

# About depression

## What is depression?

Feeling depressed is more than just feeling sad. It's normal to feel sad as a result of being hurt or of losing something or someone special. Depression affects people's thinking. They see themselves and the future negatively. Along with feeling sad or irritable it may seem that nothing is worthwhile. From time to time everyone feels depressed, but it usually doesn't last. A diagnosis of depression is made only when the depressed mood has lasted more than two weeks, when it is intense, and when the symptoms of depression interfere with the person's ability to manage everyday things.

## What would you notice in a child with depression?

Children with depression are hard to engage and motivate. Their low mood may be constant. They may cry and whinge and be very difficult to soothe. The child may become irritable easily. Outbursts of anger may result in feelings of misery and guilt. School staff may notice that the child looks sad and withdrawn or seems especially sensitive.

## Signs of depression in children

Children are often unable to explain how they are feeling, especially when depressed. In diagnosing depression mental health professionals look for key signs and symptoms in children's behaviour. When several of the following signs or symptoms occur together and are out of character for the child, they indicate that the child needs assessment and support from a mental health professional with experience treating children with depression.



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## What you might see in a child with depression

Symptoms and signs	What you might notice
Loss of pleasure	Uninterested in usual activities
Apathy	Bored, hard to motivate
Fatigue	Tired all the time
Psychomotor retardation (slowed movements)	Dawdling, dragging self around
Restlessness	Fidgeting, can't settle
Irritability	Cranky, bad-tempered
Agitation	Nervous, jumpy
Sleep problems	Problems going to sleep or staying asleep, waking early, or sleeping a lot
Sadness	Unhappy, seems 'down' most of the time
Worthlessness, feeling unloved	Feels bad about him/herself
Guilt	Blames him/herself excessively
Social withdrawal	Lonely, avoids other people
Accident prone, thoughts of suicide	Talks about death or hurting him/herself
Poor concentration	Doesn't listen, can't focus on tasks
Memory difficulties	Forgets details, forgets to do task
Impaired thinking processes	Draws wrong conclusions, expects the worst
Impaired decision-making	Can't make up mind

When adults are depressed, feelings of sadness are often very obvious. In children, irritability may be more noticeable than sadness. Sleep changes in children are more likely to be a change to sleeping less rather than sleeping more. Loss of appetite and weight loss sometimes occur in children but are less common than in adults with depression.

As well as behaviours that can be observed, children with depression have thoughts of self-criticism and helplessness. For example, depressed children may think their parents or carers favour other children in the family or that they are useless. Some children also have thoughts of suicide. It is important to take seriously any talk about wanting to die or hurt oneself from a child of any age. Whether such talk represents a clear intention of suicide or is a way of expressing feelings of depression, it indicates a high level of distress that requires attention.

## What puts children at risk of depression?

- Children who get depressed often live in families where other members have also experienced depression. This may be due to a number of possible factors, for instance family history (genetic factors). Alternatively it may be that living with adults who are depressed may change how parents or carers and children relate. A third possibility is that the stress affecting the child affects the whole family.
- Stressful events such as a death of a parent, parental divorce, changing school or being bullied may trigger an episode of depression in children.

## What helps to protect children from depression?

- Children with easy temperaments, who are able to regulate or get control over their emotions, are less likely to develop depression. Children can also learn skills for managing their emotions, and this helps to build up resilience.
- Having warm and supportive relationships helps to provide protection from depression. Parents and carers, school staff and friends who provide support can help to buffer the effect of life stresses. They also provide models for children to learn problem-solving and coping skills.



## How is depression diagnosed?

If you are concerned that a child may have depression you should seek a mental health assessment. Your child's school counsellor/psychologist or family doctor can help with this. They may refer you and your child for specialist assessment to a psychologist, psychiatrist or counsellor who works with children. There is no single test that can tell us whether a child has depression or is just feeling down. The diagnosis of depression depends very much on how intense the symptoms are and how much they interfere with the child's ability to get on with everyday things. To help with the diagnosis, the mental health professional will need to find out about your child's emotions and behaviours, physical changes and stresses that have been experienced by the child in the last few months. This information will be gathered by talking to parents and carers, the child themselves and, where possible, also to teachers. Sometimes parents and carers will be given questionnaires that help to assess how big an impact the child's symptoms are having. The mental health professional will use the information they gather to put together a professional support plan that will suit the child and the situation.

## Types of depression

Major Depression is diagnosed when symptoms are severe enough to cause problems at home, at school and with friends. Dysthymia may be diagnosed when symptoms are milder but continue for a long time and limit the child's ability to cope with everyday situations.

## Depression and other mental health problems

Depression and anxiety often occur together. Symptoms of anxiety in children include having fears and worries and complaining often of aches and pains. See the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on anxiety for further information.

Depression and Conduct Disorder may also occur together, especially when the child gets closer to adolescence. See the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on serious behavioural difficulties for further information on Conduct Disorder.

To assist children with depression it is important to have a coordinated approach between home and school.

## What treatments are effective?

Psychological treatments are best for depression in children. While antidepressant medication has been found to be helpful for adults, the evidence of its effectiveness for children is unclear. There is debate amongst medical researchers about the safety of antidepressant medication for children and adolescents. It is therefore important to discuss any concerns around risks with a medical practitioner.

Evidence shows that psychological professional support can:

- reduce the time it takes to recover from depression
- decrease the likelihood that another bout of depression will occur.

Coping skills learned through professional support help to protect the child from getting depressed again. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy is a particularly helpful psychological professional support for children. It helps by identifying the negative thinking patterns that lead to feeling depressed and teaching children skills for changing them. The therapy will be tailored to the individual child, but is likely to include learning age appropriate skills for:

- telling the difference between optimistic and pessimistic thoughts
- challenging the child's own negative thinking patterns
- solving problems in more helpful ways
- relaxation and exercise
- engaging in activities that the child enjoys.

The therapy can be offered in groups or to an individual child.

Psychological professional support that involves the whole family is also helpful and especially important in supporting your children. Parents and carers can play a key role in encouraging children to use the new coping strategies and setting up opportunities for practising them.

To get the best outcome, a professional support plan needs to include strategies to modify the stresses experienced in the child's environment. For example, if the child is being bullied, action should be taken to stop it and prevent it from recurring. If there is conflict in the child's family, this should be addressed. If there is a family member who is also suffering from depression, they may be encouraged to seek help for themselves as well as for the child.

# How to assist children with depression

Depression is a common disorder but it can be overlooked in children. Since the symptoms of depression are often negative behaviours (eg irritability, whingeing), it is easy for adults to feel annoyed by them and to blame or punish the child for his or her behaviour. This can lead to missing other signs of depression. Paying attention to your child's emotions will help in noticing signs of depression earlier so that help can be accessed.

When you are concerned about changes in children's behaviour and mood that suggest they may be feeling depressed, the first step is to talk with them. Even when children are not able to explain why they are unhappy, talking with them about problems in a supportive way can often start to improve their mood. If the child's mood and behaviour does not improve in a few weeks, it is important to seek help from a mental health professional.

## General principles for assisting children with depression

### Be supportive and make time to listen

Let the child know that it is okay to ask for help and that you are ready to listen to whatever he/she wants to say. If a particular situation has caused him/her distress, help the child to solve the problem or find ways yourself to improve the situation.

### Keep a focus on normal routines and activities

When children are depressed their thinking gets clouded by lots of negatives. The more they think about them, the bigger they become. Encouraging children to keep up with normal routines and activities helps to distract them from negative thinking patterns.

### Keep active

Depression slows down children's bodies as well as their minds. Keeping active helps to restore physical health and improves children's mental health and wellbeing.

### Seek professional help

When concerned about a child who may have depression, take prompt action to seek help. Getting help early is best.



This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at [www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au)



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