

Tips for Teachers of Depressed Students

What is Depression?

Clinical depression is a “psychobiological reaction” which may be triggered by losses or trauma and is more common in young people with anxiety, attentional, and learning problems. Genetic factors increase risk. The psychological features include hopelessness, irritability, sadness, and suicidal thinking. The biological features include problems in sleep, eating, energy, and concentration.

How common is it?

5% of teens have “major depression” at any given time and about 4% have “minor depression”. By the end of the teen years about 1 in 5 teens will have had an episode of major depression. In other words, you are guaranteed to have several teens in your various classes who are clinically depressed at any given time. A depressive episode even with the best treatment response usually lasts at least three months and much longer in many cases. This means, at minimum, one school term will be significantly affected.

What effect does depression have on school work?

Depressed teens will have more trouble concentrating, have poor motivation, are easily discouraged, are irritable, and will often be tired in class. Depressed teens have sleep problems and frequently miss first block in the morning. Their grades drop dramatically. They may not participate much during class.

Despite these difficulties depressed teens are usually advised by their doctor to attend school anyway. Why? It gives the day structure, it prevents “school phobia”, and it keeps them socially connected. It also keeps them moving along academically to some degree so that catch-up is easier later. However, at times their timetable may need to be adjusted to a half-day and the number of subjects reduced.

How can you help?

1. **Check with the counselor:** If you have concerns that a teen in your class may be depressed talk to the student’s counselor. The counselor will often be aware of what is happening and give you some guidance as to how serious the problem is and how much the course material may need to be modified. If the counselor was not aware of the situation your inquiry could lead to help being offered.
2. **Check in with the teen:** How are they managing? Is there anything they don’t understand? Do they need extra help? If it seems they are overwhelmed arrange to discuss jointly with the counselor some ways to reduce expectations for a defined time period. Do not excuse them from class however! Regular attendance is a lifeline.
3. **Communicate with parents:** You may need to be in touch with the parents in a positive, problem-solving way. Perhaps they can help by getting a tutor or keeping the teen on track with assignments.

4. **Adjust work expectations:** Short answer, multiple choice, and match type testing is easier for depressed teens. Producing essays and answers which require a lot of effort and thinking may be overwhelming. They may need help breaking larger tasks such as projects into individual steps. You can help by encouraging the teen to make intermediate deadlines, checking how they are coming along, and providing encouragement to keep it up.
5. **Subject failures:** It is not uncommon for even a good student to fail a term when they are depressed. Sometimes a doctor's letter will suggest that material be "omitted" for part of a term or that the course-load be reduced. Often, a subject, especially math or science, needs to be repeated in summer school or the next year as core materials has been missed. Please be understanding and encouraging in this situation, as students can feel very ashamed and worried about their academic future. They may feel they have let you down as well.

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