

## Moods and feelings in adolescence

*In 'The Wasp Factory' by Iain Banks the central character mentions having killed three young relatives in quick succession. This was 'on a whim'.*

*But it's okay, he says, that was years ago.*

*It was just a stage he was going through.*

(A rather extreme example, from the novel 'The Wasp Factory' by Iain Banks.)

Adolescence typically lasts from the start of puberty (when chemical changes in the body produce a range of physical changes) right through to full physical and sexual maturity, usually in the late teens.

Adolescence is likely to start and end earlier in girls than in boys..

It is a time when a lot of things are happening, and some can be tough to adapt to:

- ☞ New chemical messengers (hormones) start flowing through your body and brain.
- ☞ Your body is changing in many ways, and it takes time to adapt to the new you.
- ☞ Embarrassing clumsiness often follows growth spurts. Your brain is trying to adapt to newly proportioned arms and legs, and your muscles are also trying to adjust.
- ☞ Many important decisions are looming. Uncertainty about what you want for your future can, on its own, produce moodiness, bad temper and general unpleasantness to other people – particularly to parents and other family.
- ☞ Awareness of the world and your potential place in it is growing rapidly, sometimes creating feelings of confusion and insecurity. Your moods may swing for no obvious reason between feelings of self-importance, conceit and confidence to ones of worthlessness and failure.
- ☞ There may be a clash between peer group influence, and how your family and your school expect you to behave.
- ☞ Examination pressures are building up, and you may not yet have the skills to cope.
- ☞ Your sex drives, which typically peak at age about 17-18, appear fairly abruptly and build rapidly. The increasing need/desire to have a girl/boy friend, coupled with mood swings and general insecurity, can be highly stressful. Many teenagers experience a period of uncertainty about their sexual identity, about whether they are heterosexual or homosexual. This is often highly stressful.
- ☞ Concern over personal appearance increases. There is likely to be particular pressure to be attractive and acceptable to the opposite sex, but continuing changes in the body produce uncertainty about whether you can achieve this. Acne can cause terrible anxiety and embarrassment, but is usually short-lived – particularly if treated.
- ☞ In British society you become, in many ways, an adult – yet you hold no significant position of worth in society, and your new maturity may often not be recognised.
- ☞ There is a very wide range of development amongst perfectly normal adolescents. This can cause particular problems for those who are markedly early or late developers. Physical height (either much taller or much shorter than your peers) can be particularly stressful, and late sexual development can give rise to damaging comments from peers in the showers.
- ☞ The media now put unprecedented pressure on adolescents to conform, often in ways which conflict with your own values, or which demand more money than you can afford.

It is important to keep reminding yourself that almost all of your peers are experiencing similar problems, even though some of them may be good at hiding it. Fairly commonly adolescents behave quite differently at school from at home.

# Mood swings and Depression

## Clinical depression

Clinical depression can be a serious but often treatable illness. There are chemical changes in the brain which limit or change the ways in which it can work. Sometimes this is as a result of some outside experience - the death of someone you love, unbearable stress through being bullied, etc. At other times the causes are unclear, and you seem to 'catch' depression just like you catch a cold, although not from someone else.

Clinical depression shows itself in a number of physical and psychological ways, including the emotions associated with the word 'depressed'.

Everyone feels down, or depressed, from time to time. These feelings can last for days on end without being abnormal or a matter for medical help. If they continue for several weeks without letup it would be worth consulting your GP, especially if schoolwork is significantly affected

## Depression in adolescence

In early and middle adolescence depression is often different from depression in adults. At these ages, individuals rarely complain of being depressed or sad, yet may show signs of it in such ways as difficulty in concentrating, progressive deterioration in school performance, boredom and restlessness, excessive tiredness, eating too much or too little, and a range of vague bodily symptoms.

They often become withdrawn, uninterested in any activities, dissatisfied with everything, and show diminishing self-esteem and feelings of rejection and being unloved.

Older adolescents, however, usually admit to feeling depressed if their gloominess persists much longer than is normal.

It is important when feeling down to remember that your feelings are quite normal. Even for those few youngsters whose feelings persist over weeks or more, recovery normally just happens for no obvious reason.

## Coping with feeling down

When you feel down you are tempted to let your lifestyle slip, in ways which will in fact make you feel even worse. Here are a few suggestions for what you could do to help yourself:

- ☞ Be tolerant of yourself. Avoid criticising or bullying yourself. You're ill, so be kind and understanding with yourself.
- ☞ Talk through your problems with someone who will listen sympathetically and can be trusted.
- ☞ Admit when you have problems.
- ☞ Make sure you eat enough healthy food.
- ☞ Exercise regularly, but try to avoid pushing yourself too hard and getting overtired.
- ☞ Get enough sleep, and learn how to relax.
- ☞ Maintain a range of types of activity in your life.
- ☞ Maintain as near a normal social life as you can.
- ☞ Try to be tolerant and patient with people.
- ☞ If your schoolwork is seriously affected, don't try to hide your temporary problems or pretend they are for reasons other than your current mental state. Any good teacher will listen sympathetically to you, and give advice and assistance to help you survive in their subject until you get back to your normal self. Consider having a confidential chat with your Tutor or Head of Section.
- ☞ Remind yourself frequently that this is just a temporary state of mind, it is fairly normal, and in most cases time is the cure.
- ☞ If you feel significantly depressed over several weeks, and particularly if your work is affected, err on the safe side and seek medical advice.

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Some of the above is based on parts of the book 'The Adolescent Years' by John Buckler (Consultant Paediatrician). John also gave valuable help with this information sheet. There is a copy of his book in the school library. Andrew Sims (Consultant Psychiatrist) checked and approved the final draft. This information sheet is copyright © Nigel A. Leech 1998.