

Depression

Can Children Really Have Depression?

Yes. Childhood depression is different from the normal "blues" and everyday emotions that children go through as they develop. Just because a child seems sad doesn't necessarily mean they have significant depression. But if the sadness becomes persistent or interferes with normal social activities, interests, schoolwork, or family life, it may mean they have a depressive illness. Keep in mind that while depression is a serious illness, it's also a treatable one.

How Can I Tell if My Child Is Depressed?

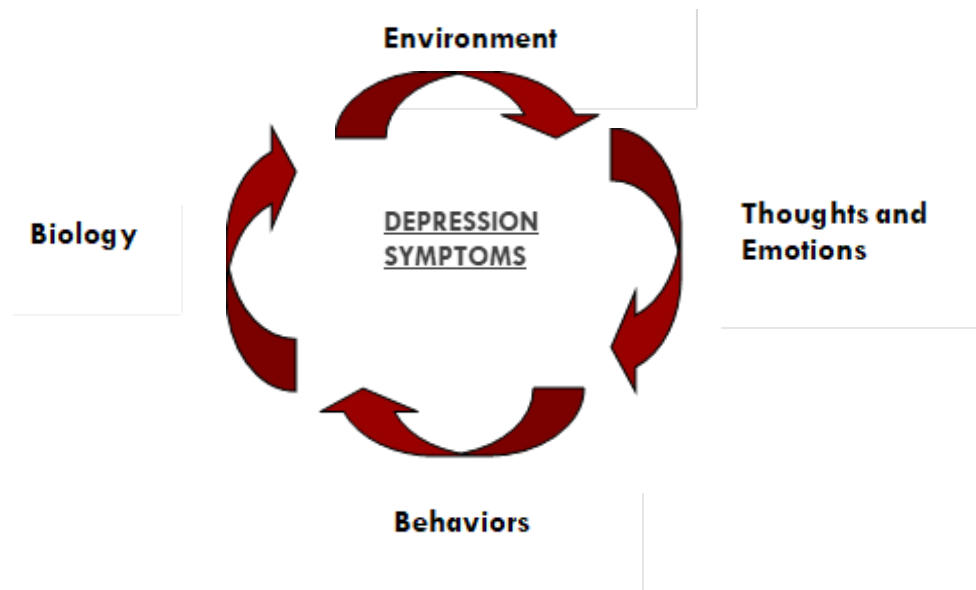
The symptoms of depression in children vary. The condition is often undiagnosed and untreated because symptoms are passed off as normal emotional and psychological changes. Early medical studies focused on "masked" depression, where a child's depressed mood was evidenced by acting out or angry behavior. While this does happen, particularly in younger children, many children display sadness or low mood similar to adults who are depressed. The primary symptoms of depression revolve around sadness, a feeling of hopelessness, and mood changes.

Signs And Symptoms of Depression in Children

- Crankiness or anger
- Continuous feelings of sadness and hopelessness
- Social withdrawal
- Being more sensitive to rejection
- Changes in appetite, either increased or decreased
- Changes in sleep (sleeplessness or excessive sleep)
- Vocal outbursts or crying
- Trouble concentrating
- Fatigue and low energy
- Physical complaints (such as stomachaches and headaches) that don't respond to treatment
- Trouble during events and activities at home or with friends, in school, during extracurricular activities, and with other hobbies or interests
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Impaired thinking or concentration
- Thoughts of death or suicide

Not all children have all of these symptoms. In fact, most will show different symptoms at different times and in different settings. Although some children may continue to do reasonably well in structured environments, most kids with significant depression will have a noticeable change in social activities, loss of interest in school, poor academic performance, or a change in appearance. Children may also begin using drugs or alcohol, especially if they are over age 12.

Usually, depression is related to a combination of factors including the social environmental, biological factors, our thoughts and beliefs, our emotions, and our behavior. Each of these factors can affect the others, and often work together in a sort of “snowball effect” that may lead to more symptoms of depression. The depression spiral provides a helpful illustration of this:



Depression in Children: Warning Signs

Parents should be particularly vigilant for signs that may indicate that their child is at risk for suicide. Warning signs of suicidal behavior in children include:

- Many depressive symptoms (changes in eating, sleeping, activities)
- Social isolation, including isolation from the family
- Talk of suicide, hopelessness, or helplessness
- Increased acting-out of undesirable behaviors (sexual or behavioral)
- Increased risk-taking behaviors
- Frequent accidents
- Substance abuse
- Focus on morbid and negative themes
- Talk about death and dying
- Increased crying or reduced emotional expression
- Giving away possessions

Depression can result from certain situations in life or may have a biological cause. As a parent, you can't always control the stressors in your child's life. But you can help improve your child's mental health by ensuring they get:

- Daily exercise.
- Safe, supportive environment at home and school.
- Plenty of sleep.
- Well-balanced meals.

How to Cope with Depression

The good news about the depression spiral is that it is reversible----there are specific behavior change strategies that you can use to improve your life, starting TODAY. These strategies have been shown to lead to significant and enduring improvement among hundreds of thousands of other people.

STEP ONE: Calming Your Mind

One way to help depression, also used for anxiety is technique called Mindfulness 5-4-3-2-1. This technique helps to ease your state of mind so you can get through stressful times. All of us, at some point, have experienced overwhelming feelings that are hard to control. If left alone, that these can cause your mood to spiral downward. Follow along with with the technique below so you can learn how to perform and practice Mindfulness 5-4-3-2-1.

First, take a moment to become mindful of your breath. Then, become aware of your environment.

- Look For 5 Things You Can See:
 - Notice the wood grain on the desk in front of you. Or the precise shape of your fingernails. Become aware of the glossy green of the plant in the corner. Take your time to really look and acknowledge what you see.
- Become Aware Of 4 Things You Can Touch:
 - The satisfyingly rough texture of the car seat. Your cotton shirt against your neck. If you like, spend a moment literally touching these things. Maybe notice the sensation of gravity itself, or the floor beneath you.
- Acknowledge 3 Things You Can Hear:
 - Don't judge, just hear. The distant traffic. The voices in the next room. As well as the space between sounds.
- Notice 2 Things You Can Smell:
 - If at first you don't feel like you can smell anything, simply try to sense the subtle fragrance of the air around you, or of your own skin.
- Become Aware Of 1 Thing You Can Taste:
 - The lingering suggestion of coffee on your tongue, maybe?

Repeat this process as many times as necessary. Take your time and notice how you feel afterward.

STEP TWO: Increasing Favorite Activities

Often, when we're stressed or feeling down, we participate less in activities than we normally would. But doing more of the activities we enjoy can actually help reduce stress and depressed mood and give us more energy!

When you're depressed, you will rarely feel motivated or excited about initiating an activity...but you'll find that once you get started, the positive momentum will build and over time (over several weeks of increasing your activity level), most people experience increased energy and an elevation in mood.

You will increase your chances of success if you plan, and schedule, specific activities (i.e., "tomorrow morning at 7am, I am going to walk my dog around the neighborhood for 30 minutes"). The activities you select don't have to be extravagant- they can be as simple as a 10-minute walk outside, taking a bath, gardening, reading a book, talking to a close friend, or listening to soothing music. Remember- everybody is different- it's important to identify activities that are enjoyable or meaningful to YOU! (Note: if you are having a difficult time identifying activities, your PCB can provide you with a list of hundreds of potentially enjoyable activities to "spur" your brainstorming process.)

Use the activity schedule on the last page of this pamphlet to schedule and track your activities for the next week. Tracking your activities can help you to see more clearly the relationship between them and your mood. Be sure to rate your level of enjoyment/mastery for each activity, and your average mood (using a 0-10 scale, with 0 representing "completely depressed" and 10 representing "not at all depressed") for each day. After you've done this for one week, ask yourself the following questions:

- Did my activities affect my mood? How?
- Which activities helped me to feel better?
- Did any activities (or periods of inactivity) cause me to feel worse?
- Which activities had the greatest positive impact on my mood?
- Were there certain times of the day or week when I felt better or worse?
- Based on my answers to the previous questions, what activities can I plan in the coming weeks to maximize the chances that I will feel better?

Use the information you've gained to guide activity plans for the upcoming weeks. Becoming "un-depressed" is a little bit like walking out of a big hole in the ground. It won't happen all at once; rather, you'll have to climb out one step at a time. The important thing is to keep the momentum in the positive direction. Don't give up!!! If you need to, get your friends/family to help keep you on track with planning and committing to activities.

STEP THREE: Catch, Check and Change Your Thoughts

Depression is characterized by thought patterns that maintain the depressed mood. Individuals who are depressed experience negative thoughts about the self (self-criticism), the world

(general negativity) and the future (hopelessness). It's a little bit like wearing a pair of dark sunglasses—everything you see has a shadow cast over it. Our thoughts have a direct impact on our mood, on our interactions with others, and on our activity level (or lack thereof). It's very important, therefore, that you **pay attention to unhelpful thinking**.

We all have thoughts that make us feel upset from time to time. Sometimes these thoughts really get in our way and aren't helpful. There are steps you can take to help turn those upsetting thoughts around. It's called Catch It, Check It, Change It.

Catch it:

- The first step is for children to become aware of all the negative things they say to themselves. Many times, their negative self-talk is on autopilot, and they don't even notice how critical they are being of themselves. Have the child pay attention to their thoughts and "catch" any unhelpful (negative) thoughts. Explain to them that their feelings and sensations are clues. When you have big feelings, notice what you are thinking. Remind them that unhelpful thoughts usually make them feel lousy and helpful thoughts make them feel more comfortable.

Check it

- "Check" your unhelpful thoughts: Is it true? Is it useful? Do you have proof to back it up? Would others see your thoughts in the same way? **"Examine the evidence"** for and against the negative thought. Are you blaming yourself for something over which you do not have complete control? Are you jumping to conclusions? Are you discounting your strengths, or positive attributes, in some way? Become your own scientific investigator and collect the facts.

Change it

- Children often accept their self-talk as truth and never question anything it says. If they hear you're a loser from their inner voice, they tend to believe that message and feel like a loser. Overtime, this leads many children to develop low self-esteem and a negative self-image. Therefore, it's not enough for kids to only recognize their negative self-talk. Once they start noticing their negative thoughts, they also need to learn how to challenge their stinking thinking.
 - For example, if they notice they frequently tell themselves I am stupid, have them ask themselves, is this true? Am I stupid? Have there been times when I've demonstrated that I'm smart? When children ask questions to challenge their negative self-talk, they get to determine if their thoughts make sense and if they are accurate. It also gives them a chance to explore different ways they might interpret a given situation. Additionally, they learn to not accept every thought they have as fact without first gathering evidence.

Most of us go through life on "autopilot," unaware of much of our thoughts or on the impact that they have on our mood and our behavior. It can take a while before you get to be skilled at identifying and working with negative thoughts. Over time, you'll get better at this.

Additional Resources (Workbooks/Books)

- Conquer Negative Thinking for Teens: A Workbook to Break the Nine Thought Habits That Are Holding You Back by Mary Alvord and Anne McGrath
- Don't Let Your Emotions Run Your Life for Teens: Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills for Helping You Manage Mood Swings, Control Angry Outbursts, and ... with Others (Instant Help Book for Teens) by Sheri van Dijk
- How To Get Unstuck from The Negative Muck: A Kid's Guide to Getting Rid of Negative Thinking by Lake Sullivan PhD
- Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child by John Gottman, Joan Declaire
- How to Talk so Kids Will Listen and Listen so Kids Will Talk by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- How to Talk so Teens Will Listen and Listen so Teens Will Talk by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- The Highly Sensitive Child: Helping Our Children Thrive When the World Overwhelms Them by Elaine Aron

Activity Log – Dates:_____

Grade each activity for sense of accomplishment "A" and pleasure "P" on a scale from 0-10 (10 being the highest)

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