

Why Are So Many Gay Teens Depressed?

Too often, hostile environments at school and at home make gay and lesbian adolescents depressed. Here's how teens in the LGBT scene can find the emotional support they need.

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Life is stressful for any teenager — there's homework, after-school activities, and that all-important social scene to juggle. But if you're a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender adolescent, teen-hood gets even more difficult — and studies show it can be a big contributor to [depression](#).

What tends to make or break a gay teen's [emotional health](#)? The environment they live in. “Shame, social isolation, humiliation, and [bullying](#) create a hostile environment for the young LGBT adolescent,” says Loren A. Olson, MD, a psychiatrist in private practice in Des Moines, Iowa, and author of *Finally Out: Letting Go of Living Straight*.

In fact, a recent National School Climate Survey of 7,000 LGBT students, ranging in age from 13 to 21, found that 80 percent had been verbally harassed, 40 percent physically harassed, 60 percent felt unsafe at school, and one in three had missed a day of school in the last month due to fear of violence.

Given these struggles, it's no surprise that a LGBT teen may experience depression. And getting help for depression is a must: Not only does research show that gay teens are up to four times more likely to attempt [suicide](#) than their heterosexual counterparts, if they have been rejected by their families, they become eight times more likely to try to kill themselves.

A Depression-Treatment Guide for Gay and Lesbian Teens

There are a variety of avenues to explore to find the right depression remedy. Consider these ideas:

- **Choose a confidant.** It can be a challenge to find someone to trust, but gay teens should try to reach out to a friendly adult, someone else going through a similar issue, or even a person or group known to accept people for who they are.
- **Find a safe haven.** Some schools have gay-straight alliances to take advantage of. Online, check out the [Trevor Project](#), an organization dedicated to ending suicide through information and a crisis hotline run 24/7 at 866-4-U-TREVOR (866-488-7386).
- **Chat with a doctor or therapist.** “This type of support can be very helpful in coming to terms with your depression and why you are depressed,” says Russell Hyken, PhD, EdS, a therapist in St. Louis. “Being gay does not automatically lead to depression,” he

explains. “Being a teen is difficult overall. There may be other factors that contribute to your depression.”

For Families and Friends of Gay Teens: How You Can Help

Family members and friends can provide needed support for a loved one who might be depressed.

First, know what to look for. “Warning signs include a change in how a gay teen relates (they become withdrawn and isolated), how they look (they may become unkempt, sad, or dispirited), or how they act (they may give away prize possessions, talk of wanting to die, and/or engage in impulsive and dangerous behavior),” says Richard Shadick, PhD, director of the Counseling Center and an adjunct professor of psychology at Pace University in New York City. “They may also drink or use drugs heavily. And if a teen has a family member that has died because of suicide or they have tried to kill themselves before, then there should be extra concern.”

Also, don’t forget that it’s natural for teens to have temporary changes in mood — changes that can result from a variety of stresses in their lives. The difference between teen angst and true clinical depression revolves around the length of time the symptoms are present, how severe the depression is, and how much the teen has changed from who he or she usually is, says Dr. Olson.

Here’s what you should do to help:

- **Take him seriously.** “Tell him that you understand how he’s feeling and validate his feelings,” says Olson. “Offer support and listen, but don’t lecture. Avoid blaming him or yourself. Ask directly if there is anything you can do to help.”
- **Keep the lines of communication open.** Don’t give up if the teen is not ready to talk, or responds with hostility. Tell her that, if and when they want to discuss anything, you will be there.
- **Cheer on social activity.** Help him find a group that acknowledges homosexuality and accepts people for who they are. When one place, such as school, is difficult, it can help to have another activity, such as a hobby or sport, where there are no struggles.
- **Educate yourself.** Consider joining a group like Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) to learn more and get support yourself.
- **Offer hope.** Remind the teen that, even if things seem terrible now, they will get better.
- **Get outside help if needed.** Always take depression and threats of suicide seriously.

Olson reminds teens to look at the bigger picture. “As a teen questioning your sexual orientation, you probably feel different and alone,” he says. “Most of us who’ve been through it have felt that way, but you are not alone and you will get through it. Depression ends.”

For inspiration, check out “[It Gets Better](#),” a series of personal stories about how life has improved for many openly gay adults.

