

## Talking With Students About Depression

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Adolescent students who are experiencing depression often want information about their condition. At the same time, they are often cautious about talking to adults because they are unsure of the reaction they might get and what the consequences might be. Talking with adolescents about their depression requires adults to strike a balance between providing guidance and promoting the autonomy of the student.

### HOW STUDENTS MAY PRESENT TO SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

- Most adolescents have a pressing desire to be normal, and often minimize their symptoms. They may have fears of being considered more depressed than they are or being considered weird, stupid, or crazy.
- They are likely to be very cautious about disclosing depressive symptoms in order to avoid negative and unwanted consequences. For example, they may fear being singled out for special programs, being prescribed an antidepressant, or having their parents or peers find out about their condition.
- Alternatively, they may also carefully disclose in order to minimize the risk of not being treated or not having their symptoms legitimized.

### CONFIDENTIALITY, CONNECTION, AND THE NEED FOR INFORMATION

To offset the concerns and to create a context of safety in which depression can be identified and treatment discussed, school mental health professionals must address three main issues: confidentiality, connection, and a need for information

#### Confidentiality

- Three situations are commonly recognized as requiring a breach of confidentiality: (a) when a student requests it, (b) when there is a risk of harm to the student or others, and (c) when required by a court.
- Know state and school district regulations about mandated reporting.
- Appreciate that many students view their disclosures of distress and feelings of inadequacy as privileged information.
- Discuss confidentiality and explain at the beginning of a relationship with a student what information will be shared, why and with whom it will be shared, and how it will be shared. Make sure the student understands what will and will not be shared with the parent or caregiver.

### WHAT ADOLESCENTS WANT

Despite their caution, adolescents with depression generally want a connection with a professional they can trust and who will work with them to find solutions. They need information about what they are experiencing and what can be done about it.

#### Connection

Students want a connection and are astute observers of verbal and nonverbal cues; they will withhold information and withdraw from interaction if they are not picking up the right cues from the professional. School mental health professionals who develop a relationship with adolescents are more likely to engage them in treatment than those who do not.

- Actively listen to the student.
- Convey concern about the student's well-being.
- Do not simply process complaints.
- Express empathy.
- Communicate an authentic understanding of the experience of depression.
- Respect the adolescent's desire to be normal.
- Use the *student's* words to describe symptoms.
- Acknowledge that feelings are important to discuss and that it takes strength to seek help.
- Accept the symptoms of depression; do not try to talk the student out of these feelings.

## Information

Adolescents want feedback and information about depression from the professionals they work with. They want professionals to collaborate with them to find solutions. Adolescents who are more informed about treatment options are more likely to engage in treatment.

- Validate the student's experience and convey a legitimate concern.
- Point out (*notice* rather than *accuse*) behavior that seems different from the student's usual behavior or that may indicate depression.
- Keep in mind that adolescents view depression as caused by external stressors and as something to be solved by personal actions. Discuss depression as a normal consequence of stressful or abnormal experiences.
- Biological and technical explanations of depression are not likely to be helpful.
- Discuss depression in the context of the personal history and experience that the student shares with you.
- Stay solution-focused.
- Present options that are congruent with solving the problems they identify.
- Enhance the student's feeling of being understood.
- Confirm the student's autonomy to make decisions for themselves.