

A Caregiver's Guide to Childhood Depression



Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.

Helen Keller

Although it may be difficult to believe, children of all ages can become depressed. The good news is that depression is manageable and your child can live a meaningful and happy life. The following guide discusses what depression is and what childhood depression can look like; what you can expect from therapy, treatment and medications; and what you can do at home to assist in your child's treatment.

What is Depression?

Depression is a medical illness that negatively affects one's emotions and how they think and act on a daily basis.ⁱ In children specifically, depression can interfere and disrupt their ability to function.ⁱⁱ It is a real and serious mental illness that requires professional help. Depression in children goes beyond just the feeling of sadness and can include other symptoms as defined below:ⁱⁱⁱ

- Frequent sadness, tearfulness and crying
- Decreased interest in activities; or inability to enjoy favorite activities
- Hopelessness, low self-esteem and feelings of guilt
- Persistent boredom, low energy and poor concentration
- Social isolation, poor communication and difficulty with relationships
- Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure
- Increased irritability, anger, or hostility
- Frequent complaints of physical illnesses such as headaches and stomachaches
- Frequent absences from school or poor performance in school
- A major change in eating and/or sleeping patterns
- Talk of or efforts to run away from home
- Thoughts or expressions of suicide or self-destructive behavior

**Adolescents and teens who are depressed are at a higher risk of attempting or committing suicide^{iv}. If your teen mentions that they want to harm themselves or take their own life make sure to seek medical assistance immediately. Always take talk of suicide or suicidal behaviors seriously.*

***Suicide warning signs can include, but are not limited to: talking about suicide, seeking out an object that could be used in a suicide attempt, an obsession with death, feeling of burden or worthlessness, giving away their favorite things, unusual goodbyes to family or friends, isolating themselves from others, and self-destructive behavior (increased alcohol or drug abuse, recklessness, unnecessary risks, etc.).^v*

What does the future hold?

There is help for children with depression. A child with depression will benefit from early intervention and effective treatment especially if there are other mental health or medical issues. Treatment attendance is extremely important because depression can happen again and/or can also happen with other mental health issues.^{vi}

Treatment for Childhood Depression

Treatment is essential for childhood depression and can consist of both psychotherapy and medication.

- **Psychotherapy** is another word for counseling and is carried out by professional and licensed clinicians and psychiatrists. This is a procedure in which the professional sits down with your child individually or with the child and caregiver/family. This can include:^{vii}
 - Teaching you and your child about depression and what it means.
 - Talking about the way your child thinks about him or herself and how that makes him or her feel. When talking about these thoughts, the therapist may be able to help change them and help your child feel differently.
 - Looking at the activities your child is involved in and working on ways for your child to participate in them while enjoying him or herself.
 - Encouraging your child to pay attention to his or her thoughts, feelings, and behavior and to connect those to depressed feelings.
 - Talking about whom your child feels close to and the different relationships in his or her life and talk about how these relationships can ease your child's depression.
 - All of this can be done through family support, informative education, emotional support, self-monitoring, and problem solving.
 - *Be sure to speak to your child's clinician or psychiatrist to receive more detailed information on the type of therapy he/she is using with your child and/or family.*
- **Medication** is typically used alongside a form of psychotherapy (listed above) as it can be really helpful in improving your child's thoughts and feelings.^{viii} It is important to do your best at feeling hopeful and supporting the decisions made by the clinicians and doctors as this will really help your child. *Most importantly, be sure to discuss the use of medication with the clinician or psychiatrist and ask them to provide you with information on your child's specific medication(s). This should include: how much your child should take per day, what the medication is aimed to improve and the possible negative side effects.*

How Can You Help?

Caregivers often want to know how they can help their child feel better. The following section includes tips that other caregivers have found helpful. Keep in mind they might not all be right for you and your family but it may be helpful to give a few of these a try.^{ix}

- **Education.** Stay educated on what depression is, how it affects all children and how it affects your child in particular. Stay involved in your child's treatment plan, both with getting involved in family therapy and/or assisting your child with taking their medications. Help your child understand what depression is and what the treatment process (therapy, etc.) will be. Be comfortable and open with the clinician to guarantee the best care possible for your child.
- **Create support systems.** Help inform everyone who lives in your home about depression and what is going on with your child in order to create a strong family support for him or her. Find people that you trust and can confide in to help you with transportation to appointments, taking care of other family members and for emotional support as well.
- **Stay involved with school.** Childhood depression can be directly linked with school and social difficulties. If you inform the necessary school staff of your child's depression, they can help keep him/her safe and supported when you are not around.
- **Take care of yourself.** Know your limits and seek support if you need it. Join support groups, check out community services and seek professional help for yourself if you think it would be helpful. You are your child's source of support and comfort so feeling your best will help your child to feel his or her best!
- **Create a calm and positive environment at home.** Make sure that your home is a safe place for your child and the rest of your family. Have meals together and spend quality time together as this can help your child feel supported.
- **Don't place blame.** Blaming yourself, your child or anyone else will not help the situation. Release feelings of guilt about what your child is going through and focus on getting help and what is working well for you and your child.

- **Develop routines and structures.** Changes in routine are inevitable if your child begins treatment of any kind. Do your best to stay organized with appointments, medication, work, and social plans with friends and family.
- **Reduce stress.** You may laugh at this one, but it is true. The less stress you have in your life, the better off everyone will be. Continue doing things you love and be sure to stay healthy (exercise and eat healthy foods).
- **Be proud of yourself.** This is a difficult time. You are already on the right path just by staying informed and involved in your child's life!

ⁱ Depression. (2012). *American Psychiatric Association*. Retrieved October 3, 2013, from <http://www.psychiatry.org/mental-health/key-topics/depression>

ⁱⁱ Facts for Families: The Depression Child. (2008). *The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. Retrieved on October 3, 2013 from http://www.aacap.org/App_Themes/AACAP/docs/facts_for_families/04_the_depressed_child.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Facts for Families: The Depression Child. (2008). *The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. Retrieved on October 3, 2013 from http://www.aacap.org/App_Themes/AACAP/docs/facts_for_families/04_the_depressed_child.pdf

^{iv} Smith, M., Segal, J. & Robinson, L. (July 2013). Suicide Prevention. Helpguide.org: A Trusted Non-Profit Resource. Retrieved on October 3, 2013 from http://www.helpguide.org/mental/suicide_prevention.htm

^v Smith, M., Segal, J. & Robinson, L. (July 2013). Suicide Prevention. Helpguide.org: A Trusted Non-Profit Resource. Retrieved on October 3, 2013 from http://www.helpguide.org/mental/suicide_prevention.htm

^{vi} Practice Parameter for the Assessment and Treatment of Children and Adolescents with Depressive Disorders. (2007). *The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. Retrieved on October 3, 2013 from http://www.aacap.org/App_Themes/AACAP/docs/practice_parameters/depressive_disorders_practice_parameter.pdf

^{vii} A Family Guide: What Families Need to Know About Adolescent Depression. (2010). *National Alliance on Mental Illness*. Retrieved on October 3, 2013 from http://www.nami.org/Content/Microsites316/NAMI_PA,_Cumberland_and_Perry_Cos_/Discussion_Groups559/No_Active_Discussion_Groups_for_this_Site/FamilyGuideDepression.pdf

^{viii} Children. (2012). *American Psychiatric Association*. Retrieved October 3, 2013 from <http://www.psychiatry.org/mental-health/people/children>

^{ix} A Family Guide: What Families Need to Know About Adolescent Depression. (2010). *National Alliance on Mental Illness*. Retrieved on October 3, 2013 from http://www.nami.org/Content/Microsites316/NAMI_PA,_Cumberland_and_Perry_Cos_/Discussion_Groups559/No_Active_Discussion_Groups_for_this_Site/FamilyGuideDepression.pdf