**Section:** Girl’s Life SPECIAL REPORT
**COMING OUT OF THE DARKNESS**

The holidays are supposed to be the most wonderful time of the year. But for the thousands of teens suffering from depression, it's often hard to find anything to be festive about. Here, GL goes into the dark world of teen depression to shed some light on this serious mental illness.

growing up, Jayme B.\* had always been a happy and outgoing girl, full of energy and quick with a smile. But just a few months after her 16th birthday, Jayme's usual sunny personality became much darker. Suddenly sullen and exhausted 24/7, Jayme spent most of her day in bed. And when she wasn't sleeping, she was alone, purposefully isolating herself from her friends and family.

"It always felt like there was some sort of wall blocking me off from everyone else. I felt very lonely, even when I was with people," says Jayme. "And I was always tired. I'd come home from school so fatigued that all I wanted to do was flop on the couch and watch TV until I went to bed. I figured it was all just a normal part of being a teenager."

But Jayme's behavior wasn't normal. She was depressed.

Jayme is among the 121 million people worldwide struggling with depression, a figure which includes up to one in five teenage girls. A mental illness that can be marked by feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and despair, depression tends to hit teens hardest between ages 14 and 17.

And though experts have yet to pinpoint depression's roots among teens, most say it usually has to do with a combo of genetics (you're at a higher risk if a family member has the disorder), hormonal changes and increased pressure to look good and fit in with classes, sports and among friends.

"Teens are constantly up against a ton of pressure. In school, in relationships and at home. Everything seems so scheduled that girls don't have time to just relax," making it harder to cope with the stress, which can lead to depression, says Dr. Lisa Boesky, a psychologist and author of When to Worry: How to Tell If Your Teen Needs Help — And What to Do About It.

[**DEPRESSED — OR JUST DOWN?**](http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/delivery?sid=da3f01ba-9494-44c4-93ce-31cdac9fc05e%40sessionmgr115&vid=17&hid=105#toc)

With all of the emotional ups and downs of life, it can be hard to separate temporary sadness from the more serious signs of depression. But when the sadness doesn't let up, and you've got minimal motivation to get out of bed, go to school or hang out with your friends or family, then you may be battling something much bigger than the blues.

"Depression is not just about being sad about life events. It's a persistent change in what is considered your normal mood," says Dr. Laurel Williams, a psychologist at the Adolescent Treatment Program at The Menninger Clinic in Houston. "You're disinterested in life, and you have consistent changes in your sleep and eating habits as well as your energy levels."

Sonia L., who first showed signs of depression at age 11, likens the disorder to a bad mood that won't go away. "We all get moody, but usually by the end of the day, you can move on. Depression goes much deeper. It's a feeling you cannot escape."

Ann L., who struggled with the condition throughout high school, agrees with Sonia. "Depression is like being in a black void — endless nothingness. It robs the joy and pleasure out of life and activities that you used to enjoy."

At its worse, depression can be downright debilitating. Ann says she spent her darkest days floating through life like a zombie. She slept constantly, skipped school and eventually failed her classes. "I was a husk of the girl I once was. I rarely left my bed, other than for the bathroom or whenever I felt hungry, which was rarely," she says, "I didn't bathe for a week at a time and would wear the same dirty clothes day after day."

You don't have to be in a constant state of sadness or sleepiness to be diagnosed as depressed. The condition can also make you extremely angry, causing you to lash out at loved ones, get into fights with friends and do other reckless and careless things.

"Most people think that girls who are depressed are going to be sad, crying and withdrawn, but they're often irritable and engaging in risky and dangerous behavior," explains Dr. Boesky. "They may be hanging out with the wrong crowd, using alcohol or drugs and breaking the law. They are often seen as 'bad' girls in need of punishment, but they are really 'sad' girls in need of treatment."

[**FROM BAD TO WORSE**](http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/delivery?sid=da3f01ba-9494-44c4-93ce-31cdac9fc05e%40sessionmgr115&vid=17&hid=105#toc)

Left untreated, a severe case of depression can lead to self-harm, and in extreme cases, suicide. In fact, suicide is the third leading cause of death among teenagers (see sidebar for more info).

Those battling depression often think about ending their lives and may be interested in music, books or poetry centered around death or destruction, says Dr. Boesky.

When Jayme's depression was at its worst, she says she spent hours fantasizing about her own death and funeral. "I'd think about who would come; what people would say about me and if anyone would miss me if I died. I also thought a lot about different ways I could take my life and which would be the most painless," she says, "I remember sitting at a busy intersection at a stop light, and I very seriously thought about what would happen if I were to just take my foot off the brake."

Jayme got the help she needed before she did anything dangerous. And while most depressed girls don't follow through on their fatalistic thoughts, many come close: Depression is often linked with displays of self-harm, like cutting. Ann hid razors all over her room and often ran them along her upper body and thighs. Once, she nearly severed a tendon in her left arm, causing her to bleed so badly she spent hours in the ER having it sutured.

"I'd cut to feel something other than the pain and sadness that was eating away at my insides," says Ann. "I felt like my heart was bleeding, and it only seemed appropriate that my body would as well."

Besides cutting, other girls turn to drugs to alleviate feelings of depression. A recent study by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy says that depressed teens are almost twice as likely to use drugs as nondepressed teens. And while many girls think drugs or alcohol will help them feel better, the substances actually make their outlook seem more dismal than ever.

"I felt so different from other people; I thought if I did marijuana I would feel like everyone else because I thought everyone was doing it," says Sonia, who eventually sought treatment for depression and drug dependency. "Marijuana only added to the depression. I slept even more and was extremely lazy. I thought it would make me more connected, but it made me feel more disconnected."

[**SUFFERING IN SILENCE**](http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/delivery?sid=da3f01ba-9494-44c4-93ce-31cdac9fc05e%40sessionmgr115&vid=17&hid=105#toc)

Without realizing that they're struggling with a serious illness, many depressed girls keep their feelings to themselves. But while it may seem easier to pretend nothing's wrong when people pry, staying silent is never a good idea.

Ann admits she pushed her parents away with lies and excuses whenever they mentioned her moodiness.

"I felt like if I did tell them I thought I was depressed, they would be ashamed of me or feel like they were bad parents," she says. "So whenever they seemed worried about my behavior, I just came up with a lie. I told them I had the flu or a migraine. And maybe it was denial on their part, but eventually, they just stopped asking questions." That was until her near-fatal cutting accident.

On the flip side, some parents, like Jayme's, will often overlook signs of depression, chalking them up to plain ol' bad moods or hormones.

"At first, when I told my parents that I thought I was depressed, they didn't believe me. They told me that everyone feels sad sometimes and that it was a normal part of being a teenager," says Jayme. "They didn't give me the chance to explain all of the different things I was experiencing besides being sad. Because I was so good at pretending to be fine, they thought I was being dramatic."

It wasn't until Jayme started cutting herself that her parents sent her to a therapist — and by then, it was almost too late.

[**GETTING HELP**](http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/delivery?sid=da3f01ba-9494-44c4-93ce-31cdac9fc05e%40sessionmgr115&vid=17&hid=105#toc)

Bottom line: If you think you could be depressed, confide in a trusted adult before things go too far.

"It's best if you can tell one of your parents, but if you can't, it's important to talk to a school counselor, a relative, a close friend of the family or your doctor. Do not try to be strong, just be honest. If you have thoughts about hurting yourself in any way, it's important that you tell them that too," says Dr. Boesky. It's also important to make arrangements to see a professional ASAP. Most bouts with depression are successfully treated with therapy. "Focusing on your thoughts and feelings has helped many girls overcome their depression," says Dr. Boesky. Some girls may need to take antidepressant medication in conjunction with therapy to help stabilize their moods.

[**SEEING THE LIGHT**](http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/delivery?sid=da3f01ba-9494-44c4-93ce-31cdac9fc05e%40sessionmgr115&vid=17&hid=105#toc)

Therapy certainly helped Jayme, who was able to sort through her angst and anxiety through weekly chat sessions. "The greatest thing I have learned is to not isolate myself. When you're depressed, it feels like you're always alone. But you're not. And instead of pulling away, being with friends or family helps me to get my mind off of the bad feelings," she says.

Though depression doesn't go away overnight and can even be a lifelong struggle, it is a manageable fight. Just ask Ann, who at 19 is now eight years removed from her diagnosis. "I'm still working on my recovery," she admits, but says helping raise awareness about depression, cutting, and drug and alcohol abuse through the organization To Write Love on Her Arms ([www.twloha.com](http://www.twloha.com)) has shed light in her once-dark world.

"Depression is a battle you have to fight every day, but it does get easier," she says. "I'm taking life one day at a time. And while I used to think I'd never get through the days, now, I have hope."

[**GET HELP NOW**](http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/delivery?sid=da3f01ba-9494-44c4-93ce-31cdac9fc05e%40sessionmgr115&vid=17&hid=105#toc)

If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide, getting help immediately is so important. The first step is talking to someone. There's 24/7 support and advice available at the resources below:

* National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK, suicidepreventionlifeline.org
* National Suicide Prevention Hotline, hopeline.com
* Self-Abuse Finally Ends, 1-800-DONTCUT, selfinjury.com

DEPRESSION

[**STOPPING TEEN SUICIDE**](http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/delivery?sid=da3f01ba-9494-44c4-93ce-31cdac9fc05e%40sessionmgr115&vid=17&hid=105#toc)

The rate of teen suicide is up for the first time in 10 years. Suicide attempts among 10 to 14 year old girls are also on the rise.

So if you suspect someone you know may be suicidal, look out for these major warning signs:

* Complaining of being a bad person or feeling rotten inside.
* Girls at risk say things like, "Nothing matters," "It's no use," and "I want to tell you this, in case something happens to me."
* Giving away her favorite things or throwing away belongings.
* Becoming suddenly cheerful after a period of depression.
* Hallucinations or bizarre thoughts.
* Change in personality, eating habits or sleeping patterns.

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By Sarah Wassner Flynn