

Fact Sheet

DEPRESSION

What is the Issue?

Depression has been predicted as one of the major health problems of the 21st century. More adolescents and young people are experiencing depression. This is known to increase their risk for other mental health problems such as hazardous use of alcohol and other drugs and suicide.

While it is not unusual for children and young people to feel "blue" or "down", when this feeling persists for more than a few weeks, additional help may be needed. Depression is serious and if left untreated, may become life threatening.

When young people's moods disrupt their ability to manage usual activities, it may indicate a serious mental health problem. It can be difficult to know when children and young people are feeling depressed because adults expect them to be moody. Adolescents and young people do not always understand or express their feelings very well. When asked they may deny that anything is wrong. They may also express their feelings through aggressive, hostile or risk taking behaviour. These behaviours only lead to more problems and possibly worsen any feelings of depression.

The most common forms of treatment for young people are counselling, therapies (such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) and social interventions. Counselling and therapy involve talking about your concerns and techniques for solving problems and for coping with stress, now and in the future. This may involve individual and family therapy, and group work.

Medications are used less often to treat depression in young people but are sometimes needed for severe depression.

Sometimes adolescents and young people may feel so depressed they may consider suicide. Feelings of anger, resentment, guilt or worthlessness may lead to impulsive, self-destructive acts. Few children or young people will seek help on their own. They need encouragement from their friends, families and concerned adults.

What are the signs of depression?

Most forms of depression involve both physical and psychological symptoms.

The following signs may indicate depression, particularly when they persist for more than a few weeks:

- Sadness or irritability.
- Difficulty concentrating, deterioration in school performance.
- Lack of energy, enthusiasm or motivation, feeling slowed down.
- Restlessness or agitation.
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns.
- Feelings of guilt or worthlessness.
- Withdrawal from friends, family and previously enjoyed activities.
- Suicidal thoughts or actions.
- Use of alcohol or drugs.

Some people experience periods of excitement and overactivity as well as feeling down. This is a bipolar disorder (sometimes called manic depression).

Recent surveys suggest up to 1 in 5 young people experience depression at some time. Adolescence is a challenging time involving many changes. These changes occur emotionally, physically and socially. Young people are also exposed to varying messages from parents, schools and the media including the Internet.

Source: Child and Youth Mental Health Service: Adapted from NSW Health Brochures
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Helping young people with depression

When adolescents and young people are feeling down, there are a number of things families can do to help them. Offer help and listen. Encourage them to talk about their feelings. Acceptance and belonging are very important to adolescents so encourage them to:

- Talk to someone they trust.
- Ask for help when they need it.

Some other things that may be helpful include encouraging them to:

- Spend time with friends.
- Participate in sports, school activities or hobbies with a focus on positive activities and achievements.
- Be involved in organisations that provide support for young people and help them develop additional interests.

If a young person is severely depressed, they may not be able to participate in usual activities.

Young people should be encouraged to talk to someone they trust.

When adolescents and young people recognise they have a problem, it is the first step towards getting better. However, few adolescents will seek help on their own. They need support and encouragement from concerned adults and their friends. If a situation seems like it is serious, seek help promptly. Sometimes this may mean breaking a confidence but it may be necessary to save a young person's life.

The first point of contact can be:

- Your child's general practitioner, teacher, guidance officer, school counsellor or school health nurse.
- If more specialised assessment or intervention is required, general practitioners, schools or other health professionals can make a referral to a Child and Youth Mental Health Service (CYMHS) – for local clinics, look under Health in the White Pages telephone directory.
- Your general practitioner may refer you to other specialists who work with children and adolescents such as a private psychiatrist or psychologist.

Other support organisations:

Kids Help Line

Phone: 1800 551 800
24 hours, every day of the year

Lifeline

Phone: 13 11 14
24 hours, every day of the year

Internet sites for children and young people:

Kids Help Line

www.kidshelp.com.au

Reachout!

www.reachout.com.au

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