

Parenting for Prevention: Depression

Understanding the Differences between Sadness and Depression

Emotions are part of the human experience. When we experience joy, pride, excitement, or other positive emotions it makes us feel happy. When we experience loss, stress, disappointment, or other negative emotions, it can make us feel sad. We all experience sadness from time to time. Sadness is a temporary condition and healthy reaction to a specific event, such as the loss of a loved one, the breakup of a relationship, or even a movie that tugs at our heartstrings.

There is a difference between healthy sadness and the debilitating symptoms of depression.

Depression is a serious mental health condition that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest in activities. It affects how we think, feel, and behave. A person who is depressed may withdraw from others, have difficulty sleeping, be irritable or angry without cause, or have thoughts of death or suicide. Symptoms of depression affect the ability to function day-to-day, are pervasive, and last for more than two weeks. Depression does not have a single cause - it can be brought on by a specific event or occur spontaneously.

Risk Factors for Depression

- Having issues that negatively impact self-esteem, such as peer problems or bullying
- Having been the victim or witness of physical, emotional or sexual abuse
- Other mental health conditions, such as bipolar disorder, an anxiety disorder, a personality disorder, anorexia or bulimia
- Having a learning disability or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Ongoing pain or a chronic physical illness such as cancer, diabetes or asthma
- Certain personality traits, such as low self-esteem, or being highly self-critical
- Family history of depression, bipolar disorder, or alcohol use disorders; a family member who dies by suicide; history of family conflict or dysfunction; or experiencing a recent stressful life event, such as parental divorce, parental military service or the death of a loved one
- Having a hard-wired temperament that is more prone to negative thinking
- Abusing alcohol, nicotine, or other drugs
- Being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender in an unsupportive environment
- Being a girl - Compared to boys, after puberty, twice as many girls have depression and are more likely to stay depressed longer.

How Parents Can Support Children & Teens

While there is no way to prevent depression, if your child is at risk, you notice some of the warning signs & symptoms (refer to the back), or your child is diagnosed with depression, these are some helpful ways to support your child.

Encourage social connection – Look for ways to keep your teen involved with others. Make face-time a priority to combat social isolation. Keep your teen actively involved in caring and supportive relationships. Use family dinners, after-school check-ins, or weekend activities to keep your child engaged.

Make physical health a priority – Exercise is essential to mental health. Exercise can treat mild to moderate depression by promoting positive changes in the brain by releasing endorphins that make us feel good, and by encouraging neural growth and new activity patterns that promote feelings of calm and well-being.

Diet, sleep, and screen time count too – Provide nutritious meals, encourage plenty of sleep, and set limits on screen time to help your teen maintain balance in their overall health, which can help to lessen symptoms associated with depression.

TERMINOLOGY

Sadness is a normal human emotion often triggered by a difficult, challenging, or disappointing situation. We are sad *about something*. Sadness is temporary – as the situation changes, we cope, adjust, or adapt.

Depression is an abnormal emotional state that pervades our thinking, perceptions, and behaviors in debilitating and chronic ways. When we are depressed, we are sad *about everything*. It does not require a specific loss or traumatic event as a trigger.

FAST FACTS

- Depression is common
- Depression is treatable
- Depression can present in different physical, social, and emotional ways, and is characterized by changes that last for more than two weeks.
- Depression can happen at any age, but signs and symptoms often emerge in the teens, early 20s, or 30s.
- In depressed teens, irritability, anger, and agitation are often the most prominent symptoms – not sadness.
- Depression can co-occur with other mental health conditions and/or substance use.
- Untreated depressive episodes put a child at risk for more depressive episodes in the future



Warning Signs of Depression: What to Look For

The signs and symptoms of depression include a change in previous attitudes and behaviors that can cause significant distress and problems at school or home, in social activities, or in other areas of life. Consider **how long** the symptoms have been going on, **how severe** they are, and **how different** your child is acting from their usual self.

Signs of Depression in Preschool

- Seems to have lost learned skills; regresses to baby talk or resumes thumb sucking
- Has returned to having separation anxiety
- Has become more aggressive.
- No longer enjoys play; withdraws during playdates
- Abandons a regular sleep schedule; starts napping at odd hours; is sluggish throughout the day.
- Is losing weight; losing interest in snacks or meals

Signs of Depression in Grade School

- Frequently complains about aches and pains, without medical cause
- Develops a negative outlook
- Talks often about feeling lonely, despite having friends; social withdrawal, talks about being bullied when there are no signs of it.
- Feelings of sadness and hopelessness that don't get better over time
- Frequent bouts of yelling or crying; irritability or anger
- Decrease in academic or athletic performance; no longer cares about doing well in anything; loses interest in daily activities
- Changes in appetite or sleep patterns; low energy over several weeks; trouble with concentration
- Trouble functioning the way she/he normally does at home, with friends, or in school
- Feeling worthless, guilty or easily rejected
- Talking or thinking about death or suicide

Signs of Depression in Tweens and Teens

- Seems distant or emotionally closed off to family and friends, spends a lot of time behind closed doors.
- Seems uncharacteristically irritable or sad; often lashes out in anger
- Changes in appetite or sleep
- Talks about feeling stupid, worthless or hopeless; obsesses about shortcomings
- Has had dramatic changes in daily habits.
- Loss of interest in hobbies and activities that used to provide pleasure
- Is acting out with risky behavior, such as substance use or sexually promiscuous behavior
- Trouble with concentration
- Talking or thinking about death or suicide



Teens have a lot going on. Peer pressure, academic expectations, daily stress, and hormones contribute a lot to typical teen behavior. It can be difficult for parents to know whether their teen is experiencing the normal fluctuations of adolescence or if these behaviors are indicative of something more serious.

If you are concerned about your child, the first step is to talk with them. Find a time and place where they are comfortable and willing to talk with you. Bring up your concerns in a gentle, non-judgmental way. Let them know which specific depression symptoms you have noticed and explain why they worry you. Allow your child to share what he or she is going through and be ready to listen. Refrain from asking a lot of questions, but be clear that you are there to support whatever they need.

Focus on listening, not lecturing

Be gentle but persistent

Acknowledge their feelings

Trust your instincts

When to Seek Support

- ~ When symptoms disrupt your child's daily functioning
- ~ If your child asks for help

- ~ When symptoms last more than 2 weeks
- ~ If your child also exhibits risks factors for depression

~ If your child exhibits self-harm behaviors, such as cutting or talking about suicide

RESOURCES

Bradley Hospital Parent Guide

<https://www.bradleyhospital.org/emotional-and-behavioral-health>

National Alliance on Mental Illness

www.nami.org

Psychology Today: Important Difference between Sadness & Depression

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/the-important-difference-between-sadness-and-depression>

Mayo Clinic

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/teen-depression/symptoms-causes>

National Institute of Mental Health

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/teen-depression>

Portions of this tip sheet were adapted from some of the resources listed above.

Parenting for Prevention is a Decisions at Every Turn Coalition educational series for parents and other caring adults to increase awareness and knowledge about important youth issues and to encourage dialogue about making healthy choices.

Please visit <http://www.AshlandDecisions.org/parent-tip-sheets.html> for our complete library of tip sheets.

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