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Opinion Article

What Can We Do to Turn Around Rising Teenage Depression? Introducing the SPARK Method

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The Teenage Depression Crisis

Depression kills and teenage depression kills children. Through suicide, depression can be a deadly disease, even though suicide is complex and rarely has a single cause. In the WHO European Region (which includes 53 nations both in Europe and Central Asia), suicide is the leading cause of death among young people aged 15 to 29 [1].

Around the world, about one in seven young people between the ages of ten and nineteen is living with a mental health condition [2]. In the UK, the recorded incidence of depression in children and teenagers in primary care rose 2.4-fold between 2003 and 2018. Anxiety rose 3.5-fold. Incidence was higher in girls than boys [3]. Greater awareness, less stigma, and changes in diagnosis may explain part of that rise, but the study's authors could not rule out a true increase. A national survey in England of 5–15-year-old children showed emotional disorders rising from 3.9% in 2004 to 5.8% in 2017 [4]. After the pandemic, the numbers got even higher and the latest survey found that those rates remained high in 2023. In 8-16-year-olds in England, the rate of those with a probable mental disorder rose from 12.5% in 2017 to 20.3% by 2023 [5]. These are not statistics about someone else's children. These are the kids on our school runs, in our classrooms, our examination rooms, and in our neighbours' homes.

Changes in awareness, diagnosis, access to care, and young people's environments may all contribute. The increased disease burden in such a short time is not something that genetics alone can explain, and so we must look to the environment. The good news is that the environment for teenagers can be placed primarily into the hands of parents, caregivers, educators, counsellors, physicians, and lawmakers. And that these environments are malleable.

Why Prevention, and why a Paediatrician?

I took these sobering facts as a call to action, as I was seeing these trends first-hand in my examination rooms as a practising paediatrician in Southern California. After over two decades of caring for children, I was seeing disturbing rises in attempted suicides and mood disorders. I was seeing many of these children after their symptoms had begun, and I wanted to help children before the onset of any symptoms.

Most of our systems are built to respond, not to prevent. We wait for the crisis: A&E (the emergency department), the hospitalisation, the waiting list. By then, a child has already suffered for months and sometimes even years.

I am not a psychologist. I am a paediatrician, which makes me a kind of first responder. I see children when they are healthy, every year, long before anything goes wrong. I notice when sleep slips, when friendships thin, when the spark dims, and when electronics begin to creep into their schedules for much longer than they intended. And I have the parents in the room, too.

If there were ways to lower the risk of depression and keep teenagers well, shouldn't everyone, including parents, teens, teachers, coaches, and paediatricians, know them, encourage them, and live them? Years ago, during a hard season for my own family, one of my colleagues and mentors encouraged me to build resilience in my family and told me, "You'll have to steel them." To make them so strong and impenetrable, like steel. I have never forgotten it. Depression, external stressors, bullying, meanness, isolation, and despair all try to steal our kids. Our job is to steel them instead: to make them strong, purposeful, curious, and kind. One letter changes everything.

The SPARK Method

SPARK is a method I designed based on five daily practices intended to support teenagers' wellbeing and to attempt to elevate and protect a teenager's mood. It is simple on purpose. A plan a family can remember is a plan a family will actually use. Physicians notoriously ask patients to take their medications, eat right, exercise, avoid toxins like alcohol and tobacco, and take steps to elevate mood. The SPARK Method makes doing the right thing easy to remember and easy to achieve. It provides a simple framework that releases parents and teenagers from the tyranny of how. SPARK is an acronym, S is for Social Connection, P for Practising gratitude and finding Purpose, A is for physical Activity, R is for Rest and Relaxation, and K is for Kindness.

The SPARK Method has not yet been evaluated in a controlled clinical trial, and its effectiveness in preventing major depressive disorder remains unknown. SPARK should never delay appropriate clinical assessment or treatment.

S — Social Connection

Teens need real friendships, in person, not just followers. Loneliness is one of the quiet thieves of mood. In my exam room, I see how a scrolling feed can feel like company while leaving a teen more alone. In my "Best Part of Your Day" exercise, two people take turns asking, "What is the best thing that happened to you today?", and then really listening and asking open-ended follow-up questions. Research on sharing positive experiences suggests that enthusiastic, responsive listening can enhance positive emotions and relationship quality [6]. These studies were conducted mainly in college students and couples rather than in teens. Protect one phone-free family meal a day, and help your teen find one group that meets in person: a team, a club, a youth group, a band.

P — Purpose and the Practice of Gratitude

A teen who believes she matters to someone, or to something bigger than herself, is a teen with a reason to get up in the morning. Gratitude trains the brain to notice what is going right. Running water without parasites in it. Heaters. A smile from a stranger or loved one. Each night, share three good things from the day. A 2025 meta-analysis of brief psychological interventions in youth termed "wise interventions" found that the gratitude-practise intervention subgroup showed a modest reduction in depressive symptoms, a small but significant effect of gratitude interventions on depressive symptoms in young people [7]. Give your teen a real job at home that the family genuinely depends on; this will reinforce their value to their family.

A — Activity

Moving our bodies is one of the most reliable mood lifters we have. My own mother has exercised one hour a day, every day, for sixty years. Small daily habits reshape a person. If exercise sounds daunting, call it movement. Regular physical activity can support both mood and sleep in children and adolescents [8]. Exercise elevates mood and helps regulate sleep, shortening sleep latency and providing better quality sleep. Commit to increasing movement from whatever is the baseline. Walk together; the best conversations often happen side by side, not face to face.

R — Rest and Relaxation

Rest means not only sleep but downtime, so teenagers can reset and have scheduled stress-free time. I call it the Three Ms of rest: Meditation, Mindfulness, or a Mini-Vacation of about twenty minutes a day. A Mini-Vacation can be drawing, listening to or making music, taking a bath, or simply sitting outside without a screen. Keep a steady bedtime and wake time, even at weekends. Phones charge outside the bedroom at night. For everyone. Parents too. Adolescents aged 13-18 need eight to ten hours of sleep [9]. The MYRIAD trial compared a 10-lesson school mindfulness programme with usual social-emotional teaching among students aged 11–14. At one year, researchers found no evidence that the mindfulness programme was superior in reducing depression risk or improving wellbeing and social-emotional functioning. A companion analysis found small but worse scores for some students who were already struggling, and the authors cautioned against using this programme with them [10]. According to a University of Oxford write-up, students' views of the programme were mixed, and 80% did not do the required mindfulness practice homework. This does not mean mindfulness is not helpful nor that it might be harmful for every teen; it suggests that one approach may not fit everyone. That is why the Mini-Vacation option exists, to offer another way not involving mindfulness nor meditation for teens to rest. Let teens choose a form of respite that feels right for them and help them protect time for it, especially after possibly stressful school days.

K — Kindness

Helping others is one of the surest medicines for the self. Kindness pulls a struggling teen out of her own head and reminds her that she can make someone else's day better. Encourage one small act of kindness a day: a text to a lonely friend, help with a chore, a thank-you note, calling a grandparent. Teach kindness to self, too. Acts of kindness support wellbeing and help teenagers feel connected to others, although the effects are not the same for everyone. The voice in a teen's head should sound like a good friend, not a critic. Kindness activities may benefit some adolescents, although effects are not universal [11].

Box 1. The SPARK Method at a glance

	Practice	One thing to try tonight
S	**Social Connection**	Phone-free family dinner; ask, “What was the best part of your day?”
P	**Purpose & Gratitude**	Each share three good things from today.
A	**Activity**	A 15-minute walk together after dinner.
R	**Rest & Relaxation**	All phones charge outside bedrooms tonight — parents’ too.
K	**Kindness**	Text one friend or grandparent something kind.

SPARK has not been tested in a clinical trial and does not replace professional assessment or treatment.

What I left out on Purpose

SPARK is loosely grounded in famed psychologist and father of positive psychology Dr. Martin Seligman's PERMA model of well-being. His PERMA model stands for Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment [12]. But I made one deliberate change. Seligman's "A" stands for Accomplishment. Mine stands for Activity. Our children are not short on pressure. Exam results, rankings, followers, university applications: they are measured all day long. I did not want one more scoreboard.

And yet, there is something real underneath achievement that teens need: competence. Competence helps build confidence. Self-esteem is not built by telling young people they are amazing. It is built by helping them become capable. Confidence grows when competence grows. That is the difference between pressure and purpose.

Start tonight

You do not need to do all five letters at once. Pick one. Tonight. Maybe it is a phone-free dinner. Maybe it is three good things before bed. Maybe it is a walk around the block with a teenager who rolls her eyes the whole way, and then, somewhere around the corner, starts to talk.

Prevention is quiet. Nobody throws a party for the depression that never happened. But that is the victory I fight for every day, and it is one every family can attempt to win.

The world, with its wars and its economic turmoil, its politics and its natural disasters, and the uncertainty of artificial intelligence, will try to steal our children's sparks, to dim their lights and to bring about self-doubts and worries. Our job as parents and physicians, and all those who love children and want them to thrive, is to steel them, with connection, purpose, movement, rest, and kindness, one ordinary day at a time.

SPARK is for prevention, not treatment. If your teen has been showing warning signs of possible depression and is persistently sad, irritable, or withdrawn for two weeks or more; has lost interest in things they used to love; is sleeping or eating very differently; is falling behind at school; or talks about hopelessness, self-harm, or not wanting to be here, please see your paediatrician or a mental health professional promptly.

Also, if you or your teen is struggling right now, please do not wait. In the United Kingdom, call Samaritans on 116 123, Childline on 0800 1111 (under 19s), or Papyrus HOPELINE247 on 0800 068 4141 (under 35s), or text SHOUT to 85258. In the United States, call or text 988. All are available any time, day or night.

About the Author

Seamae Erfani, MD, is a Paediatrician in Southern California and the author of *Mama-Doc's Guide to Preventing Teenage Depression*, which describes the SPARK Method in full. www.mamadoc.net

Competing Interests

The author wrote *Mama-Doc's Guide to Preventing Teenage Depression*, which describes the SPARK Method, and has a commercial interest in the book.

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