



Dealing With Depression

You feel down, overwhelmed, alone. Don't worry – help is available.

WHEN HE WAS CAST AS A LEAD ACTOR IN A FILM about teens coping with depression and anxiety, Josh Devou knew little about either illness. In fact, he didn't realize they were illnesses.

"I just thought depression was when someone was sad all the time and didn't know why," says Josh, 17.

Turns out, the role led Josh to understand what had been happening in his own life since middle school.

"I never had words for it before," Josh says. "I used to get really sad at night. I'd be awake and feel so alone, so isolated, so scared. Even when surrounded by people, I felt alone."

It was always worse in the winter, when it got dark early. He also began to experience moments in which he felt overwhelmed. He was unable to focus his thoughts and struggled for breath.

"It was like having an asthma attack without having asthma."

His role in the film "The Road Back" educated him about mental illness, and he took his first step toward recovery when he talked to a school counselor about what was going on. He was referred to a therapist who diagnosed him with anxiety and seasonal affective disorder, a type of depression that

impacts individuals at certain times of the year, usually winter.

Today, thanks to therapy, Josh has strategies to cope with his illness. He has regained a positive outlook and looks forward to college in the fall.

"There is nothing to be afraid of when you say, 'I need help.' You aren't weak. You are strong because you are working on it," he says. "I look at it this way: Dealing with my illness was like another homework assignment. It's something I had to do for myself. I had to regain control of my life."

What Is Depression?

Josh isn't alone. One in four teens will experience symptoms of depression, says Dr. Sibel Algon, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Acadia Hospital in Maine.

While researchers aren't sure exactly what causes depression, they

AT A GLANCE

- » Depression is a treatable illness, not a hidden embarrassment.
- » It can be hereditary or triggered by a traumatic life event.
- » Untreated depression can lead to danger.

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THE ROAD BACK

“The Road Back” is an award-winning dramatic short film that offers hope to young people dealing with anxiety and depression. It follows Allie and Christian, high-achieving students challenged by pressures at home and school. Based on true-life experiences of teens, the film explores the stigma attached to mental health issues impacting youth.

The film was written and directed by high-school student Faith Bishop and stars many of her classmates, including Josh Devou. Acadia Hospital and Project AWARE, a nonprofit organization that empowers youth, helped produce the film.

You can watch “The Road Back” for free at boyslife.org/links/theroadback.

ADDITIONAL READING

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry's youth resources website: boyslife.org/links/aacap
Helpguide has good information too: boyslife.org/links/helpguide

do know it has to do with an imbalance of chemicals in the brain. These chemicals are what allow cells in the brain to communicate with each other and when they are out of balance, it impacts brain functions, including movement, sensation, memory and emotions.

Depression can be hereditary. It can also be triggered by a traumatic life event, such as divorce, death or being bullied. And teens who experience depression may also experience anxiety — as Josh did.

But the good news is that depression is very treatable. Like other illnesses, the key is recognizing the symptoms and seeing a doctor.

What Are the Symptoms?

While everyone feels sad, anxious or fearful from time to time — for example, after an argument with a friend, doing poorly on an exam or breaking up with someone — what distinguishes depression from a normal bout of “the blues” is the amount of time that the sadness lasts.

“If it lasts for a few weeks, then it might be depression,” Algon says. “And that doesn’t mean you have to feel sad 100 percent of the time. You might feel OK 30 percent of the time.”

But if sadness and hopelessness are the prevailing emotions, then chances are, it might be depression.

Other signs of depression include anger, irritability or lashing out at friends and family; an inability to focus; feeling tired all the time; feeling worthless; falling grades; changes in sleep or eating habits; no longer wanting to be with friends; constant headaches and stomachaches; and losing interest in things that previously were important to you.

“Maybe you used to shoot hoops with your friends and you no longer want to do that. Maybe you used to like to go to the movies and they no longer interest you. Now TV or video-games are exclusively taking the place of the things you used to want to do, as they make no demands on you,” explains

Dr. Bela Sood, chairwoman of the Division of Child Psychiatry in the Virginia Treatment Center for Children, Virginia Commonwealth University. “These all can be subtle signs that you are heading toward depression.”

Intervention and Prevention

Youth struggling with depression are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, including smoking, drinking, drugs, running away, bullying or acting violently, sex, hurting themselves and ultimately, suicide.

“It’s important that you know that the decisions you make when you are depressed are not the same decisions you would make when you are recovered,” Sood says. “Depression causes people to look at life through dark glasses, and you have difficulty appreciating the bright side of anything. Your judgment is colored negatively. Once a person goes into a depression, it’s often hard to see reality.”

But with treatment — which almost always includes therapy and some-

times medication — your outlook can change tremendously.

The most important step for a teen experiencing symptoms of depression is to talk to a trusted adult. Treatment will likely start with a visit to a family doctor, who might refer you to a specialist.

And while no one causes their own depression or anxiety, there are things you can do to help alleviate the conditions, Algon says. Get enough sleep — usually eight to nine hours a night. Eat healthy. Exercise. Talk with your parents or other influential adults in your life. Spend time with friends. Volunteer in your community. Avoid substance abuse. Understand what triggers you to become upset and learn how to cope with those triggers.

And know that depression can be a temporary situation.

“What I tell others who are dealing with depression and anxiety is that we all have things in life we have to deal with. This is just one more thing on your plate right now,” Josh says. “And once you overcome this, you can overcome anything in life.”

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Be on the lookout for these symptoms of depression in yourself or others. If you see them, talk to a parent or other trusted adult.

- Overwhelming sadness, hopelessness and anger that last for weeks
- Inability to focus
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Falling grades
- Changes in sleep or eating habits
- Constant tiredness, headaches or stomachaches
- Losing interest in important things, including friends



GETTY IMAGES

HELPING A FRIEND

Researchers say untreated depression is one of the leading causes of teen suicide. But what should you do if you suspect a friend might be suffering from depression or thinking about ending their life?

Dr. Lidija Petrovic-Dovat, an adolescent psychiatrist at the Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center in Pennsylvania, offers these suggestions:

Teens experiencing depression will often rely on their peers more than their parents or other adults, so friends can be influential in encouraging them to get help. If a friend is showing signs of depression, ask how he/she is feeling. Ask what is going on in his/her life. Encourage him/her to talk to an adult. Be there. Don’t judge.

But if you fear a friend is thinking about suicide — for example, maybe that friend has made a comment in real life or on the Internet about not wanting to live anymore, about wanting to give up, about not wanting to be a burden anymore — talk to an adult immediately. Do not worry about betraying the friendship. The friend may be angry for a while, but you very well may save a life.



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