can tell you've really thought about this." "I really enjoyed that performance." "I can see a lot of work/effort has gone into completing this project."

Bad days, bad moods and a touch of melancholy or sadness can strike most of us from time to time. These feelings are normal in our children too, especially during the teenage years. It is normal to feel disappointed or sad when we face set-backs or loss, but these feelings usually diminish with time.

If on the other hand you DO notice that your teenager seems withdrawn or is experiencing a depressive/irritable mood that lingers on for weeks or even months, and if this mood seems to be limiting their ability to enjoy life (even with their friends), or their ability to function normally, then you are right to be concerned and should seek help. Boredom, feelings of hopelessness and anger are also possible signs of depression that should not be ignored.

It is not uncommon to hear parents say, "But she has a good life and absolutely nothing to be depressed about." And it can be difficult for parents to understand that depression can strike regardless of circumstances. If you are not sure or are worried about your child, do not hesitate to call or email us at school. We are happy to talk to you about your concerns.

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