

How to Help Your Child Cope With Depression

Depression is an experience of feeling down, blue, or sad. Depression can affect your child's thoughts, feelings, relationships, and physical health. Depression lasts longer than the occasional disappointment and sadness that is a normal part of life. It may have a significant effect on daily activities.

Depression is caused by changes in the brain that can be triggered by stress or a serious loss. In children, depression is often triggered by:

- Bullying.
- The death of a relative, friend, or pet.
- A divorce in the family.
- Problems with friends.
- Major transitions, like puberty or changing schools.

How do I know if my child has depression?

It is not easy to know if a child is depressed. The symptoms of depression in children differ from the symptoms in adults. Children with depression often experience:

- A prolonged feeling of sadness.
- A lack of enjoyment with most activities.

In addition, children with depression may:

- Have changes in sleep habits.
- Have decreased energy levels.
- Have changes in appetite.
- Gain or lose weight without trying.
- Have dramatic changes in mood.
- Avoid activities that are usually enjoyed.
- Have trouble concentrating.
- Think or talk about suicide or death more often.
- Want to be alone.
- Avoid interaction with others.
- Quit events or extracurricular activities.
- Have physical problems, such as headaches or an upset stomach.

If these symptoms last for two weeks or longer, your child may be depressed.

What are some steps I can take to help my child cope with depression?

Depression is serious, and getting the right help can lead you and your child in the direction necessary to get better. When your child is depressed, do not panic, but **do not** minimize the problem. To help your child cope with depression, try taking these steps:

- During times of major loss, change, or transition:
 - Watch your child closely.
 - Keep the conversation open.
 - Talk about how your child is feeling.
 - Spend some extra time together.
 - Ask about your child's symptoms, and listen to what your child says about them.



- Be by your child's side, and assure your child that he or she is not weird or different. Being supportive is perhaps the most important step that you can take.
- If your child is younger and does not have all the words that he or she needs, observe him or her closely or talk with his or her teachers to help identify a problem.
- Make an appointment with a professional who can help. This may include a school counselor or your child's health care provider.
- Learn as much as you can about childhood depression. The more you know, the better prepared you can be to offer support.
- On a daily basis:
 - Spend time as a family in nature.
 - Exercise together as a family, such as by going on a walk or playing an active game.
 - Limit screen time right before bed. Turn off TVs, computers, tablets, and cell phones.

When should I seek additional help?

Depression does not get better with age, and it may get worse if left untreated. If your child is depressed, it is important to be observant and take action because your child may not tell you that he or she needs additional help. If your child is depressed and you have a conversation with your child that seems to help, it may still be useful for you to learn more about depression and seek support.

If your child is depressed, you have a conversation with your child, and after your conversation you see no change or things get worse, then make the appointment to see a health care or counseling professional on behalf of your child. If depression has been going on for some time and your child has more dramatic symptoms, such as cutting or alcohol or drug use, get help immediately.

Where can I get support?

Support is available through a variety of sources, including:

- Health care providers. Your child's health care provider's office is a safe place to begin discussing how best to get help for your child.
- Mental health professionals or counselors.
- School counselors and teachers.
- Support groups for parents of children with mental illness.
- Friends and family.
- Your insurance provider. Insurance providers usually have a panel of mental health providers with whom they have a relationship. Ask them to give you names of specialists who can help.
- This website, which can help you find mental health professionals in your area:
<https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

Where can I find more information?

Your child's health care provider can provide you with information about childhood depression. He or she is likely to know you, understand your needs, and give you the best direction. You can also find information about depression at the following websites:

- MentalHealth.gov: www.mentalhealth.gov/talk/parents-caregivers/index.html
- Families for Depression Awareness: www.familyaware.org
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI):
www.nami.org/Find-Support/Family-Members-and-Caregivers

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.