

Depression in Children and Adolescents

Everyone feels sad, blue, or down sometimes. Depression however is a serious mental illness, which affects as many as 5% of children and teens according to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. Depression affects children of all ages, ethnicities, religions, and incomes. The good news is that depression is treatable.

What to Look for:

Depression in children and teens often looks different than depression in adults. Children have difficulty expressing their feelings and often manifest behaviorally such as refusing to attend school or to separate from parents. Look for...

- Irritability or anger
- Sadness or hopelessness
- Sleep changes: increase or decrease
- Appetite changes: increase or decrease
- Loss of interest in pleasurable activities
- Social withdrawal or isolation
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fatigue and low energy level
- Physical complaints or poor hygiene
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Thoughts of death or suicide

Treatment Options:

Although being a parent of a depressed child can be confusing, scary, and overwhelming, successful treatment options are available.

- Comprehensive evaluation to ensure accurate diagnosis as different illnesses often present with similar symptoms
- Education regarding the disorder and treatment
- Individual therapy to address both the symptoms and the underlying causes
- Family therapy to promote a supportive, nurturing, and understanding environment
- Medication to alleviate symptoms
- School interventions to ensure a child's symptoms do not hinder academic progress

Without treatment, depression can have significant and long-lasting effects on areas of emotional development, self-esteem, school performance, social interactions, and parent-child relations. Untreated depression can lead to disruptive behaviors, substance abuse, violence, and even suicide.

Commonly Asked Questions:

How do I know if my child is truly depressed or just sad?

That is a tough question since everyone feels sad sometimes. The most important things are to talk with your kids, to be educated about depression, and to notice changes in behavior. If the symptoms listed persist for more than two weeks and lead to problems in any area of life, you should seek professional advice.

What causes depression?

Depression can be caused by a variety of factors such as family history / genetics, individual personality characteristics, life events, and biochemical disturbance. Although the reasons can be pretty confusing, it is important to remember when asking "why my child" that your child is not the only one and that your family is not alone. Whatever the cause of depression, it is treatable.

Won't depression just go away?

Possibly, however successful treatment can significantly decrease the severity of symptoms and the duration of the depressive episode leading to less disruption in a child's life.

My teen seems irritable all the time and often talks of death. I am scared and don't know what to do.

One of the most difficult aspects of parenting is watching your child or teen struggle. It is often difficult to seek help, feeling ashamed, guilty, or just plain scared. Seek support from friends or family or even a parent support group. Educate yourself regarding depression and available treatments. Find a mental health provider with whom you feel comfortable. Be actively involved in your child's treatment and enjoying watching your child thrive. Feel proud to have overcome these obstacles.

What will people think of my child or my family if they find out that my child is in therapy or on medication?

All you have to do today is turn on a news program or look on the internet to find mixed messages about mental illness and treatment options. Finding a mental health provider that you feel listens to and understands your child and family is paramount. And remember that having a healthy, happy child is most important.

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