



## Teen Depression and the Holidays.

by Jennifer Salerno

### The Struggle is Real.

Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Christmas, and the other winter holidays can mean excitement, family bonding, and tons of joy – but they can also mean the exact opposite of all of that for some individuals. During the holidays, it's not unusual for teen mental health struggles to worsen.

The holidays can easily be filled with stress and anxiety, making it a depressing time for some teens. The causes of this can be from the expectations that come with the holidays to family conflicts to demanding social events. It can be a lot for one teen to handle, which can cause underlying teen mental health struggles to deepen and increase.

According to The National Institute of Mental Health, an estimated 3 million teens aged 12 to 17 had at least one major depressive episode in the past year and as the holidays fast approach, these feelings often worsen. The holiday season can be difficult for teens with the onslaught of social media posts, school parties, and other social gatherings. Feelings of depression can cause teens to avoid social interactions, which can be especially difficult during the holidays. Unfortunately, withdrawing from holiday festivities often worsen their feelings of loneliness and symptoms of depression.

Teens are learning to explore and find their way with their emotions and thoughts. Creating opportunities for honest disclosures and discussion is critical. These 3 tips for identifying teen depression and improving parent-teen communication can help you get started.

## One: Identify the struggle.

Start by noticing teen behaviors and watching for red flags (those warning signs that may point to depression):

- Excessive moodiness and tears
- Anger and irritability
- Excessive sensitivity to criticism
- Difficulty concentrating
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Feelings of worthlessness and/or helplessness
- Changes in eating patterns that result in dramatic weight gain or loss
- Unexplained aches and pains
- Social isolation or abandonment of peer group
- Isolation from family members

## Two: Educate yourself.

Understand outside stressors affecting teen depression – social media, cyberbullying, academic pressures, substance use, poverty, fatigue, body image, violence, and family issues or loss. Resources like Teen Speak are a must-have to identify issues and navigate discussions that may be difficult to approach otherwise.



## Three: Start the conversation.

Communication is key. Open the door to discussions with teens about depression as well as outside stressors that may be affecting their mood. Talk with them...not at them. Dr. Jennifer Salerno, has written *Teen Speak: A how-to guide for real talks with teens about sex, drugs and other risky behaviors*, to provide parents and other adults with practical communication strategies to help foster strong relationships with the teens in their lives and to support often difficult conversations about risk.

The teen years are not easy for parents or teens, feelings of depression can make it even more challenging. Building strong relationships through effective communication can provide teens with the support they need to navigate the holiday season and beyond.

# How to Beat the Holiday Blues



Some of the causes that seem to contribute to the holiday blues include:

- Unrealistic expectations
- Outside pressure to feel happy
- Financial hardship and pricey Christmas shopping
- Memories of lost loved ones
- Loneliness or social isolation
- Stressful family gatherings
- People-pleasing
- Lack of energy or fatigue
- Loss of sunlight

If you feel sad, bummed or depressed this holiday season, don't beat yourself up. You don't need to turn to alcohol or drugs to mask your feelings or put on a happy face. Here are some tips for dealing with the holiday blues:

1. Make plans ahead of time: Plan which parties and gatherings you'll be attending well ahead of time. That way, you know you won't be alone, and you'll be able to mentally prepare yourself for any stressful events.
2. Prepare a holiday budget: You know the holidays are coming, so if you plan on being a generous gift-giver, make a budget and start saving early. That way, you won't have to worry about financial troubles during the holidays.
3. Help someone in need: Whether it's volunteering at a soup kitchen or lending a helping hand to an elderly neighbor, it's hard to feel down when you help someone else. After all, giving to others is what the holidays are really about.
4. Take time to rest: Instead of rushing from one holiday event to the next, take a break now and again to rest and recuperate.
5. Avoid isolating yourself: While taking time for yourself is important, don't hide away from others. Take time for those meaningful relationships in your life too.
6. Feel what you feel: Feelings of grief or stress are bound to pop up during this high-pressure season. It's okay to feel what you feel. Pretending to be happy will only make things worse.