

## Coping with Depression

Depression is undoubtedly a common occurrence among adolescents. It is important to recognize that depression is more than just a few negative feelings that come and go or even a bad day or week. Depression is a mental condition that lasts for more than several weeks at a time and is too strong to overcome with simply a positive attitude by oneself. Art Bennett (co-founder and former Director of the Alpha Omega Clinic) gives a great example of how to identify depression in an adolescent. A teen that says, “I did something stupid” or “I messed up” is communicating the guilt or regret he may feel for something he has done. However, when a teen begins to say, “I am stupid” or “I am a mess-up,” it suggests negative self-talk and a lack of self-worth that could indicate depression. A Director of Youth Ministry (DYM) should pay close attention to how and what their teens are saying. If a teen consistently use negative self-talk, he or she may need to be referred for professional help.

Research indicates that the rates of depression greatly increase from childhood to adolescence. Why is that? Adolescent depression is associated with a number of factors including:

- Anxiety/worry/fear
- Poor academic performance
- Peer pressure
- Substance abuse
- High-risk sexual behavior
- Divorced/separated parents
- Bad home environment
- Negative self-concept
- Negative body image
- Hormonal and physical changes
- Insensitive peers
- Abusive parents/family members
- Alcoholic family members
- Sexual abuse from the past (which leads to lack of self-worth and difficulty trusting others)
- Absent parents
- Unlimited cell phone and internet use
- Hectic schedules
- Eating disorders

According to *Renewing the Vision*, the Church’s ministry with adolescents seeks to “promote positive self-image in young people, including an appreciation of one’s ethnic culture, a sense of self-esteem, a sense of purpose in life, a positive view of one’s personal future, and a humble acceptance of one’s self as lovable and loved by God and others” (17). It can be difficult and challenging to achieve this when there are so many obstacles and battles to overcome. In an excerpt from Ron Taffel’s book Breaking Through to Teens: A New Psychotherapy for the New Adolescence, he explains how teens “everywhere are overwhelmed by a tidal wave of culturally induced anxiety” and “often the real problem is handling the stress of normal, everyday teen life” (11). Not to mention, parents are becoming less involved in their teenager’s life for a variety of reasons. In fact, “parents now spend 40% less time with their children than they did 30 years ago, and two million children younger than 13 have no adult supervision either before or after school” (21). In reaction to this lack of personal attention from the people they love the most, feelings of anger, anxiety, and depression arise in teenagers. Young people need community, appreciation, nurture/care, and a sense of belonging. In a way, young people can benefit from a second family that will provide all of these things that they are not getting at home.

Youth ministry may provide this sense of belonging and increased self-worth for those who are lacking it in their lives. According to Taffel, “adolescence is still a time of intense emotions and fluctuating identity, of absolutes and debilitating insecurities. [Teens] not only need the anchor of reliable relationships with adults in their lives, they secretly yearn for the kind of knowledge that mature people have acquired through years of observation and experience” (25). Youth ministry

leaders can empower and encourage young people to realize that they are loved by others and more importantly, by a God who gave His only Son to die for them. During adolescence, teenagers experience something called the “personal fable” in which they develop the tendency to think that their thoughts and feelings are unique and no one else knows what they are experiencing. It is no wonder that depression is a major issue during adolescence when these thought processes are occurring. Adolescents are extremely self-conscious and so when something goes wrong like a relationship breakup, it is almost unbearable to experience because they think that no one else knows how they are feeling and what they are experiencing.

Small groups are a great tool that DYMs can incorporate into their program in order to deal with these issues. Groups help an individual to realize that he/she is not alone and provide a sense of belonging and appreciation that might be lacking in one’s life. Small groups provide a support system in which students become examples to each other and hold one another accountable. However, depression is a serious suffering that requires professional help. As a youth minister, monitor what the teens are saying to you about how they are feeling while at the same time keeping a healthy distance. **You are not a professional therapist. You are not on-call 24/7.** If a teenager comes to you with the same issue more than twice, then it is time for you to refer them elsewhere. **If a teenager has expressed thoughts of suicide to you or anyone else, then immediate action must be taken.** *Parents must be notified.* The student needs professional help if he/she is not already seeing someone.

Last but not least, PRAY FOR THEM and WITH THEM. Pray for their healing and the strength to overcome their negative thoughts and feelings. Pray for an increase in faith, hope, and love. Of course, the Mass is the most perfect prayer to offer up for anyone who is suffering. The Rosary is another beautiful prayer. Ask the Blessed Mother to watch over and heal those teens in your parish youth program who are depressed. Finally, consider the Thomas Merton prayer:

*Dear God,*

*I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself. And the fact that I think I am following your will does not necessarily mean that I am doing so. But I believe this. I believe that the desire to please you does, in fact, please you. I hope I have that desire in everything I do. I hope I never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it at the time. Therefore I will trust you always, for though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I know you will never leave me to face my troubles all alone. Amen.*