

Depression and Teen Sexuality

Study shows and increase in depression among teens who are sexually active.

When I was in high school it seemed like everywhere I turned friends were having sex. For many of my peers sex was seen as a rite of passage; something you've earned the right to do. For others it was simply part of the inevitable or something you were expected to do. Growing up watching the 80's Brat Pack, sex was all smiles and laughs. It all seemed easy.

No one ever talked about the next day, much less the coming weeks and months after the fling was over. As I look at the landscape twenty years later not much has changed in the message or practice. Sure we've added "STDs are dangerous" and "Be responsible" to our glib messages but we still say little of one of the greatest dangers -- the immediate and long term emotional effects on one's self.

According to a new study by The Heritage Foundation, premarital sex is one of the leading causes of depression among teens. Sexually active girls are 4X more likely to struggle with depression, boys are 3X more likely. The study also observed a correlation in teen suicide rates and sexual activity showing those who are sexually active are 2-3 times more likely to attempt suicide.

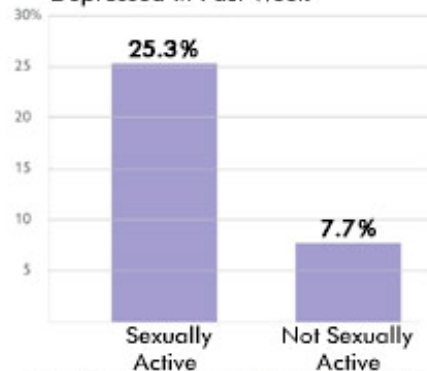
I find it ironic that we will spend over 500 million dollars this year teaching our teens to practice sex safely, yet there will still be 9.1 million teens that contract an STD. We spend countless hours telling them of the dangers of premarital sex to their bodies, but perhaps we have neglected the more important message of the danger to their heart and mind. We have told them that sex is an act of maturity and you must "respect your partner" but could it be we have overlooked the weightier message of respecting yourself by saying "no" from the beginning?

Boys and Girls See it Differently

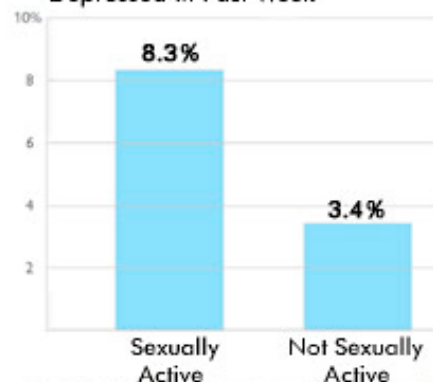
In our age of gender equality, we have taught teens that there is no difference in the genders. Our feel-good teaching has done nothing but undermine the uniqueness and value of each of the sexes. Our "equality" has created a mindset among girls that their sexuality is a means to an end, the end result being control and fulfillment. Instead, it has only led to more confusion and depression.

Adults who have a close relationship with teens can easily see the fruit of this faulty thinking. Teen expert and speaker, Harriet Turk of Power Choices, Inc. sees it on a regular basis as she speaks to tens of thousands of teen girls each year. *"Teenage girls are confused because they constantly hear*

Depression & Sexual Activity: Teen Girls Depressed in Past Week



Depression & Sexual Activity: Teen Boys Depressed in Past Week



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, Wave 8, 1996
 Note: Teenage boys aged 14 to 17. Depressed means the boy responded that he felt depressed "a lot of the time" or "most or all of the time."

messages from adults that as a woman today 'you can be anything you want to be.' Sounds empowering when it actually has the opposite effect," says Turk. When what girls want most is to be loved and desired, they are willing to trade sex to try and get it. But in the aftermath, love is not the emotion they are left with. Turk goes on to say, "Confusion and depression set in because what they seek is not in any form reality. Women think about relationships with their hearts, not their brains. When they seek love, they give sex. Emotionally, for a moment, it works. But feelings of unworthiness come from the aftereffects of giving your heart and receiving little or nothing in return."

Girls who have sex in order to fulfill an emotional desire only end up more emotionally deflated. This could be why the study showed that while both genders struggle with depression and suicide, the effects on girls is disproportionate. One in four of all sexually active girls are currently depressed. Their different reasons for having sex are apparent, a path to fulfillment vs. an expression of bravado, but the effects are the same. According to the National Campaign to Reduce Teen Pregnancy, more than 2/3 of teens who have had sex said they wish they had waited longer. The majority of teens express regret over their decision to have sex. They long for another chance to say, "I've never."

The Path to Sexual Freedom

Much of our culture tells us we can have what we want, when we want it, and however much we want. That is fine if we're talking about ice cream. Instead we are talking about a decision teens are making that can never be reversed. We see teens today (just as we did before them) experiencing depression, dissatisfaction with self, shame, and remorse as they experiment with sexual activity.

As a parent, it is your responsibility to help your teen see their sexuality as part of a bigger design for their life and the freedom that comes from waiting until marriage. The poet Robert Frost once talked of choosing a "path less traveled." When it comes to sexual activity, the less traveled path as a teen would be to say, "I choose to wait." With all the cultural pressures they face, the path of sexual purity is a difficult one to choose. But it is a path much easier to stay on if you are willing to walk it with them.

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