

Sad/Unhappy

About sadness, unhappiness and depression

It is very normal to have ups and downs in our mood. Some days we feel happier and more positive than other days. Our mood can be affected by a whole range of issues such as stress, or how well our close relationships are going. We would expect to feel sad when we have experienced a loss or bereavement or to feel less optimistic when things are not going very well for us. If our mood remains low for a prolonged period of time or we experience more down periods than up, then it may be that we are becoming depressed. Depression is a term that is widely used to describe anything from feeling a bit fed up to a serious mental disorder referred to as clinical depression.

Clinical depression is a condition that affects children and young people as well as adults. Around one in every two hundred children under the age of 12 can suffer from more serious depression and two to three teenagers in every hundred are likely to be seriously depressed. After puberty, girls become more prone to depression than boys.

The reason why some young people get depressed and others don't seems to be due to a combination of different factors. For example, it is known that depression has a tendency to run in families. Also, depression is more common if a child or young person has experienced a traumatic life event such as the loss of a parent or serious neglect and abuse. It would appear that bonding well with a caring, nurturing adult in early childhood offers some protection against depression later on.

It is important to be able to recognise the signs that a young person may be becoming depressed rather than being just fed up or having a bad patch.

Signs of depression:

- Appearing sad or low in mood most of the time, most days and for at least several weeks.
- Appearing to have lost interest in activities they once enjoyed without showing interest in new activities.
- Becoming socially withdrawn.
- Having difficulty in concentrating on school work.
- Being more tearful, upset or irritable.
- Loss of previous confidence and lowered sense of self-worth, for example describing themselves as worthless or being excessively guilt-ridden.
- Appearing to have a lack of energy or excessive tiredness in the absence of physical illness.
- Changes in sleep pattern: either sleeping too much or not being able to sleep.
- Changes to appetite, for example excessive comfort eating or appearing disinterested in food.
- Excessive worry, anxiety or experiencing panic attacks.

- Loss of interest in their personal appearance.
- Regular complaints of feeling unwell with vague anxiety related symptoms such as headache, upset stomach, palpitations.
- Frequent thoughts of death or suicide (always seek advice from a mental health specialist in this instance).

Most people can recognise having had one or two of these symptoms on occasion in their lives, so it is important to think of their frequency and persistence and not to consider any single symptom in isolation as a sign of depression.

Things to think about

Risk Factors

There are several risk factors that influence a young person's likelihood of having depression:

- Young people with another member of the family who has suffered from serious depression are at a higher risk of developing depression.
- Personality appears to play a significant role. Children who are anxious and worry a lot are more prone to depression.
- Death of a parent in early childhood can increase the risk of developing depression later on.
- Social isolation and bullying.
- Major life events, such as bereavements or family discord. Many symptoms of depression are normal, immediately following bereavement and for the first three to six months afterwards.
- Failure to achieve goals such as passing exams or feeling pressure from others to attending college or follow a certain career can lead to stress, unhappiness and in some cases can precipitate depression.
- Some of our most intense romantic relationships happen in adolescence. We can sometimes wrongly dismiss or trivialise the impact of a broken heart in a young person.

Resiliency Factors

Some factors or life circumstances make depression *less* likely:

- Good bonding with a caring parental figure in early childhood.
- Being socially connected, i.e. having lots of close friends.
- Regular physical activity and exercise.
- Having a close and caring family that does not put excessive pressure on the child.
- Having an optimistic, confident outlook and good sense of self-worth.

Think about yourself

Everyone has experience of their mood fluctuating up and down and many people have experienced periods of sadness or depression in their life. Some people will find it very easy to identify with a sad or unhappy young person whereas others will find it too painful to think about these feelings. On the other hand, if you have not experienced such feelings, it can be very frustrating trying to understand why the young person cannot just 'get over it'. It is important to think about your own feelings towards depression so that your reaction is genuine and meets the young person's needs.

For more advice, see section on being aware of yourself and your own response.

What you can do

- It can be very useful and may help to prevent the onset of depression if adults are able to deal sensitively with a young person who starts to struggle with sadness or low mood because of a particular situation like bullying, loss of a romantic relationship or family discord.
- Reassure the child or young person that it is normal and OK to feel sad and unhappy at times.
- Encourage them to talk and actively listen to what they tell you. For more information, see section on counselling techniques.
- Through active listening, find out if there is anything causing them to feel sad or unhappy.
- Remind them of their strengths and resources. For more information, see section on solution-focused techniques.
- Actively encourage them to participate in social activities, since being socially connected is a protective factor.
- Encourage the young person to get plenty of exercise as this has been shown to improve people's sense of emotional wellbeing.
- Encourage the young person to reduce any pressures or stresses that are on them.
- Encourage the young person to talk to someone they trust and get on with about the way they are feeling, i.e. friend, teacher or parent.
- If they are responding to a life event such as a bereavement or parental separation, provide them with some age-appropriate self-help reading materials on the subject.

When to contact a mental health specialist

- If the young person expresses the desire to die or describes feeling suicidal or thinking about suicide.
- If they are showing several signs of serious depression and these symptoms persist for a period of more than three or four weeks.

- If they disclose information that you are inexperienced in dealing with such as sexual abuse or self-harm.

How to contact a mental health specialist

You should get in touch with your local health centre or hospital to obtain a contact number for the appropriate children and young people's mental health specialists.

Remember - you can contact your local mental health specialists for a number of reasons, for example:

- For advice on how to make a referral about a named child.
- For advice about whether or not to make a referral (it is normal practice to seek this advice without naming the child in the first instance).
- For advice about what to do (once again there should be no necessity to name the child).

By not naming the child you are protecting their right to confidentiality. This method of seeking advice also has the advantage that you do not need to get anyone's consent in advance of your contact phone call.