

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 a 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 troubles enjoying anything
- 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 even show 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, and early treatment can stop it from coming back in the future.

What causes depression?

Sometimes parents feel guilty that 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 bigger 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 see things from a child or teen's point of view. Things that might not seem like a big deal to an adult can be overwhelming to a child or youth. And some children are just more sensitive to stress.

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 a doctor (like your family doctor or pediatrician), and 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 or social workers.

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

- Your child's doctor
- Emergency department, or a
- Crisis line

Depression treatments at a glance...

Many different treatments are available for depression. They can be used alone or together, depending on your child. Some treatments work well with some children, but not with others. If a treatment isn't working (after giving it a good try, of course), your mental health professional may talk with you and your child about 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'.

2. Medications (antidepressants):



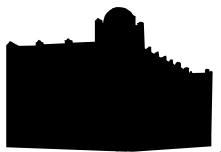
- Are tools that doctors and psychiatrists can use to help ease depression
- Adjust brain chemicals to improve your child's mood and allow her to feel a little happier
- Can make it easier for children and youth to take part in talk therapy
- Are not needed by all depressed children and youth

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 may be worried 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 eye-glasses, medications must be chosen and adjusted for each child or youth.

While some people have strong views about medications for depression - a balanced look at antidepressant treatment is the most helpful. Medications are not all bad, but they are not needed all the time, either.

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 to 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 cause 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 research studies suggest that a lack of Omega 3 fatty acids can make depression worse (see our fact sheet on Omega 3 fatty acids).
- **Is physically active.** Children and youth need about an hour a day of physical activity, and it's best if they get exercise outside in the sun. Research tells us that aerobic exercise (exercise that increases the heart rate and breathing) can have 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.** While street drugs can sometimes make youth feel better at first, they can cause more problems and make things worse after a while.



Working with the school

Speak with staff at your child's school if school stress contributes to your child's depression, or 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 and having troubles with stress. 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 find ways to still 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, relaxing times 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. Teens may seem to be less 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 out professional help. Sometimes the best way to help your child is to get help and support for yourself first.

What doesn't help

Understanding and supporting a child or teen who is depressed can be challenging. Here's what **not** to do:

- **Don't 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, it makes your child less willing to talk with you.
- **Don't expect your child to just "snap out of it".** They can't 'will' themselves out of a depression any more than someone could '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 you can give a choice over which day he goes or which counselor he sees.
- **Don't give up getting 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 Eastern Ontario

- In a crisis?** Child, Youth and Family Crisis Line for Eastern Ontario, 613-260-2360 or toll-free, 1-877-377-7775
- Looking for mental health help?** www.eMentalHealth.ca is a bilingual directory of mental health services and resources for Ottawa, Eastern Ontario and Canada.
- Renfrew County:** Phoenix Centre for Children, Youth and Families, with offices in Renfrew and Pembroke. 613-735-2374 or toll-free 1-800-465-1870, www.renc.igs.net/~phoenix
- Leeds and Grenville County:** Child and Youth Wellness Centre, with offices in Brockville, Elgin, Gananoque and Prescott. 613-498-4844, www.cywc.net
- Lanark County:** Open Doors for Lanark Children and Youth, with offices in Carleton Place, Smiths Falls and Perth. 613-283-8260, www.opendoors.on.ca
- To find a Psychologist anywhere in Ontario:** College of Psychologists of Ontario, 1-800-489-8388, www.cpo.on.ca

Where to find help in Ottawa

- Youth Services Bureau**, for ages 12-20, 613-562-3004
- Family Service Centre of Ottawa**, 613-725-3601, www.familyservicesottawa.org
- Catholic Family Services**, 613-233-8418, www.cfssfc-ottawa.org
- Jewish Family Services**, 613-722-2225, www.jfsottawa.com
- The Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario and the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre** (by physician's referral), 613-737-7600 ext. 2496. For more information on our programs, www.cheo.on.ca
- To find a Psychologist in Ottawa:** Call the Ottawa Academy of Psychology referral service, 613-235-2529. Listing many, but not all, Ottawa psychologists, www.ottawa-psychologists.org/find.htm

Support and Advocacy Groups

- PLEO (Parent's Lifelines of Eastern Ontario)**, a support group for parents of children and youth with mental health difficulties, www.pleo.on.ca
- Parents for Children's Mental Health**, a province-wide organization for parents supporting children and youth with mental health issues, www.parentsforchildrensmentalhealth.org

Want more information?

Useful websites

- The Offord Centre, www.knowledge.offordcentre.com
- www.cmho.org, good links to useful websites
- www.cheo.on.ca, growing information section on mental health and health
- www.mheccu.ubc.ca/documents/publications/DWD_PrintVersion.pdf, excellent self-help guide for teens with mild depression

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

For more books:

- see the excellent Mood Problems Reading List from the Offord Centre www.communityed.ca/docs/booklists/mood_problems.pdf



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). 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.

Provided by:

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