

## Should I Worry?

### Tuning into Teens' Emotional Shifts

As we approach the one-year mark of an ever-strong pandemic that has rocked our world, we are searching for ways to keep ourselves mentally and emotionally in check. For teens, this has been an even more difficult feat. Adolescence is already fraught with stress and moodiness but adding in the social isolation and fear have led to an even greater rise in anxiety and depression among teens. And while parents are doing their best to manage their own stress and provide for their families, alarming signs of depression in teens are being overlooked. Therefore, it is vital that parents are attuned to their teens "normal" moods and know when they are exhibiting more harmful ones.

As teens grow and develop, it's no surprise that the raging hormones along with academic, social, and even athletic stressors set the stage for teenage angst. And while it's not always easy to discriminate between typical teenage moodiness and depression, observing behaviors that are continuous and persistent are cause for concern. Teen brains are already overly sensitive to stress since their prefrontal cortex is still developing. Therefore, the onset for serious psychological disorders is during these years. And even more disturbing is that the beginning of emotional distress seems to now be trickling into younger age groups, generally around age 10.

Our modern lifestyle has, no doubt, played a role in the increased stress in our teens. They typically get less exercise, eat more processed foods, and spend hours on some form of technology or social media. They get outside less and get minimal amounts of quality sleep. And to exacerbate things they are now living through a pandemic that has decreased their social support systems and kept them out of school off and on or indefinitely. So, things that once served to alleviate some of the pain are now gone too. Moreover, experts believe that teens have been raised with unrealistic expectations about the "real world" because many parents have tried to shield them from pain and disappointment instead of helping them develop coping skills and dealing with a problem head on.

Since anxiety and depression present in varying ways, it's vital that parents are attuned to their child's baseline personality. Sadness often shows up as withdrawal or irritability. And while moodiness often accompanies typical teen emotions, watching for extreme shifts in their mood and how long these things are lasting can give parents an enormous amount of insight. Now, more than ever, it's essential that parents do daily mood checks with their teens. These moments, however, are when parents should be gentle but persistent while also being ready to **listen** without trying to fix things.

As a part of the SKILLZ Child Development program, the Parent SKILLZ curriculum provides tips for parents to connect with their child, no matter what age. Being attuned to their normal personality traits can help parents better nurture the bond with their teen through patience and consistency. These things will encourage open dialogue so teens will feel their emotions are taken seriously. Also encouraging a healthy lifestyle with plenty of physical activity, **balanced** meals, and sleep will help stabilize moods.

Teens often have a hard time expressing how they feel so it's up to **parents**, teachers, and other caregivers to identify the signs when moodiness turns into depression. Reaching out to other trusted adults for help with teens and get them talking, is important. Then the uncomfortable feelings that come along stress and other adolescent woes will be more manageable due to coping skills and a strong support system.