

Recognising serious signs in teen behaviour

Persistent low mood, withdrawal and fatigue may point to something deeper, says psychiatrist Lim Wei Shyan



Depression in teens often shows up in quiet ways, but support can start at home. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Most parents recognise that teenagers can be moody – their emotions swinging quickly between highs and lows. While these shifts are a normal part of growing up, persistent or severe changes may signal something more concerning, like depression.

As your teen navigates the challenges of puberty, forms their own identity and copes with growing social pressures, it can be hard to tell when mood swings indicate deeper issues. Understanding the differences can help you provide the right support at the right time, says Mount Alvernia Hospital psychiatrist Lim Wei Shyan. Here, he explains key signs to watch out for and how to help.

Q What are teenage mood swings and how is depression different?

Teenage mood swings are a normal experience in adolescence. They result largely from hormonal fluctuations – such as in testosterone and oestrogen – which can make emotions feel more intense and unpredictable. At the same time, the areas of the brain responsible for regulating these emotions are still developing, so teens may struggle to manage their feelings, leading to dramatic highs and lows.

In contrast, depression – also known as major depressive disorder – is a more persistent state of low mood and disinterest that lasts for weeks or longer, often without a clear trigger. Depressed teens may also experience symptoms such as significant changes in sleep, appetite, energy levels and concentration, which can severely impact their daily lives.

Q What are the early signs of depression in teenagers that parents might overlook?

An important clue is a negative mood that does not improve – even during positive moments – and lasts for at least a couple of weeks. If your teen no longer enjoys activities they once loved, withdraws from social interactions at home or school, or struggles with sleep, these signals could suggest deeper concerns.

Other red flags include significant shifts in appetite or weight, ongoing fatigue despite sufficient rest, neglect of personal care and even self-harm behaviours. These cues often start subtly, so it is important to watch for changes over time and across various settings. While one symptom alone might not confirm depression, a combination of these behaviours may mean your teen could benefit from extra support.

Q What steps can parents take to support a teen showing signs of depression at home?

Begin by creating a safe, open space for conversation. Gently share your observations and invite them to talk about how they feel, keeping in mind they may feel overwhelmed or unsure of how to express themselves. Listening patiently – without rushing to offer solutions – can help your teen feel understood and gradually open up.

You can also encourage your teen to build healthy daily routines to support their well-being, such as getting enough rest, having balanced meals and engaging in activities they enjoy, even if it takes a little prompting. Let them know you are always there by checking in regularly, so they never feel alone.

Should their mood remain low or they begin to withdraw further, consider seeking guidance from a school counsellor or mental health professional. If you suspect their safety may be at risk or they might be harming themselves, trust your instincts and have them evaluated by a psychiatrist as soon as possible or seek emergency care if necessary.



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