

Depression in Children and Teenagers

Overview

How you can help a child or teenager who is depressed.

- Signs of depression
- What you can do to help
- If your child or teenager talks about dying
- What causes depression?
- Various kinds of treatment
- Questions to ask a therapist
- Helping your child

Children and teenagers can experience depression just as adults can. But children go through so many ups and downs in the normal course of childhood that it isn't always easy to tell the difference between a temporary "stage" and a problem that needs attention. It's natural for your child or teenager to feel sad or anxious at times -- for example, when a grandparent dies or a best friend moves away. These feelings usually become less intense after a while, and your child bounces back and begins to seem like herself again. But if your child has been feeling sad for a long time or seems to be having much more difficulty than usual, these changes in behavior may be signs of depression. A mental health professional or your child's physician may be able to help you identify the problem and suggest ways to help your child.

Signs of depression

The following signs of depression to watch for in children:

- *Your child seems "down."* Does your child show little interest in activities he used to enjoy? Has he stopped seeing friends? Does he never seem to leave his room? These can be signs that your child or teenager is depressed. Although every child feels sad from time to time, the situation may be more serious if the sadness persists for more than a month and is interfering with sleep, time with peers, daily activities, or your child's enjoyment of life.
- *Changes in appetite, including weight loss or gain.* Does your child want to eat constantly, even if she has just finished a meal? Has she lost her appetite, eating very little at mealtimes? Has she stopped eating favorite foods?
- *Sleep problems, including sleeping too much or having trouble sleeping.* Is your child taking naps despite getting a good night's sleep? Is he awakening early in the morning and having trouble going back to sleep? Is he constantly complaining about being tired?
- *Complaining.* Your child or teenager may show that she's depressed by complaining, particularly about health problems that seem to have no physical cause. She may have headaches, stomachaches, and other vague "aches and pains," and she may miss school frequently.

2 • Depression in Children and Teenagers

- *Trouble getting along with others.* Difficulty with peers can be a sign of depression. A child or teenager who is picked on, teased, or excluded, or who feels the need to be a bully and pick on others, may be depressed and need help.
- *Problems with schoolwork.* A common sign of depression in children is trouble with schoolwork. Your child may be getting lower grades, neglecting his homework, or not completing projects. These may be signs that he is having trouble paying attention. He may be worrying about something, which is keeping him from doing his best work. Particular attention should be paid to children who are usually “good students” but who suddenly seem to be having trouble in school.
- *Crying more than usual.* A child who seems to cry easily and without the usual provocation may be demonstrating signs of depression.
- *Social isolation.* Avoiding friends and becoming socially isolated can be a sign of depression. Cutting off relationships that were important in the past can also be a sign of depression.
- *Watching more television or playing more video games.* A desire to watch TV or play video games instead of participating in other activities that your child once enjoyed could be a sign of depression.
- *Giving away belongings and making statements about what she wants to happen to her things should something happen to her.*
- *Preoccupation with death,* particularly with asking about what happens after death.
- *Causing physical harm to oneself.* Some teenagers who are depressed may cut their arms or other body parts. Act promptly if this is noted, to avoid other physical harm.

What you can do to help

When you see signs of depression, you can help by talking with your child, listening carefully, and getting help with problems that don't go away. Here are some steps you can take:

- *Ask questions.* Try to find out what is making your child feel sad and how often she feels that way. If your child has become withdrawn and resists answering questions, you may be able to draw him out by showing that you understand through comments like, “You seem to have been very sad since Joshua moved away. You must miss him a lot.” Let your child know that you care and want to help. If your child does not seem to be opening up to you, enlist the help of a family member, friend, or teacher with whom your child feels comfortable.
- *Don't assume your child or teenager will “outgrow” the problem.* Hoping that signs of depression will go away can increase your teenager's frustration. If she has been trying unsuccessfully to feel better on her own, letting the problem go on could make your child feel guilty. She may be blaming herself for problems that aren't

her fault. Children and teens do not have the coping skills and life experiences that help many adults to cope with such situations.

- *Understand that depression is treatable.* If you seek help promptly after noticing signs of depression, you may be able to keep your child's depression from becoming worse.
- *Realize that depression doesn't just go away.* Depression may be related to a chemical imbalance and, even if a situation that triggered depression has improved, your child may still require treatment.
- *Talk to your child or teenager about counseling.* Your child or teenager may not understand that there are people he can talk to when he feels unhappy who can help him find solutions to his problems. Let him know that he doesn't have to keep all his feelings inside. If your child or teen resists counseling, suggest a short-term contract for a limited number of visits, giving the physician or therapist a chance to break through the depression. You may find that your child will be more interested in continuing once he starts to feel a little better.
- *Let an older child or a teenager participate in counseling decisions.* You'll have to make decisions for a younger child. But if you let an older child know about some of the counseling options that exist, she may want to participate in the decision or suggest the kind of counselor she would feel most comfortable seeing. If possible, let her choose whether to see a male or female therapist.
- *If your child refuses counseling, go yourself.* A therapist may be able to work with you to help your child or teen indirectly.
- *If necessary, be willing to involve your entire family in counseling.* Each child or teenager lives within the context of a family, and behavior is often shaped by the family dynamics. Family therapy can benefit your child, directly or indirectly.
- *Be sure to involve both parents whenever possible* with counseling and medication decisions. Both parents need to support such decisions. Children and teens often "play" one parent against the other with everyday issues. If a child understands that his parents are in agreement and will not back down, he is more likely to be willing to seek help and follow a therapy program.

If your child or teenager talks about dying

It's always upsetting and alarming to hear your child or teenager say something like, "I just feel like killing myself." This can be a sign of severe depression, so it's important not to ignore comments like these. Take these steps right away:

- *Take the comment seriously.* Think about what your child has said and how it fits into other things that are happening in her life. Don't ignore it or shrug it off as a figure of speech, especially if your child has been feeling low for awhile.

- *Talk with your child or teenager.* Talk with your child as soon as you can about what he said. Does he sometimes think seriously about hurting himself? If so, try to find out what is making him feel so sad and what you can do to help.
- *Show that you want to help.* Try not to brush off remarks about death with phrases like, “You’re just going through a phase,” or, “Tomorrow you won’t even remember how upset you were.” This may make your child think you don’t care about her pain. Try to show that you understand how sad she feels.
- *Keep a watchful eye on your child.* Look for other signs that your child or teenager may be serious about hurting himself. For example, children who are thinking seriously about death often start giving away their favorite possessions.
- *Suicide-proof your home.* Be sure that any guns are removed from the home or make sure that they are locked unloaded, with the ammunition stored separately. Your child or teen should not have access to them at any time. Medications (including over-the-counter medications like ibuprofen and acetaminophen) should be inaccessible at all times. This should also include any medicines for depression. Finally, make sure that knives and razor blades are kept in an inaccessible place.
- *Seek professional help.* If you’re unsure about how serious the problem is, a counselor can evaluate the situation and help you decide what to do next. Don’t assume that the sad feelings are trivial or that they will go away on their own. Even if the problem turns out not to be serious, talking to a counselor can help you understand how to keep it from getting worse. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (800-273-8255) if you need help immediately for a child or teenager who may be at risk for suicide.
- *Don’t be fooled by a sudden improvement in mood.* Recovery from depression is seldom quick. If your child has been showing signs of depression and suddenly becomes upbeat, do not assume that the depression has passed. This could actually be a sign that the child has made a decision and will act soon to harm herself. Seek professional help to assess the situation.

What causes depression?

Depression can have many causes in children or teenagers. Usually it results from a number of factors that work together to create a situation that makes your child feel that he can’t cope. Many doctors believe that depression generally results from a combination of hereditary and environmental factors. A family history of depression can increase the risk that someone will experience the condition, but depression can also occur in children with no history of depression in their families. The common causes of depression include the following:

- *Stress.* Your child may have become depressed because she believes she has to be perfect, and she blames herself for not being able to live up to her own or other

people's expectations. She may also be having trouble handling a heavy load of schoolwork or adjusting to a big change, such as a divorce in the family.

- *Loss.* Children and teenagers often show signs of depression after losing the love or affection of someone they depend on -- a parent or another relative, a caregiver, or a special teacher. They may also become depressed when a romance ends, when they move to a new home, or when a close friend moves away.
- *Chronic illness.* Depression can occur along with some chronic or serious illnesses, such as diabetes or cancer that make your child feel afraid or "different." This kind of depression can often be treated along with the illness.
- *Biological changes.* The normal biological changes of adolescence can make your child feel upset or confused about what is happening to his body. These changes can be especially unsettling if your adolescent is also coping with other changes, such as starting a new school or facing intense peer pressure.

Various kinds of treatment

A professional evaluation can help you decide whether your child or teenager is depressed and, if so, what treatment would be best. Your pediatrician or family doctor can refer you to someone who can help -- a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, or another professional counselor. You might also be able to get recommendations from family and friends, a guidance counselor, or a religious leader you trust. After evaluating your child, a counselor might suggest treatment that includes psychotherapy or another form of therapy, medication, or both.

- *Psychotherapy, or "talk therapy."* In this kind of therapy, your child talks with a professional who can help her understand and find ways to cope with things that are bothering her. Psychotherapy gives your child a safe place to talk about the feelings of loss, sadness, or frustration that may be contributing to her depression. Psychotherapy may or may not involve other members of the family.
- *Play therapy.* Play therapy is a form of talk therapy designed for younger children or for children who have other problems, such as difficulty putting their feelings into words. In play therapy, a therapist might use dolls, toys, or games in working with your child. A related form of therapy known as art therapy encourages children to express their feelings through drawings and paintings.
- *Medication.* Antidepressant medications are designed to help people feel better by acting on the chemical pathways in the brain related to moods. Medical research has shown that a variety of antidepressants can be effective for adults, but the results are less clear for children and teenagers. And studies have shown that antidepressants can increase the risk of suicidal thoughts and behavior in young people. For this reason, any child or teenager who is taking antidepressants needs to be monitored closely by his doctor and his caregivers for signs that he may be feeling more depressed. Some doctors believe antidepressants should be used with psychotherapy or to help young people make enough progress to continue

with talk therapy. You can learn more about the effects of antidepressants on children and teenagers by visiting the Web site for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) at www.fda.gov.

Questions to ask a therapist

If you decide to have your child evaluated by a counselor or therapist, you'll probably want to ask a lot of questions about your child and the recommended treatment. Questions to ask include the following:

- Is my child depressed?
- How serious is the depression?
- Do you recommend psychotherapy?
- Are there support groups for parents who are coping with this kind of condition?
- How can I find those groups?

If a doctor recommends medication for your child, ask the following questions:

- What kind of medication is needed?
- How long will the medication be needed?
- What are the side effects?
- How long will the side effects, if any, last?
- How will the medication interact with other medications that my child might be taking, such as ibuprofen or cough syrup?
- Is this medication approved for use with my child's age group?
- If not, why do you believe it might still be beneficial?
- Are there any alternatives to this medication?
- How will you monitor my child while she is taking this medication?
- How do my child's caregivers and I need to monitor my child at home?
- Has the FDA approved this drug for the use for which you are prescribing it? Or are you recommending an off-label [unapproved] use? If so, why are you recommending the off-label use?
- Do you have any suggested books, Web sites, or other resources for more information?

Helping your child

You can help your child cope with depression by paying close attention to his feelings and needs.

- *Make time for your child or teenager.* Try to set aside some time each day to talk with your child.
- *Keep the lines of communication open.* Your child or teenager needs to feel free to talk to you about anything that is bothering her. Try not to get angry or upset if she expresses a view that upsets you or is very different from yours.
- *Respect your child's privacy.* Let your child or teenager know that you care about him, but won't force him to talk about a subject if he isn't ready. Show that you respect his privacy about subjects that might be too painful to talk about now.
- *Watch for signs of depression.* For example, watch for changes in your child's sleeping or eating habits, for unusual problems with schoolwork, or for signs that your child has stopped seeing friends and is spending more time than usual alone.
- *Encourage good habits.* Good health and social habits can make your child or teenager feel better even if she is depressed. Help your child find ways to get regular exercise and enough sleep, eat a balanced diet, and stay in touch with friends and family. Encourage her to participate in activities such as a club, youth group, or volunteer organization where she can meet others with similar interests.

Depression in children and teenagers isn't always easy to identify or overcome, but there are many effective ways to treat it. You can learn more about treatment options by visiting the Web site for the National Institute of Mental Health at www.nimh.nih.gov. The key to finding the kind of help your child needs is to be willing to try a variety of approaches until you find the one that works best.

For help and support, remember that the program that provided this publication has many helpful resources.

This information is provided to supplement the care provided by your physician and is not to be used as a substitute for professional medical advice. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider if you have questions about a medical condition or plan of treatment.

Written with the help of Deborah Borchers, M.D. Dr. Borchers is a primary care pediatrician and the parent of three children. She reviews articles for *Pediatrics* journal and is a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care.