



# DEPRESSION DEPRESSION

This is not everyone's favorite topic to discuss. The first question we have to ask is "Who gets depressed?" The answer is: Everybody. At one time or another in the course of a person's life we feel sad, down, blue, mad, stuck, empty .... depressed. The feelings can last for a few hours or a few days. When the feelings stay everyday, for at least two weeks, you may be suffering from a *Clinical Depression*. Most people who report feeling depressed have felt that way for more than two weeks. In fact, some folks struggle with depression for a long time before they tell someone or seek any kind of help. Many never ask for help. Why? Because depression can make you feel hopeless, helpless, sad and angry. The thinking that follows from these feelings is something like this: "What's the difference anyway." "It's never going to change." Talking about it won't help." "I don't want to burden my friends or parents." "It's hopeless." These are called "negative cognitions" or negative self-talk. It's kind of obvious. When we are feeling depressed it's pretty hard to see the positive. Even when we can find the positive things about ourselves or a situation it may be pretty hard to believe or accept it. Depression narrows our focus. That's why people describe it as "going down a dark tunnel" or "being at the bottom of a black hole."

What about IMSA students? What is depression like for them? Surveys with our students over the past several years rank depression in the top four school problems experienced at IMSA. Depression was preceded by ‘achieving in school’ (number one), ‘relationships with friends’ (number two), and ‘perfectionism’ (number three).



2009 Sophomore Nav group doing community service on the Fox River  
In addition to academic stresses, our kids also do a variety of community service and work service  
They are busy!

It is no wonder that IMSA kids identify ‘achieving in school’ as their number one concern. The academics here are rigorous and there is a lot of work to do. Some kids describe it as ‘high school on steroids.’ Cute. But trying to keep up with all the ‘stuff’ plus believing you need to achieve at a higher level can be exhausting. Add an intense relationship, some personal perfectionism and one or two extra curricular activities, and you have a formula for increased stress that can deplete a student and leave them feeling depressed. This is not to say that higher level academics at IMSA cause depression. It is to say that gifted students who are high achievers, have a tendency toward perfectionism, have intense relationships, are immersed in a challenging academic environment, and have all the other developmental issues that go along with being an adolescent, are at a higher risk of developing depressive symptoms that might not go away.

## **What does depression feel like?**







- You constantly feel irritable, sad, or angry
- Nothing seems fun anymore, and you just don't see the point of trying.
- Things that used to be fun are no longer that interesting; everything feels like work
- You feel bad about yourself – worthless, guilty, or just “wrong” in some way
- You sleep too much or not enough; have a hard time falling asleep or staying asleep
- You may have frequent, unexplained headaches or other physical problems, especially an upset stomach
- Anything or everything makes you cry, or you feel like crying but can't
- You've gained or lost weight without consciously trying to
- You can't concentrate. This may or may not be affecting your grades
- You feel helpless and hopeless
- You're thinking about death or suicide (of course, you should talk to someone right away if this is happening!)

## **Suicidal Thoughts or Feelings**

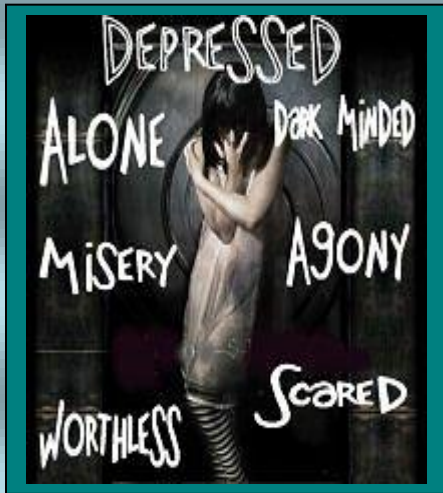
Here is another difficult topic to talk about. If your feelings become so overwhelming that you can't see any solution besides harming yourself or others, you need to talk to someone right away. Why? Because most people who attempt suicide or think about it don't really want to die, they just don't want things to keep going the way they are. They want to stop the pain or get out of a situation that they see as intolerable. And yet, asking for help when you are in the midst of such strong emotions can be really tough. At IMSA you can grab a friend, talk to an RC, or go see the counselor. If you feel out of control, your RC can call the counselor and they will come on campus and talk with you. That's not bothering anyone!! It's not just their job; they actually love helping kids through a crisis. That's why they took the job in the first place! The counselor can see the other side of things when you cannot. That's called “the light at the end of the tunnel.” It's just hard to see when you are in the tunnel! Sometimes you will not feel out of control, you are just having thoughts that you would rather share with a

stranger. In that case, you can call a hotline number and get some advice. **The Fox Valley Teen Talk Line** is a good one in our area. **Their number is 630-482-9595.**

Here are some other ideas:

-  With regard to thinking about suicide, WE BELIEVE THERE IS ALWAYS ANOTHER SOLUTION. For IMSA kids, these feelings can come on pretty fast after a setback or a series of bad days in classes. A crisis with friends at home or at IMSA can also trigger these thoughts. Talking about it does make you feel better. Seriously. We can help you find another way.
-  No one should judge you or condemn you for having these feelings. The thoughts and feeling do not make you a bad person. Again, lots of us can feel this way under the right circumstances. Hang with people who support you. Obviously, the counselors are very open to talking and are not judgmental.
-  If you don't want to talk to someone give yourself 24 hours before taking any action. This can give you time to really think things through and give yourself some distance from the strong emotions that are plaguing you. Again, try to talk with someone during this period or immediately afterward.
-  If you're afraid you can't control yourself, make sure you are never alone. Stay close to a friend, stay in public places, or go home for a couple of days. The counselors can help you arrange this.
-  Let your parents know how you are feeling. I know. Teenagers really don't want to do this. You know your parents better than we do! Sometimes it is not possible to talk with mom or dad. However, your parents really can be your best ally.
-  Above all, do not do anything that could result in permanent damage or death to yourself or someone else. Remember, suicide is a "permanent solution to a temporary problem." Help is always available. All you need to do is take that first step and reach out.





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Depression is not your fault and you didn't do anything to cause it. However, you do have some control over feeling better. Staying connected to friends and family, sharing our feelings with someone you trust, and making healthy lifestyle decisions can all have a hugely positive impact on your mood.

### **What can you do to feel better?**

#### **Ask for help if you are feeling stressed**

- IMSA students get busy and the work piles up pretty quickly. Stress is a normal part of student life, but you should talk to someone when exams and classes feel *overwhelming*. That's the key word. Overwhelmed. That is the point where things can be talked about and solutions can be found. There is always a solution; even if that means things can't be changed right now, you can still learn to reduce the stress and feel better. So talk with an RC, a friend, a trusted adult, or an IMSA counselor when the stress starts to build.

#### **Try not to isolate yourself**

- When you are depressed, you may not feel like seeing anybody or doing anything. Just getting out of bed in the morning can be difficult, but isolating yourself only makes depression worse. It is ok to have "alone time" but make it a point to stay social; even if that's the last thing you want to do. As you get out into the world, you may find

yourself feeling better. Spend time with friends who are active, supportive, and make you feel good about yourself. Try to stay away from folks who are feeling just as bad as you feel. Misery does love company. Depressed people who don't get outside of their pain will just pull each other down.

#### Remember that you are not alone

- You might be surprised at how many other IMSA kids, and teens in general, have suffered with depression. You are not alone, and neither is your depression a hopeless case. Even though it can feel like depression will never lift, it eventually will. With proper treatment and healthy choices it can lift a lot sooner. Talk to your parents about treatment options. Therapy and short-term medication are very effective in alleviating depression. (More on medications later). Some kids are reluctant to tell their parents because they might worry about them. That's what parents do best!! They worry about you because they love you and it makes them feel good to be able to help. If it feels impossible to tell your parents, the IMSA counselor can help you do it or do it for you. We love talking to parents and we can help explain the various stresses at IMSA that might be contributing to how you are feeling!

#### Try to keep your body healthy

- When people feel depressed guess what they want to stop doing? Mostly physical exercise. Why? Because they feel depressed, tired and unmotivated. Any exercise actually can increase endorphins, the body's natural pain reducer. This makes you feel better in the short term. Ongoing exercise can extend those benefits. Even going for a walk helps overcome fatigue. Eating right is another concern. One of the symptoms of depression is loss of appetite. Some people compensate for this by eating junk food and drinking caffeine drinks. This helps for a little while, which is why they are in the category of "comfort foods." However, the resulting sugar and caffeine crash only worsen feelings of depression. Eat as best you can. Vegetables, fruits and protein from meat and other sources are what help the most. You can talk with the school nurse about this and she can make suggestions from our very own cafeteria!

### Avoid alcohol and drugs

- This one is also obvious, but not always obvious? Alcohol and other drugs are mood altering, so they make people feel better. There is no denying that, otherwise people would not use them. Adolescents in our society today are said to be using drugs and alcohol “recreationally.” That means they do it for fun, to fit in, to assert their individuality and so on. Depressed and “angst-ie” people also drink and use to feel normal. It takes away the pain for a little while and distracts them from the despair of living. Two things here: 1) alcohol (especially) and other drugs can actually cause depression all by themselves and (2) they always make depression worse for people who are clinically depressed. The other thing drugs and alcohol do is reinforce the “who cares” part of depression; I feel bad so who cares, what’s the difference. Fight any temptation to escape through chemicals. It’s a dead end.

### A word about medications

Mild to moderate depressions respond to talk therapy alone or talk therapy in conjunction with short-term antidepressant therapy. Severe depressions do not respond well to talk therapy alone. Medication is almost always indicated as the treatment of choice. That said, IMSA does not make recommendations about taking medication. We can help you identify the symptoms of depression and then refer you to a doctor for an evaluation. We will strongly encourage you to follow the doctor’s recommendations and will help you sort out any issues about taking medicine.

There seems to be a mixed message in the media about antidepressants for adolescents. Some feel they are dangerous and we are over-medicating our children, while others cite studies that show the benefits of treating the depression with medication early on. There is truth to both sides of this argument. Not everyone responds well to medication. Either it does not work or there are uncomfortable side effects. A very small percentage of teens and adults may experience an increase in suicidal feelings when taking the medication, so the government now puts warning labels on the bottles. However, many teens and adults report the benefits of antidepressant medication. Their symptoms resolve, they concentrate better, they sleep and eat normally, and they get their old energy back. Our recommendation is that you be an informed consumer.

- 1) Talk to your doctor about his or her medication recommendation. Find out everything you can about side effects, how long you might be taking it, and risks vs. benefits.
- 2) Do your own research to help make an informed decision. The counselors can help you and your parents do this. The IMSA school nurse and the counselor can also help monitor any side effects from taking medication and the nurse can make recommendations.

### **How can you help a depressed friend?**

- Get your friend to talk to you. Starting a conversation about depression can be tough. However, start by what you are observing: “You seem like you are really down, and not yourself. I really want to help. Is there anything I can do?”
- You can’t have all the answers. Most friends do not expect you to have all the answers. They just need someone to listen and be supportive. All you have to do is listen and respond in a non-judgmental way.
- Know your limits. Pay attention to when you might be getting in over your head. You can get burned out or frightened when helping someone through some dark times. Talk to a friend about your friend or talk with the counselor or RC. Other people can help you recognize where limits need to be set.
- Speak up if your friend is suicidal. If your friend is joking or talking about suicide, giving possessions away, or saying goodbye, tell a trusted adult immediately. Your only responsibility at this point is to get your friend help, and get it fast. Even if you promised not to tell, your friend needs your help. It’s better to have a friend who is temporarily angry at you than one who is no longer alive.



Why are animals always happy?  
Cause they don't have to write  
history papers.  
(Our apologies to the history  
department)