



Childhood and Adolescent Depression

What is depression?

Depression is a serious condition in which individuals feel sad, hopeless, and lack interest in their daily life. It can disrupt relationships with family and friends, negatively impact school performance, and affect almost every other part of their life. Depression may be a one-time problem or may persist for weeks or months. It is important that depression be recognized and appropriately treated. Untreated depression may return or worsen. Children who have had depression have an increased risk for it to occur again later in life.

Depression in children and adolescents can be difficult to recognize. In children, symptoms are often masked by other behavioral and physical complaints. Many young people will also have a second psychiatric problem that can complicate a diagnosis.

Common signs of depression in youth

- Frequently feel sad or irritable.
- May say things such as “I’m sad,” “I hate myself,” or “I’m stupid.”
- No longer enjoy doing activities they previously enjoyed
- Sudden change in weight or eating, either increased or decreased
- Sleep disturbances; Sleeping too little at night or too much during the day
- No longer wanting to be with friends or family; Wants to be left alone often
- Lack of energy
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt; Low self-esteem
- Forgetful; Trouble focusing or making choices; School performance may decline
- Not caring about the future; Hopeless
- Aches and pains without any other cause
- Frequent thoughts of suicide or death; They may say things like “I wish I were dead.”
- Using drugs or alcohol
- Self-harm, such as biting, hitting, or cutting him/herself

Many of these signs can occur in youth who are not depressed, but when seen together and frequently, they are red flags for depression.

What is the cause?

The exact cause of depression is unknown. Individuals with depression may have increased or decreased amounts of chemicals in the brain that affect thoughts and emotions. Depression can also run in families. Stressful events such as problems at school, bullying, losing a friend, divorce of parents, or death of a close relative or pet may trigger depression. Abuse, neglect, and poverty can also place a child at an increased risk for becoming depressed.

In childhood, both boys and girls are at equal risk for becoming depressed. During the teenage years, girls are more likely to develop depression.

How is it diagnosed?

Your child’s healthcare or mental health provider will get an in-depth history of your child’s symptoms, medical and family history, and medication list. They will screen for medical illnesses, medication issues, or substance abuse problems that could be contributing to the symptoms. Your healthcare provider may refer you to a mental health therapist for further testing and evaluation.



What Can I do to help?

It is important that you support your child and build a close relationship with them. Encourage them to talk with you about anything they wish and be a good listener. Encourage your teen to share their feelings, including thoughts of death or suicide. Help them view their problems in a more positive way and break them down into smaller, more achievable steps. Children and teens need to feel that their feelings matter and that you care. Tell your child that you are there for them whenever they need you. Depressed individuals often feel unworthy of love and attention, so you need to remind them often that you love and care for them. Praise their good behavior and point out their strengths.

It is also important to discuss if there is any bullying or abuse occurring. Keep in touch with your child's school and other caregivers and communicate how your child is doing. Be consistent with rules and consequences. Your child needs to know that rules still apply to them.

As a parent, ensure your child is eating a healthy diet, getting enough sleep, and getting regular exercise. Limit screen time and encourage them to partake in fun activities with family and friends.

Make a Safety Plan. Your healthcare or mental health provider will work with you to develop a safety plan. This often involves developing a list of people to call if symptoms are worsening. Monitor for suicidal risk factors, including talking about suicide, giving away belongings, increased thoughts about death, and substance abuse. Locate phone numbers for your teen's doctor, therapist, and local mental health crisis response team. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline can be reached at **1-800-273-TALK (8255)**.

What are the common treatments for depression?

There are a number of different treatments for depression, including counseling, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and medication. Treatment can also include working with the child's school and/or having the child involved with peer support or self-help groups. CBT helps patients identify and change thoughts and behaviors that contribute to depression and negative feelings. It can help your child better manage stress and can improve self-esteem. CBT is often offered by counselors and therapists.

Several types of medications can be used to treat depression. Your child's healthcare provider will work with you in deciding when and if medication is appropriate.

For additional help:

- National Institute of Mental Health
866-615-6464
<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml>
- Mental Health America
800-826-3632
<https://www.mhanational.org/>
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
1-800-273-TALK (8255)
suicidepreventionlifeline.org