

UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION



What Is Depression?

Sadness is a normal feeling that all people experience. It is our way of responding to loss, hurt, disappointment, or discouragement. A normal response to sadness can be to “**shut down**” positive feelings and behaviors for a short period of time.

When Is Sadness A Problem?

Sadness becomes a problem when it is **severe and persistent**, and causes an **inability to cope, function, and enjoy life**. A sad mood is then called a depressive **disorder**. Here are some signs of a depressive disorder:

- > New sad or irritable feelings that persist for most of the day, nearly every day
- > Longstanding sad or irritable feelings that persist for most of the day, more days than not
- > Loss of interest or enjoyment in most activities
- > Thinking about death or dying

What Causes A Depressive Disorder?

Depressive disorders are caused by a difference in the **structure or function** of the parts of the brain that control the intensity of sad and irritable moods. Vulnerability to depressive disorders can be **inherited** from members of the family tree. Often there is an **event in the environment** that triggers the sad or angry feelings (such as a poor relationship with a parent or friend, loss of a loved one, or other stressful life events).

How Is Depression Diagnosed?

Your child’s **primary care practitioner** (PCP) will be able to recognize and treat **mild to moderate** forms of depressive disorders. For more **severe or complicated forms**, **behavioral health specialists** experienced with children and adolescents are best trained to diagnose and treat the disorder.

How Is Depression Treated?

An effective treatment for depressive disorders is learning **cognitive behavioral skills** to manage the sad or irritable mood. These skills can be learned with the use of our **Guided Self-Management Toolkit for Families**, or by working with a behavioral health clinician (therapist), or both. These skills include learning:

- 1 How to **pay attention to situations that make us sad or irritable**, and learning how to **talk about those feelings** with a trusted person
- 2 How to make time for **daily activities** that are **comforting and fun**
- 3 How to use **relaxation techniques** that soothe the mind and body
- 4 How to **challenge ways of thinking** that worsen sadness or irritability
- 5 How to effectively **solve problems** that are making us sad or irritable.

If environmental circumstances (parental, family, school) are triggering the sad or irritable feelings, it is important to improve these circumstances through family therapy or school consultation. If a depressive disorder is more severe, then medication (typically selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors or SSRIs) may be used as an additional treatment. Medication may help us feel more motivated to work on skills in therapy.



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Other Things Kids and Teens Can Do to Help with Depression



Keep a healthy lifestyle

Get plenty of sleep, eat a healthy diet, get physical exercise daily, and spend time in nature, with pets, and with people who make you feel calm and comfortable.



Avoid alcohol or drugs

These substances can worsen depression by their effect on the brain, and by causing thoughts or behaviors that create more sad or irritable feelings.



Deal with trauma

If something very sad has happened to you, talk to a trusted person about what to do.



Connect

Find ways to be social (in person!). Reconnect with good friends and supportive relatives.



Avoid excessive media

Excessive media use can lower your mood by causing you to negatively compare yourself to other people. Remember that what you see on social media can be deceiving and not the whole story.



Practice relaxation skills

Skills like deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and guided imagery should be practiced every day and whenever you feel sad or irritable.



Become future oriented

Realize that although you are in a "rough patch", there are many wonderful things ahead of you in life. Set some goals for what you want in life and see if you can take some small steps now to help you reach those goals.

Things Parents Can Do to Help A Depressed Child or Teen

Validate the feeling

"It is hard to feel sad".

Encourage mastery

"I know you can overcome your sadness if you practice your skills".

Model positive coping

"Let me tell you what I do to deal with sad moods – it might help you, too."

Manage your own distress

While it's hard to see your child struggle, remind yourself that if your child successfully masters this challenge using the help provided, it will make them better able to face future challenges.

Support quality sleep

Gently remind your child about the impact of sleep on mood and help them set up good sleep hygiene habits.

Support socializing and getting active

Encourage and facilitate your child maintaining social connections and getting regular physical exercise.

Strengthen your relationship

Spend quality time doing activities your child and you enjoy. Use found time (e.g. driving them to activities) to connect. Don't underestimate the power of just listening to your child.

Avoid criticism

Take a deep breath before you offer criticism, even if constructive, to your child. Depression makes people feel vulnerable, so lead with positivity and gentleness.

Comment on positive steps

Praise your child when you notice them taking steps to use coping skills.

Deal with screen problems

If excessive screen use is a concern, problem solve together about reasonable expectations for limiting screen time.

Instill hope

Tell your child or teen that you believe in them and know they will get through this difficult time.

***Safety:** Depression can change the way one thinks about death and dying. Make sure there are no guns in the home of a depressed child or teen. If you think your child or teen might try to hurt themselves, seek medical attention right away.

Ask your child or teen's PCP to "prescribe" the Guided Self-Management Toolkit for Depression, so that you and your child or teen can begin to learn and practice depression management skills at home!

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