Mr Stewart Ross

"Teenage depression is just one of the many mental health issues we as teachers have to deal with on a daily basis."

An article in the Age newspaper recently talked about an alarming snapshot of the mental health of Australian high school students. The survey found that one in three girls and a quarter of boys are depressed with many turning to violence, alcohol and inappropriate behaviour to cope with their problem.

The study comprised 4,500 students from Year 7 to Year 12 also found that 30% of boys and 34% of girls felt constantly under strain and unable to overcome their difficulties. What is probably more alarming is that one-third are drinking to dangerous levels and 10% had gambled in the past year.

Are these statistics new and a product of modern society or have they always been so over the last few decades? Are we perhaps more aware of such issues as they were never discussed in polite circles in the past? As someone involved with young people, I am very concerned at these results.

Teenage depression is just one of the many mental health issues we as teachers have to deal with on a daily basis. The word ‘depression’ is commonly used to describe the feelings of sadness that all of us experience at times in our lives. It is also a term used to describe a number of diagnosable depressive disorders. Because feelings of depression are so common, it is important to understand the difference between unhappiness and sadness in daily life and the symptoms of a depressive disorder.

There are a number of different mental illnesses involving depression ranging from a major depressive disorder, to adjustment disorder, bipolar and even one that many women may have encountered, post-natal depression.

Because of the growing concern about issues like this not only in the community but also in schools, last year a number of key staff in the school undertook a two-day inservice course that dealt with depression as well as other disorders; for want of a better description it was a mental health first aid course.

Parents, too, need to be aware of the signs and symptoms of teenage depression. Teenagers face a host of pressures, from the changes of puberty to questions about who they are and where they fit in. With all this drama, it is not always easy to differentiate between depression and normal teenage moodiness. Making things even more complicated, teens with depression do not necessarily appear sad, nor do they always withdraw from others. For some depressed teens, symptoms of irritability, aggression, and rage are more prominent.

THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR:
- Sadness or feelings of hopelessness
- Irritability, anger, or hostility
- Tearfulness or frequent crying
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Loss of interest in activities
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Restlessness and agitation
- Feelings of worthlessness and guilt
- Lack of enthusiasm and motivation
- Fatigue or lack of energy
- Difficulty concentrating
- Thoughts of death or suicide

If you are unsure if an adolescent in your life is depressed or just “being a teenager”, consider how long the symptoms have been present, how severe they are, and how different the teen is acting from his or her usual self. While some “growing pains” are to be expected as teenagers grapple with the challenges of growing up, dramatic, long-lasting changes in personality, mood or behaviour are red flags of a deeper problem.

We all need to work together on this important problem.