

what you

NEED TO KNOW

about...

Helping Children and Youth with Depression Information for Parents and Caregivers

What is depression?

It is normal for children and youth to feel sad from time to time. But this sadness doesn't stop them from going on with their everyday activities. And it goes away on its own. Depression, on the other hand, is sadness so severe that it interferes with everyday life.

Typical symptoms of depression (also called clinical depression, or major depressive disorder) are:

- Feeling sad, worried, irritable or angry
- Lack of enjoyment in life, or no longer wanting to do things enjoyed before
- Feeling hopeless and worthless
- Having troubles coping with everyday activities at home, school, or work
- Problems with sleep, energy, appetite and concentration



With severe depression, people may even hear voices, or have thoughts of harming themselves or others. **Depression is more than normal sadness.** A depressed person can't 'just snap out of it'. Studies have even shown physical changes in people's brain chemistry when they are depressed.

How common is depression?

Depression is common. Researchers believe that about 1 in 5 children and youth will go through a depression by the time they turn 18. Studies also tell us that at any one moment, between 4 and 8 out of every 100 children and youth are having a major depression. Sadly, most people with depression do not get help. But getting help is important because there are effective treatments. Early treatment can stop depression from coming back in the future.

What causes depression?

Sometimes parents feel guilty thinking they caused their child's depression. But there isn't just one cause for depression. Many things contribute to it. It is usually caused by a few things going on at the same time:

Family history: If parents or other members of your family have had depression or other emotional problems, there is a greater chance that your child or teen may have depression.

Stress: Children and youth can get very upset by...

- Conflicts between parents, brothers and sisters
- Parents coping with stress or depression
- Parent's separation or divorce
- Bullying
- Conflicts or stresses with friends or classmates
- Not doing well in school or feeling too much pressure to do well in school

It can be hard for adults to understand a child or teen's point of view. Things that may not seem like a big deal to an adult can be overwhelming to a child or youth. And some children are more sensitive to stress.



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What should we do if we think our child is depressed?

If your child had a broken arm and was in pain, you'd take her to a doctor, right? Instead of causing pain on the outside, depression causes pain on the inside. **But you still need to help your child with this pain.** If you think your child might be depressed, start by taking him to your family doctor or pediatrician. Describe the changes you're noticing in his behaviour and feelings. The doctor can check for medical problems that might be causing the depression. The doctor may suggest mental health services, and can help you link with psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers or community resources.

If you are worried that your child may hurt himself or herself, call:

- Your child's doctor
- Emergency department

Depression treatments at a glance...

Many different treatments are available for depression. They can be used alone or together, depending on your child. All treatments will have a strong focus on helping children and youth reduce any isolation in their lives. They will encourage you to get your child out of the house for outings and pursue enjoyable activities. Spending too much time at home is a major risk factor for continued depression. A treatment may work well with some children, but not with others. If a treatment isn't working after trying it for a while, your mental health professional may suggest trying something else.

1. "Talk Therapy" or Psychotherapy

There are different types of talk therapy, including:

- **Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT):** Helps children and youth change the negative, depressive thoughts and behaviours that contribute to depression, and replaces them with more helpful thoughts and behaviours.
- **Interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT):** Helps children and youth resolve tension and conflict that can contribute to depression.
- **Solution-focused therapy:** Focuses on children's strengths. It helps them to focus on what they would like to change in their future, and what they can do to 'get there'.
- **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT):** Focuses on helping youth accept the difficulties that come with all our lives and to live a value-focused life. ACT also encourages youth to reduce any avoidant coping styles.



2. Medications (antidepressants):

- Are tools that doctors and psychiatrists can use to help ease depression
- Adjust brain chemicals to improve your child's mood and allow her to feel a little happier
- Can make it easier for children and youth to take part in talk therapy
- Are not needed by all depressed children and youth, but have been found to lead to better treatment effects (when combined with therapy) for moderate to severe depression.



Something to Think About! If your child had asthma, would you think it would be better for her to 'get over it' without treatment?

Are antidepressants safe? Some people worry about the safety of antidepressants for children and youth. Research shows that when used in the right way, and monitored by a doctor, antidepressants are safe and effective. Like prescription eyeglasses, medications must be chosen and adjusted for each child or teen.

People may have strong views about medications for depression. But a balanced look at antidepressant treatment is the most helpful. Medications are not always needed, but sometimes they are very important.

3. Outpatient and Inpatient Services

Children and youth with depression are usually treated in 'outpatient' clinics or community mental health centres. If the depression is severe, your child may need more intensive support from a day/evening program or by staying in hospital.



Healthy living makes a difference

Taking care of the basics can go a long way toward helping your child or teen to feel better. A healthy body supports a healthy mind. Try to make sure your child:

- **Gets enough sleep.** Poor sleep can lower mood and energy levels. See our fact sheet on Sleep Problems if your child or teen is having trouble sleeping.
- **Eats healthy meals and snacks, with plenty of fruits and vegetables.** Some early research studies suggest that a lack of Omega 3 fatty acids can make depression worse, and more research is happening in this area.
- **Is physically active.** Children and youth need about an hour a day of physical activity. It's best if they can exercise outside in the sun. Research tells us that aerobic exercise (exercise that increases the heart rate and breathing) has an anti-depressant effect.
- **Gets enough sunlight.** Lack of sunlight (or vitamin D) can trigger depression in some people who are sensitive to 'seasonal depression'.
- **Stays away from street drugs and alcohol.** Talk to your child or teen about this. Even though drugs or alcohol make some people feel better at first, they can cause more problems and make things worse after a while. Stress that street drugs are illegal.



Working with the school

Speak with staff at your child's school if school stress contributes to your child's depression. Speak with them if the depression is affecting your child at school. Make an appointment with your child's teacher, guidance counselor, or principal to talk about your child's depression. Even if you don't feel comfortable telling the school that your child has depression, you can at least say that your child is feeling overwhelmed. You can say your child is having troubles with stress. Try to work with the school to help your child cope with stress, and to reduce some of the pressures your child may feel. Teachers may be able to help by adjusting your child's learning plan.

Helping your depressed child or teen

Understanding and supporting a child or teen who is depressed isn't easy. Here's how you can help:

- ✓ **Let your child know that you notice there is something wrong.** "I'm noticing that you seem a bit different these days"; "You seem a bit stressed out these days"; "You don't seem yourself these days."
- ✓ **Express your concern.** "I'm worried about you"; "I'm scared that there might be something wrong."
- ✓ **Offer support.** "Is there anything I can do to help?"; "How can I support you?"
- ✓ **Talk, but give choices.** It's important to talk with your child, but still find ways to give your child choices. "We really need to talk about this - do you want to talk about it now, or later?"
- ✓ **Don't forget to relax and have fun.** Make sure you still have regular times when you simply have fun or relax with your child. "We need to have fun times together. I have some ideas myself, but what things would you like to do?"
- ✓ **Find and work on solving problems.** Help your child figure out what is causing stress, and then help her work through ways to handle those stresses. This usually means reducing the stress if possible and teaching ways to cope with those stresses. Your teen may not always seem open to your ideas. Try starting with something like, "I have some ideas about handling stress that may help you. Would you like to hear them?"



- ✓ **Take care of yourself.** It can be very stressful to have a child or teen dealing with depression. It's important to set aside a little time to take care of your own personal needs. Reach out to your own support network of friends, family and co-workers. If you are feeling burned out, seek professional help. Sometimes the best way to help your child is to get help and support for yourself first.

What doesn't help with depression

Understanding and supporting a child or teen who is depressed can be challenging. Here's what to **avoid**:

- **Try not to play the 'blame game'.** Blaming or making your child feel guilty for the depression won't help anything. It can even add to the stress and make your child feel even more overwhelmed. Worse yet, it will make your child less willing to talk with you.
- **Try not to expect your child to just "snap out of it".** Children cannot 'will' themselves out of a depression any more than someone can 'snap out' of asthma or diabetes.
- **Avoid power struggles.** Try to give your child a sense of control by giving choices whenever possible. For example, you may insist that your child needs to see a counselor; but maybe you can give him the choice of which day he goes or which counselor he sees.
- **Try not to give up on finding help for your child.** It can be frustrating getting the right help for your child (like long waitlists or the lack of services). But if you feel something is wrong with your child, you are most certainly right. Stay persistent in getting your child help.

Where to find help in Nova Scotia

- In a crisis?** Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team, 902-429-8167 or toll-free, 1-888-429-8167
- To Find a Psychologist anywhere in Nova Scotia:** Association of Psychologists of Nova Scotia, 902-422-9183, www.apns.ca
- Kids Help Phone,** 1-800-668-6868, www.kidshelpphone.ca
- Feed Nova Scotia Helpline,** 902-421-1188 (within HRM) or 1-877-521-1188

Where to find help in Halifax Regional Municipality

- IWK Mental Health & Addictions,** offers programs for ages up to 19, 902-464-4110 or toll-free, 1-888-470-5888 (ask to be connected to Central Referral), www.iwk.nshealth.ca/mental-health
- Laing House,** offers programs for ages 16 to 30 living with a mental illness, 902-425-9018, www.lainghouse.ca
- Capital Health Addictions & Mental Health Program,** offers programs for ages 19 and up, www.cdha.nshealth.ca/addictions-and-mental-health-program

Support Groups

- Healthy Minds Cooperative**, offers resources for peer support, www.healthyminds.ca
- Emotions Anonymous (Dartmouth)**, peer support for depression, anxiety, anger and suicidal thoughts, 902-866-2523 or 902-469-8809, www.emotionsanonymous.org
- Upstairs Kitchen Club (Halifax)**, peer support for depression or anxiety, 902-471-1422

Want more information?

Useful websites

- Anxiety and Depression Association of America, www.adaa.org
- Youth Beyond Blue, www.youthbeyondblue.com
- Teen Mental Health, www.teenmentalhealth.org
- Families for Depression Awareness, www.familyaware.org
- Kelty Mental Health, www.keltymentalhealth.ca
- Back from the Bluez handbook from Centre for Clinical Interventions, www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/consumers.cfm
- Antidepressant Skills for Teens Manual, www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental_health/pdf/dwd_writable.pdf

Books for Parents

- Helping Your Teenager Beat Depression: a Problem-Solving Approach for Families, Katharina Manassis and Anne Marie Levac, 2004

Books for Children and Youth

- My Kind of Sad: What It's Like to Be Young and Depressed, Kate Scoran, 2006

Authors: Reviewed by the Mental Health Information Committee at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) and by members of the Child and Youth Mental Health Information Network (www.cymhin.ca). Adapted with permission by the IWK Health Centre, Halifax. Thanks to Sylvia Naumovski and Sarah Cannon, Parents for Children's Mental Health, www.parentsforchildrensmentalhealth.org

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Disclaimer: Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.

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