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Talking regularly with youth about the dangers of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs reduces their risk of using in the first place.

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Start Talking!



Building a Drug-Free Future

Know! Beyond the Holiday Blues



'Tis the season to be jolly; It's the most wonderful time of the year; It's the happiest season of all. That's what we hear. But what if your student isn't feeling jolly, wonderful, or even the slightest bit happy? He or she may be experiencing the holiday blues. Unfortunately, just like moms, dads, teachers, and other adults, young people are not immune from feeling sad, lonely, anxious, and depressed during the holiday season.

There are countless reasons why students may feel especially down during the holidays, including:

- Their parents are divorced or are getting divorced.
- A parent or close family member is looking at a military deployment.
- A grandparent or other loved one has been lost.
- They've experienced a breakup recently.
- They've had a falling out with a close friend.

Instead of joyful, they may be feeling lonely and isolated and find themselves longing for the happy holidays they used to have. Social media can support those negative feelings, especially when their peers appear to be having the time of their lives, smiling with friends and family at parties and gatherings, or possibly showing off the gifts they've received. And because not all children receive the type of gifts bestowed upon their peers, that too can cause young people to feel like they are missing out. For some teens, feeling down may be about needing more sunshine than what their area of the world provides them. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a common type of depression that hits hardest during the fall and winter months, and it's known to zap your energy and make you feel depressed.

While we can't necessarily make everything merry for our students, there are some things we can do to help during the holidays:

Encourage them to step out into the sunshine at least 20 minutes each day. Even if they have to bundle up, they should experience a lift in mood and spirit.

- Let them know it is ok to feel what they're feeling, even if they don't feel like celebrating. Remind them that the holiday season will



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Empowering Parents To Raise Their Children To Be Substance-Free



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- soon pass, and that things will get better and brighter.
- If old traditions bring up painful memories for your child, suggest they create new ones. There are no rules as to how to spend the holidays. Encourage families to talk about it with their children and see what you can come up with together.
- Encourage them to GIVE. It need not involve their wallet or yours. It is uplifting and feels good to give to others, and there are so many opportunities, especially during the holidays. They can volunteer at a soup kitchen, wrap gifts for a busy mom, spend time talking to an elderly neighbor, or visit a nursing home. Forget the extravagant presents, the gift of giving oneself to others is the true meaning and reason of the holiday season.
- Help them count their blessings. Remind them of all the positives in their life and talk about the importance of moving and focusing forward.

Say the holidays come and go, yet your student still appears to be down. The question then becomes, is it more than SAD? Is it depression?

More than 1 in 7 teens experience depression each year, and studies show that high number is on the rise. By definition, a major depressive episode lasts for at least two weeks and is defined by depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure, and problems with sleeping, eating, concentration, energy, and self-image.

According to the *American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP)*, common symptoms of depression in children and adolescents include:

- Feeling or appearing depressed, sad, tearful, or irritable.
- Not enjoying things as much as they used to.
- Spending less time with friends or in after school activities.
- Changes in appetite and/or weight.
- Sleeping more or less than usual.
- Feeling tired or having less energy.
- Feeling like everything is their fault or that they are not good at anything.
- Having more trouble concentrating.
- Caring less about school or not doing as well in school.
- Having thoughts of suicide or wanting to die.
- Frequent headaches or stomach aches.
- Depressed adolescents may use alcohol or other drugs as a way of trying to feel better.

Depression not only takes a toll on a young person's life, but it can lead a child to think about or plan for suicide, which is currently the leading form of death for youth ages 10-24.

Experts say that if you suspect a teen may be depressed, try asking him or her how they are feeling and if anything is bothering them. When asked directly, some young people are surprisingly forthcoming with their answer. Any indication of deep sadness or self-harm should be taken seriously and help should be sought out immediately. According to the *National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)*, even short-term problems should be taken seriously, because they too can cause long-term mental health conditions.



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If you or someone you know needs professional help, contact your child's pediatrician, school counselor, or a qualified mental health professional, or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or visit online at SuicidePreventionLifeline.org.

Sources: [American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry \(AACAP\), Depression in Children and Teens: Facts for Families, Oct. 2018.](#) [The Dana Foundation, Brenda Patoine, Holiday Blues: Getting the Facts, Forgetting the Myth, Dec. 2015.](#) [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\), Laura Greenstein, Tips for Managing the Holiday Blues, Nov. 2015.](#)