

Article of The Month

Understanding Adolescent Depression: It Doesn't Always Look Like Sadness

One of the biggest misconceptions about depression is that it always looks like someone feeling persistently sad. In adolescents, this is often not the case. A teenager experiencing depression may:

- Become easily irritated or frustrated
- Withdraw from family and friends
- Lose interest in activities they once enjoyed
- Show a decline in academic performance
- Experience changes in sleep or appetite
- Engage in risky or impulsive behaviours

Because these behaviours can overlap with what many consider “typical teenage attitude,” warning signs are frequently dismissed. Statements like “they’re just being moody” or “this is part of growing up” can delay necessary support.

The key difference lies in duration, intensity, and impact. When these changes persist and begin to interfere with daily functioning, it is no longer just a developmental phase—it may be depression.



Why Adolescents Are Particularly Vulnerable

Adolescence is not only a socially complex stage but also a neurologically sensitive one. The brain is still developing, particularly areas responsible for decision-making, emotional regulation, and impulse control. At the same time, emotional experiences tend to feel more intense.

Several factors contribute to vulnerability during this stage:

1. Identity Formation

Teenagers are trying to understand who they are, where they belong, and how they are perceived by others. This process can create internal pressure and confusion.

2. Peer Influence and Social Acceptance

Belonging becomes crucial. Rejection, bullying, or social comparison—especially in the age of social media—can significantly impact self-esteem.



3. Academic and Future Pressures

Expectations related to performance, career paths, and success can feel overwhelming, particularly when adolescents lack coping strategies.

4. Family Dynamics

Conflict at home, lack of emotional support, or major life changes (e.g., divorce, relocation) can contribute to emotional distress.

5. Limited Emotional Vocabulary

Many adolescents do not yet have the ability to fully articulate what they are feeling. Instead of saying “I feel hopeless,” they may express distress through behaviour.

Therapeutic Approaches in Adolescent Depression

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to therapy, but several evidence-based methods are commonly used when working with adolescents experiencing depression.

That said, there are **some well-established therapeutic approaches** that have been found to be effective in working with adolescents:

✓ Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

CBT is one of the most widely used approaches in treating adolescent depression. It helps young people recognise negative patterns of thinking and understand how these thoughts influence their emotions and behaviours. Over time, adolescents learn to challenge unhelpful beliefs and develop healthier ways of coping.

✓ Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT-Informed Skills)

For adolescents who experience intense emotions, impulsivity, or difficulty regulating their reactions, DBT-informed techniques can be particularly helpful. These include skills such as distress tolerance, emotional regulation, and mindfulness, which support adolescents in managing overwhelming feelings more effectively.

✓ Expressive and Creative Approaches

Not all adolescents are comfortable putting their emotions into words. Creative methods such as art, journaling, or other forms of expression can provide alternative ways for them to explore and communicate their inner experiences in a safe and non-threatening manner.



What Parents and Caregivers Can Do?

Supporting a teenager experiencing depression can feel overwhelming, but small, consistent efforts can make a significant difference.

- **Listen without immediately fixing**
Sometimes adolescents need to feel heard more than they need solutions.
- **Avoid minimising their feelings**
Phrases like “it’s not a big deal” can make them feel misunderstood.
- **Be patient with changes in behaviour**
What appears as defiance may be a reflection of internal struggle.
- **Encourage professional help when needed**
Seeking counselling is not a sign of failure—it is a step toward support and healing.



Adolescent depression is real, and it requires understanding, sensitivity, and timely intervention. Counselling provides a vital space for young people to explore their emotions, develop coping skills, and build a stronger sense of self.

When we begin to look beyond behaviour and truly listen to what adolescents are trying to express, we create opportunities not only for healing—but for growth that can shape the rest of their lives.