



# How to Help Your Teenager with Anxiety and Depression

By Paul Asay | approx. 6 min read

**Four tips for parents on how to help a teenager with anxiety and depression. As your teen faces challenges, be prepared to help.**

The world seems to be finally shaking free of the COVID pandemic. We're putting away our masks, going to movies, and even climbing on planes. But as one health crisis eases, another just keeps growing: teen anxiety and depression. The thought of how to help your teenager with anxiety and depression is big on the mind of parents today.

The Headspace National Youth Mental Health Survey 2020 of 1,035 Australian youth (aged 12–25 years), showed that the proportion of young people feeling lonely (lacking companionship) has been increasing over time, from 49% in 2018 to 54% in 2020. Those aged 12–14 years saw the most substantial increase in feeling they lacked companionship, rising from 41% in 2018 to 52% in 2020. Young women reported higher rates of feeling isolated than young men across every age group except those aged 22–25 years.

Thoughts of non-suicidal self-injury are common among young people and increase during the adolescent years, according to [new research released today by the Australian Institute of Family Studies \(AIFS\)](#). The study found that **thirty percent** of respondents had considered non-suicidal self-injury between the ages of 14 and 17, while 18% reported acts of self-injury.

## **Anxiety and Depression in Teens**

Many parents—especially Christian parents—might think that their children maybe immune to these frightening trends. Their children, after all, know the Gospel—the greatest, most hopeful news you could possibly have. Who can be depressed in the face of that beautiful truth?

But here's the thing about depression: *It lies to you.* All you've been taught, all that you've been reared to believe, can feel false and hollow in the face of the crippling despair that depression can throw at you. While some studies suggest that faith can be a bulwark against depression, Christians that suffer from it can feel even worse. *I shouldn't be feeling this way, they might tell themselves. There must be something wrong with me. My parents would be ashamed of me.* And so, they hide it when they should be talking.

I know. When I was a teen, I would've been one of those kids who said I felt sad and hopeless much of the time. And even though I loved my parents—and honestly, because I loved my parents—I never talked to them about these feelings. I didn't want them to worry, even though they should have been concerned.

So, what, then, is a parent to do? What can you do to help a teenager with anxiety and depression?

Here's a few tips to consider.

## **Tips for How to Help a Teenager with Anxiety and Depression**

### **1. Watch for the warning signs**

The warning signs are easy to see but, paradoxically, difficult to spot. *Why?* Because often, the signs can look a lot like just being a teen. Most adolescents, after all, experience mood swings and feel a little irritable. Many complain about being tired all the time.

But these can also be signs of depression. Look for those signs, especially if they're paired with others, including social withdrawal; increased sensitivity to rejection or criticism; fatigue; unexplained physical ailments such as headaches or stomachaches; changes in appetite; a retreat from extracurricular activities (or, sometimes, a sudden and alarming increase in them).

### **2. Keep an eye on your teen's social media usage**

Scientists and researchers are increasingly seeing links between social media and mental health issues. Teens who engage with social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok a lot are more likely to be anxious or depressed.

Some of this seems to be tied to the type of content that teens engage with. Looking at Instagram photos filled with beautiful people can make teens feel ugly and less worthy by comparison. Seeing posts of a teen's friends having a good time without them can be devastating.

But it's also a matter of quantity, too. The first thing many teens do when they wake up is look at their phones. It's the last screen they engage with before going to bed, too. Many adolescents sleep with their phones—checking posts and IM'ing with friends at 2 a.m. This kind of engagement is incredibly distracting and can lead to a loss of sleep, both of which can impact a teen's mental health.



Now, social media is an important tool for many teens today, making them feel more connected to their peers. It's not all bad, of course. But parents should monitor their teen's accounts and set limits to how much time they're allowed to engage with social media. Honestly, you might want to talk to your teen about keeping his or her phone in another room at bedtime.

### 3. Talk with your teen

Easier said than done, right? But if you can manage it, good communication is key. If your son or daughter feels comfortable talking with you during the high-school years, you'll be able to keep tabs on his or her state of mind. If your teen expresses feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness, talks about having trouble sleeping or having a hard time concentrating, or confesses to having thoughts of hurting himself or herself, those are critical signs that your child might be depressed.

Additionally, just those lines of communication can help stave off depression a bit. They can help your child feel less alone, less isolated. Your teen can express some of the angst and despair she or he might feel, and it's almost always healthy to let that stuff breathe.

**Ask lots of questions**—about school, friends, and your teen's state of mind. It doesn't hurt to ask even awkward questions: "Have you ever thought about hurting yourself?" A friend of mine, who used to lead a suicide prevention nonprofit for teens, says that these sorts of questions can open the door to important, critical, conversations.

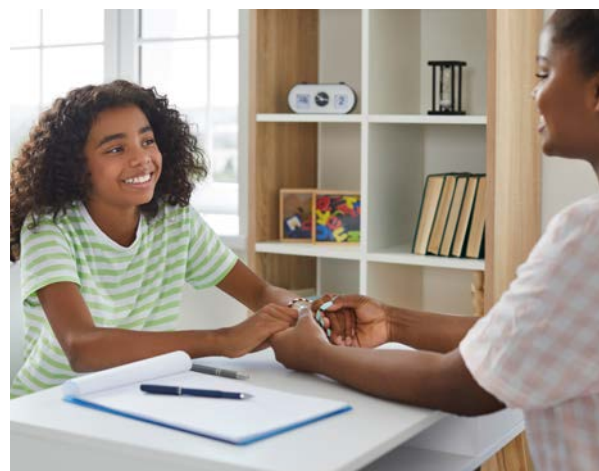
Be honest and open with your teens.

Keep in mind, though, that even when your kids love you, value your opinion, and might secretly long for some help or even just a hug from you, they still might not talk about these deeply personal, painful issues. But keep at it. Ask lots of questions. Reveal little bits about yourself—the stuff that scares you or makes you sad (up to a point). If you show that you trust your kids enough to show the chinks in your own armour, your kids will be a little more likely to show you that same trust.

Finally, be available to talk as much as possible. Take walks. Encourage conversation on the way to school. Eat meals together without the TV on. Be there.

### 4. When in doubt, see a professional.

Take your child to a counsellor or psychologist. Be proactive, even if it's a little awkward. A mental health expert can give you far more tools to help your son or daughter through those really trying adolescent years. If your child needs help, get that help. And honestly, I'd always err on the safe side.



## Final Thoughts on Phone Time for Kids

There's no magic bullet, no miracle cure for depression. Some teens may come out of it in a matter of weeks. But for others, it can be an ongoing struggle. And parents—conditioned as we are to kiss our kids' scratches and fix our kids' problems—can sometimes feel helpless in the face of it.

To watch your son or daughter struggle and suffer from this mental condition is incredibly difficult. And there are no easy answers for how to help a teenager with anxiety and depression.

**But there is hope.** You and your teen can find help. Depression is a hard thing to shake, but it can be treated—through counselling, through medication, through lifestyle changes, and yes, through savvy parenting. And, of course, you should encourage teens to engage with the ultimate hope: Jesus.

**Prayer can be incredibly helpful:** To express gratitude for all the things that God's given us can help remind how much we must be thankful for. To place our troubles at God's feet can help lessen the anxiety that often goes hand-in-hand with depression. To talk with God reminds us that we're not alone—and that can be a key component to pushing through depression. Spending time in the Bible or spending time with friends at a youth group can be a help, too.

And maybe the most important thing that you can do as a parent is to reassure your child that they don't need to go through it alone. Depression seeks to isolate its victims. Mums and Dads need to come alongside and remind their teens that you've always got their backs. That you'll always be with them—and that God is always there for them. Reassure them that whatever they're going through, you'll be there with them, every step of the way.

