UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION IN CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS

IMPORTANT INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS, PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Depression is more than 'being moody'

Depression is a condition that causes feelings of deep sadness, loneliness and emptiness, affecting our minds, bodies and behaviour.[1,2] It's an illness that can affect people of any age, including children and teenagers.[2]

Of course, it's normal for young people to experience big emotions and to feel unhappy, angry or moody from time to time, but depression is much deeper and more complicated than that.[3] It's a continually sad and hopeless feeling that eventually becomes overwhelming, and stops us being able to enjoy life.[1,2]

As in adults, depression in children and teenagers should always be taken seriously:[2] it's just like any other illness, and can't be overcome by willpower alone![4] The good news is there are many effective ways to treat depression.[1] Your doctor will explain the types of treatment that might work best.

What does depression feel like?

Depression looks different for different people! There are various types of depression[5] that can affect our minds and bodies in many different ways.[5,6]

Physical sensations:[6]

- Feeling tired all the time[6]
- Feeling sick and run down[6]
- Stomach aches[2]
- Headaches and muscle pains[6]
- Struggling to concentrate[6]

Emotions:[6]

- Sad, guilty and hopeless
- Overwhelmed
- Frustrated and easily irritated, a short temper
- Lonely
- Numb and empty

Behaviour:[6]

- Losing interest in hobbies, socialising and other fun activities
- Changing sleep habits (sleeping too much or not enough)
- Changing appetite (eating too much or not enough)
- Avoiding friends and family
- Using alcohol or other substances to cope

Thoughts:[6]

- "I'm a failure/I'm worthless"
- "Nothing good ever happens to me"
- "What's the point of living?"
- "The people I love would be better off without me"
- "I feel so lonely, even when I'm surrounded by people"

There are different types of depression



The word ‘depression’ is often used as an overall term to describe a number of different depressive disorders.[5] For example, when someone experiences a persistent depressed mood and loses interest in the activities they used to enjoy, we often simply call it ‘depression’, but the full medical name is major depressive disorder, or clinical depression.[5]

Depression and puberty

Although depression can affect younger children too, research shows that it’s more likely to be experienced during puberty.[3] Puberty can be a very difficult time, physically, psychologically and emotionally.[3]

There are a lot of hormonal changes to cope with as your body and mind begin to mature, school tends to be more stressful and demanding and social relationships become more complex.[3]

Remembering that it’s normal for teenagers to pull away from their families and experience strong or confusing emotions as they struggle to assert their independence and individuality, parents should also be aware that serious mood shifts and behavioural changes during this time can be signs of depression.[3]

DIfferent people cope with depression in different ways!

A depressed person could be really hurting inside while their life looks ‘perfect’ on the surface. Even super-successful stars like Billie Eilish, Selena Gomez and Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson have struggled with depression.[7,8,9]

Depression and substance use



Substances like alcohol, cannabis and other drugs can change the way you think, feel and act.[6] Any of these substances can potentially be misused, even prescription drugs.[6]

Some young people use substances as a ‘quick fix’ to make depression easier to cope with.[6] But while they might make you feel better for a little while, they will actually do more harm than good.[6] These kinds of substances often make you feel worse afterwards, and they will make the symptoms of depression harder to deal with over time.[6] If substance use is causing problems in your life, or making your problems worse, talk to someone you trust about the best way to get help.[6]

Why do some people get depressed?

When you're dealing with a big struggle like depression, it's normal to wonder "Why me?"

Sometimes depression can start because of specific circumstances in your life,[5] but we often don't know exactly what causes it.[1] There are many different factors that can trigger it, or make some people more vulnerable to depression than others, like:[1]

- Hormonal changes
- Stressful life events
- Traumatic experiences
- Brain chemistry imbalances
- A family history of depression and other mental illnesses
- A personal history of other mental illnesses, like anxiety disorder, eating disorders or post-traumatic stress disorder
- Serious or chronic physical illness
- Current or previous use of alcohol or drugs
- Side effects of certain medications

Did you know?

Research shows that girls are more prone to depression than boys, and the LGBTQI+ population has a higher rate of depression.[3,10]

Help for young people with depression

Before diagnosing you with depression, your doctor will ask about your symptoms and how long they have been bothering you, as well as any other factors that might be affecting you.[5]

With the right treatment, you can learn to manage your depression or even recover completely.[4] Your doctor's suggested treatment will depend on what type of depression you have and how severe it is.[5]

Talking treatment:

Speaking to a counsellor or psychologist can help you to put your feelings into words.[11,12] The most common talking treatments used are interpersonal therapy and cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT).[12]

Medication

Your doctor might also prescribe a course of antidepressant medication to help with your symptoms.[11]

IMPORTANT: A new medication might take a few days or weeks to start making a difference.[11] Some antidepressants can even make you feel worse at first, before you start to feel better.[13]

It's very important to stay in touch with your doctor or tell a trusted adult how you're feeling while you are adjusting to a new medication or starting therapy.

Parents of depressed children and teenagers

It's easy for adults to dismiss pubescent and teenage worries as being silly or insignificant compared to 'grown-up problems', but these fears can have a very serious impact on a young developing mind. Depression will stop your child getting the most out of life, and it will only get worse if it isn't treated.[2] Never dismiss signs of depression in your child, especially if they express thoughts of self-harm or suicide.[3] Helping your child or teenager through mental health struggles will help them to grow into healthier, happier adults.[14] Here are some practical steps you can take:[14]

- Be an active participant in their life
- Make yourself available and approachable
- Let your child know they can trust you and talk to you if they have a problem
- Listen to what they have to say in a non-judgemental way
- Make them feel safe, valued and heard, even if you don't fully understand why they feel the way they do
- Get to know their friends and teachers
- Encourage them to participate in healthy hobbies and social activities
- Keep an eye on their social media interactions, and talk to them about the safe, responsible and healthy use of social media
- Encourage healthy physical habits like regular exercise, a balanced diet and regular sleep patterns
- Help them to set realistic goals and improve their self-confidence

Depression is an illness, not a weakness! It's a chemical condition

Imagine that you want to chat to a friend: if you'd like to communicate by texting or calling them, you need a phone with a clear connection and good reception. A healthy brain is the same; it needs the right connections to function properly.

The nerve cells in your brain use special chemical 'connections' to send messages to each other.[15] These chemicals are called neurotransmitters.[15] Each type of neurotransmitter carries a different kind of message and plays a special role in your brain chemistry.[15]Research suggests that lower-than-normal levels of neurotransmitters can cause depressed moods and behaviour.[15]You know how it feels when you are in an area with bad signal and you can't communicate clearly over your phone? The person on the other end can't hear you properly so they don't understand you, or you can't get any messages through at all. You are left feeling frustrated, lonely and possibly scared.

In the same way, if you have too few neurotransmitters in your brain or if they are not as effective as they should be, your brain and body can't always understand the messages they should, and this can leave you feeling isolated, unheard and depressed. Just like you would need to move to a spot with better signal to solve your communication problem, you may need treatment to help the neural and chemical messages in your brain work better.

Like any other disease, depression is a real medical problem and requires medical help.[1]
A depressed child or teen can't just 'cheer up and snap out of it'.[1]

Coping with depression

Self-care is very important when you're feeling depressed or stressed out.[6] Here are some ways to look after your body and mind when you're dealing with depression.[6]

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY:

Getting active is good for your physical and mental health.A6 Walking, jogging or biking are all great ways to release 'feel-good' chemicals in your brain called endorphins, which help to improve your mood.[6]
Exercise and sport can help to improve your coordination and self-confidence.6 Playing a team sport or joining a group class can help you to make social connections too.[6] Regular physical activity can also help to regulate your sleeping patterns and make it easier to fall asleep at night.[6]

NUTRITION:

The food you eat has a big effect on your mood and thought patterns.[6] For a healthy body and brain, you need a good balance of nutrients.[6] Processed 'junk food' snacks are fine from time to time, but try to avoid them if you notice they are affecting your mood.[6]

Stay hydrated by drinking enough water every day.[6] Avoid or limit drinks containing caffeine, like coffee, fizzy sodas and energy drinks.[6] A balanced diet is the best source of nutrients, but your doctor might also recommend a supplement if your levels of certain vitamins or minerals are low.[6]

SLEEP AND RELAXATION:

Sleep is important because it helps your body to heal and repair itself.[6] It's good for your mood, your memory and your immune system, but stress, worry and hormonal changes can make it hard to get the rest you need.[6]Teenagers also often struggle to get enough sleep because your biological clock is shifting to make you naturally fall asleep later and wake up later.[6] Today's school and work schedules usually don't take this into account, which means you often lose out on your morning sleep time![16]

Use relaxation techniques like deep breathing and muscle relaxation exercises to help yourself unwind before you go to bed.[6] Cut down on screen time and avoid using your phone, tablet or laptop for at least 30 minutes before bed.[6] This will make it easier for your brain to produce the 'sleep hormone' called melatonin.[6]You can also keep a sleep diary to track your sleeping patterns and give you a better idea of why you might be struggling to get to sleep or wake up.[6]

CREATIVITY:

A creative outlet can help to lift your mood, improve concentration and confidence, and relieve stress.[6]
Creative activities also give you opportunities to meet new friends.[6]

Look for fun, creative activities that you can enjoy, either on your own or with others.[6] Don't put pressure on yourself to produce something perfect – just enjoy the process of discovering new skills.[6] Try a couple of different options until you find something that suits you.[6]If you're feeling low or demotivated, you can still enjoy something creative and inspiring by listening to music, reading a book or browsing your favourite artist's work online.[6]

SOCIAL SUPPORT:

Connecting with friends and family can help you to feel more supported and understood.[6] Focus on spending time with people who uplift you and encourage healthy behaviour.[6] Work on improving the positive relationships in your life, and try to be as open and honest about your feelings as possible.[6] Get involved in community events or volunteer programmes, to help you connect with new people.[6]

THOUGHT EXERCISES:

Pay attention to your thoughts and feelings so that you can identify situations which might make you start to feel worse or stir up more unhappy thoughts.

Keep a journal to get your thoughts down on paper; this can help when your feelings start to get overwhelming.[6] Keeping a mood diary is a great way to keep track of patterns in your moods, appetite and energy levels that you might not notice otherwise.[6]

Give yourself positive messages, like “I can do this” or “I can get through this”,6 even when you don’t quite believe it. You might just surprise yourself!

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Depression and Anxiety Self-Management for Teens
Mindfulness for Teens
Strength of Us
Triangle Project
SADAG – Teen Suicide Prevention Week
WHO: I had a black dog, his name was Depression

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