

Ask a psychotherapist

Question: I'm the mother of a teenage girl (just turned 16) who up to a while ago has been a great kid ? good student, cooperative, friendly. About a year ago, her marks suddenly started to drop and she stopped hanging out with her usual friends. She got very withdrawn, even from us and her sisters and started spending all her time alone in her room. She's lost a lot of weight and she refuses to come to the dinner table with the rest of us. She won't talk to anyone in the family about what's going on and I'm getting pretty worried. What should I do?

Answer: The teen years are a time of much growth and change and sometimes of turmoil for kids of both genders. It's natural to begin to want more privacy from parents and siblings in the later teen years but I think that you are right to be concerned that your daughter's degree of withdrawal may signal the presence of deeper, potentially serious issues.

A change of friendship group is an important indicator that something significant is happening in your child's life. She may be the victim of bullying at school or on-line and be too ashamed of the situation to want to share it with her family.

Weight loss and a change in appetite can be a sign of depression and/or an eating disorder. Your teen could be depressed for any number of reasons (bullying, boyfriend issues, drug use, unresolved family conflicts, to name a few). With the relentless pressure from media these days to present a particular body type (slim, sexualized, etc.), she may be experiencing dissatisfaction with her body image and secretly dieting in order to change it.

In any case, it's necessary to get a dialogue going with your daughter quickly somehow so that you can find out what's going on. Sometimes teens will open up more readily to a therapist than to family.

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