

What Is Depression?

Depression is an unhappy mood that affects daily functioning, including thoughts, feelings, behavior, and overall health. When depression is too severe or lasts too long, it is considered an illness that can be treated. Left untreated, depression can take the joy out of life and even take away the desire to live. Everyone experiences minor upsets, but this does not mean that everyone is depressed. To have true depression, the symptoms must be present for at least 2 weeks.

How Common Is Depression?

Depression in children and teens is far more common than most people realize and affects school-age girls and boys equally. After puberty, girls are twice as likely as boys to be depressed. Ten out of 100 teens get seriously depressed each year, and many more have mild levels of sadness or the blues. About 1 in 10 children without known problems has suicidal thoughts.

What Are the Signs of Depression?

The most important signs to look for are feelings of sadness and hopelessness. While every child or teen is sad some of the time, no child should feel sad all of the time. If you notice that your child is unhappy and can't seem to have fun, think of this as a sign of depression. To be hopeless or without hope means to feel that nothing can go right, that nothing will change, and that no one can help.

Poor self-esteem is another important sign of depression. This is the teen's or child's attitude toward himself. If your child's self-esteem is poor, he or she may feel stupid, ugly, or worthless. Another sign is a change in school performance. If your child was a good student and now wants to stay home, or if his/her grades suddenly fall, he/she may be depressed. Other signs include sleep problems, appetite changes, irritability, anger, crying, and aches and pains, such as headaches or stomachaches.

What would your child say if he or she is depressed? Don't expect your child to say much, because you can't count on him/her telling you how he/she feels. While your child may talk of being unhappy, he or she probably won't say, "I'm depressed" the way an adult will. So, you want to be aware of the signs.

What If My Child Should Mention Suicide?

Sometimes a child mentions that he or she does not want to live. If your child mentions suicide: Take it seriously. Talk to your child. Ask if he or she has made a plan for suicide. If so, it is more serious. If suicide is mentioned or if an attempt is made, seek professional help immediately. Do not assume your child is just looking for attention. Don't ever dare a youngster who mentions suicide to "go ahead." You may think it's a bluff, but he or she may take the dare.

How Can a Parent Help?

You can be very helpful to your depressed child. Some suggestions include: Be supportive -- listen to what your child has to say. Encourage him or her to keep talking. If your child can't talk well with you, perhaps he or she can talk with a sibling, aunt, friend, teacher, or healthcare provider. Encourage your child to describe or write down how he or she feels. Don't get angry if he/she describes unhappy feelings. **If the problem is severe, worrisome, or lasts more than 2 weeks, get professional help. Talk to your child's healthcare provider if you have any concern that your child may be depressed.**

What Are the Causes of Depression in Children?

There is no single answer to the cause of depression. It is probable that several factors combine to create the condition. The child's environment, especially if it is unhappy and stressful, is often a major cause. Depression also may be triggered by difficult situations, such as a death or divorce in the family or abuse. Another possible contributing factor is heredity. Studies show that depression frequently runs in families, so genetics may play a part in the depression of some children. Yet other reasons are a lack of a certain chemical in the brain, called serotonin, and a negative pattern of thinking (e.g., I can't do anything right; everything is bad).

What Are the Treatments for Depression?

- Treatment is possible and helpful. The choice of treatment depends on the cause of the problem, the severity of the depression, and whether suicidal thoughts are present. Psychotherapy, such as cognitive behavior therapy, is the primary treatment. By meeting regularly with a therapist, your child can find out the causes of his/her depression, and then learn ways to help deal with it. It is usually good for the family to become involved in the treatment.
- Medication can be an effective part of treatment. Antidepressants have few side effects and are not habit-forming or addictive.
- Finally, you should not feel guilty if your child is depressed. The important point is to realize that there is a problem and to get help for it. If you are concerned, be sure to talk to your child's healthcare provider. Remember, depression in children and teens is treatable.

What Can I Do to Prevent or Help My Child with Depression?

- Stay involved in your child's life. Spend time with your child regularly, even if it's only a family dinner. Too often, parents respond to growing teenagers' wishes for independence by withdrawing from their teens' lives. The most important thing for parents to do is to be aware of and involved in their teen's life.
- Support positive relationships by encouraging your teen to get involved in school, clubs, or community events. Help your teen find interests and activities where he or she can connect with other teens. Also, know where your teen is and what he/she is doing when they go out.
- Talk to your teen, and listen when he/she talks to you! Parents should talk to their children as often as possible so teens can talk about their problems and worries. Ask your teen about school and friends. Listen to his/her troubles and help find solutions.
- Teach your child coping and problem-solving skills; it also is important for you to role model positive ways of coping and dealing with stress.
- Know the warning signs of depression and be aware if your child shows any of these signs while talking to you, especially if he or she mentions suicide. Praise your teen's accomplishments rather than finding fault with things he/she does. Teens need to feel that their parents care about them and that what they are doing is recognized.
- It is mainly your job to make sure that your child receives the treatment he or she needs. Make sure that your teen takes his/her medication and goes to counseling. Be supportive.
- For more information about depression, contact the school counselor, psychologist, or social worker at your child's school, or contact your child's doctor or nurse practitioner.