

PARENT NETWORK NEWSLETTER

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Adolescent Anxiety and Depression What Every Parent Needs to Know

In Brookline, parents are talking a lot about teen stress, anxiety and depression. Why are kids so stressed? And when should parents worry that a child might be clinically depressed and need help? B-PEN's recent forum for parents, "Adolescent Anxiety and Depression – What Every Parent Needs to Know," featured a presentation and film by Children's Hospital "Break Free From Depression" as well as powerful guest speakers and experts. The goal was to help increase understanding and awareness of adolescent anxiety and depression as well as to de-stigmatize teen mental health issues. The evening offered valuable information on how to recognize depression symptoms, understand the contributing factors, and develop healthy coping skills. Read on...

DID YOU KNOW....?

- Clinical depression is a *medical* condition
- Depression often looks like moodiness, irritability, anger, withdrawal, feeling overwhelmed
- One in five adolescents suffer each year from depression, yet roughly 75% go undiagnosed
- Nearly one in four BHS teens reported being depressed (feeling sad and hopeless for more than 2 weeks)
- Drug and alcohol use are often attempts to self-medicate?

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www.B-PEN.org

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B-PEN (Brookline Parent Education Network) helps parents navigate the social, emotional and developmental challenges affecting today's teens and pre-teens – common challenges that can lead to risky behavior. An outreach initiative that collaborates with Brookline school administrators and PTO's, the organization's goals are to facilitate parent connections:

- * with other **parents**,
- * with school and town **resources**, and
- * with helpful **information** via written/electronic materials on a wide variety of teen concerns.

STRESS VS. DEPRESSION

Stress is a normal part of the human condition, and an optimal level of stress can improve cognitive, physical and emotional performance. It can help us learn to adapt and grow. However, it can be tricky to discern between appropriate stress causing normal mood fluctuations in our children and when stress is part of a more serious issue with depression and/or anxiety, necessitating intervention to help them cope with all they're going through. Unlike an occasional case of the blues or situational depression, clinical depression is a serious medical condition that needs diagnosis and treatment, which can range from therapy to medication.

So how can we tell the difference between appropriate stress/anxiety/sadness and a real biological condition? What does clinical depression look like? Symptoms that last most of the day, every day, for more than two weeks

and are too intense to manage on one's own are signs of clinical depression. Be aware of:

- Change in mood— depression can also manifest as sadness, anxiety, anger, irritability, agitation, fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating or thinking
- Withdrawal and isolation from friends and family
- Decreased interest in normally pleasurable activities
- Change in eating and sleeping habits
- Unexplained aches and pains like headaches, stomach aches, heart pounding
- Acting out -- picking fights, getting into trouble, substance use, cutting
- Negative thoughts -- talking about worthlessness, inappropriate guilt, death, suicide

BEGINNING THE CONVERSATION

Roughly 75% of adolescents with depression go undiagnosed and untreated, partly because of the stigma associated with mental illness or the perception that depression is a sign of weakness that one should just “get over.” If you suspect your adolescent may be struggling:

- Approach your teen gently, respectfully and non-judgmentally
- Cite specific examples of your concerns and observations
- Listen and acknowledge your teen's feelings
- Reinforce your adolescent's strengths and good qualities
- Reassure that you are there to love and support
- Communicate to them that many people go through periods of feeling depressed and get help (maybe even some family members or friends they know)
- Suggest possible options for counseling -- asking for help is a strength, not a sign of weakness

STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH STRESS AND ANXIETY

Everyone needs to feel competent and proud of something. Whether it is a sport, a skill, a job or a hobby, we all need an arena in which we can feel a sense of purpose and accomplishment. Helping your adolescent discover and pursue those interests can go a long way toward counterbalancing daily stress and anxiety, both of which can seriously impact quality of life and exacerbate clinical depression. Additional coping strategies include:

- Exercise – even walking fast for 35 minutes a day directly impacts brain chemistry to improve mood
- Meditation – breathing exercises, muscle relaxation, imagery/visualization
- Mindfulness/centering practice – “be here now”
- Journaling, creative expression, “play”
- Healthy lifestyle -- diet, sleep, time management
- Problem-solving skills – identify common triggers of stress and develop ways to avoid/address
- Challenge negativity – avoid “thought traps” like *never, always, should have, why bother*
- Music -- listen to relax or dance to re-energize

CAROLINE'S STORY

The most powerful part of the evening was the opportunity to hear directly from one of the students highlighted in the “Break Free From Depression” film, Caroline Hanley, and her mother, Sue. A middle school nurse and mother of four, Sue noted her daughter's incredible courage in seeking treatment and continuing to share her story. Caroline, who is now 23, has been in treatment for depression for nine years, beginning in high school. At first, it was hard for her and those around her to accept her depression as an illness, because depression is so often viewed as sadness or a ploy for attention. She never felt she had a reason for her depression and anxiety, but gradually came to understand she has an illness that can happen for no reason, and no two people experience it the same way. For her, it was all consuming. She said, “It effects everything you do. You feel empty, like your heart is at the bottom of your stomach, irritable, angry, paranoid. Depression takes the pleasure out of everything and distorts your perception of others. You cry over no reason, it's hard to get out of bed. On the outside, you can appear happy, but inside you're hurting. Putting on that façade and seeing everyone else happy made me hate myself even more. I felt like a burden to everyone.”

Caroline talked about fear and a lack of self-control. Her biggest fear was herself and her inclination to cut, which people often view as attention seeking, but she explains as an unhealthy coping mechanism that masks emotional pain with a physical pain “you can see and identify. But it's only temporary and makes you feel worse.”

She noted the importance of a gentle, patient and persistent support system that never gave up on her. She still experiences major depressive episodes, and continues weekly therapy and medication, but she has learned coping strategies, like staying busy, making lists rather than focusing on negative feelings, and finding just the right counselor/therapist to talk to, which is especially important. "I'll never be cured, but I know that it's an illness and how to deal with it, and I have experienced happiness."

A MOTHER'S ADVICE

Sue said she initially didn't see the signs in her own child despite extensive family mental health issues and her own background as a school nurse. She urges parents not to diminish what's right in front of them. She shared some of what she has learned from her journey with her daughter, including:

- Listening is the most important thing you can do
- Validating feelings is crucial, but don't ever say you know what your children are going through or know how they feel -- say I'm so sorry for what you're going through or I'm sorry you're in this much pain
- Kids with depression don't like themselves -- parents need to love the unlovable.
- Don't be afraid to advocate for your child
- Think of depression as an illness and get it treated
- Don't think do it on your own, bring everybody in -- family, school, etc., a team approach is the best way
- Be open -- don't hide out of shame or embarrassment

TOWN AND SCHOOL RESOURCES

Brookline and the Greater Boston area are blessed with a wealth of resources for helping parents understand and address adolescent depression. Perhaps a parent's first step should be a conversation with a child's pediatrician, who will have a sense of an adolescent's overall health and can point to possible treatment options and sources within your health care network.

SCHOOL RESOURCES

BHS social worker Fran Kuehn noted the many resources at the high school to help kids in need, and parents are urged to contact a child's guidance counselor with any concerns. BHS uses a team approach and works with adolescents, teachers and family to help figure out what it takes for these teens to make it through the school day, including working with outside mental health plans that can be implemented during the school day, encouraging and facilitating coping strategies, like music and journaling, helping students advocate for themselves, and advocating for them with teachers if they have special needs for coping. It's OK to ask questions confidentially of experts at school, widen the circle and get a second opinion. ([For a full BHS staff directory, click here.](#))

BROOKLINE COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH CENTER

Joshua Eagle, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist specializing in work with adolescents and Brookline Community Mental Health Center's Child Team Coordinator says the more than 50-year-old organization is very connected to school resources to advocate and collaborate for adolescents' mental health needs. It offers a full range of services to every child in the Brookline schools regardless of the ability to pay -- individual, family and group therapy, as well as psychiatry for any psychopharmacology needs. <http://www.brooklinecenter.org/>

RECOMMENDED READING

Non-Fiction

- *Monochrome Days: A Firsthand Account of One Teenager's Experience with Depression* – Cait Irwin
- *Eight Stories: An Adolescent Chooses Hope Over Suicide* – De Quincy Lezine and David Brent
- *If Your Adolescent Has Depression or Bipolar Disorder* – Dwight Evans and Linda Andrews
- *If Your Adolescent Has an Anxiety Disorder* – Edna Foa and Linda Andrews
- *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain* – John Ratey
- *My Kind of Sad: What It's Like to Be Young and Depressed* – Kate Scowen

Fiction Appropriate for Teens

- *The Solitude of Prime Numbers* – Paolo Giordano
- *13 Reasons Why* – Jay Asher
- *Catcher in the Rye* – J.D. Salinger

For more BHS Library recommendations, go to http://www.b-pen.org/uploads/2/9/2/9/2929884/reading_list_cohen.docx

CONTACT INFORMATION

- School Guidance Counselors/Deans
- Brookline Mental Health Center
<http://www.brooklinecenter.org/>
- Boston Children's Hospital
<http://www.childrenshospital.org/>
- B-PEN webpage "Teens and Mental Health"
<http://www.b-pen.org/mental-health-stress-anxiety-depression.html>
- BSAPP (Brookline Substance Abuse Prevention Program) www.BCASA.org

To sign up for B-PEN's quarterly "Parent Network Newsletter," visit <http://www.b-pen.org/email-list.html>

WEB RESOURCES

www.helpguide.org
www.experiencejournal.com/depression
www.talklisten.org
www.familyaware.org
www.thebalancedmind.org
www.thetrevorproject.org
www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org
www.yourlifeyourvoice.org
www.hopeline.com

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