



# I think my child is depressed. What do I do?

## WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

Depression is a treatable disorder where a person has a low mood over an period of time and it affects their daily life. Depression can happen to anyone, including children and young people.

## WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE IN YOUR CHILD?

- ✔ Over a period of time, you may see the following in your child:
- ✔ Deep sadness or hopelessness
- ✔ Irritability, anger, or hostility
- ✔ Worry and turmoil
- ✔ Panic and anxiety
- ✔ Tearfulness or frequent crying
- ✔ Withdrawing from friends and family and avoiding social situations
- ✔ Loss of interest in activities
- ✔ Unexplained aches and pain
- ✔ Negative perspectives on their life and the world
- ✔ Feeling worthless and guilty: feeling stupid, ugly, or bad.
- ✔ Poor school performance
- ✔ Changes in appetite and weight
- ✔ Changes in sleeping habits - sleeping too much or being up all night
- ✔ Restlessness and agitation
- ✔ Feelings of worthlessness and guilt
- ✔ Lack of enthusiasm and motivation
- ✔ Fatigue or lack of energy
- ✔ Difficulty concentrating or remembering things
- ✔ Unable to organise - thoughts or practicalities
- ✔ Inability to cope with day to day functioning
- ✔ Sluggishness - walking, talking or reacting more slowly than usual
- ✔ Restlessness - needing to keep hands busy, fidgeting, tapping feet etc
- ✔ Self harm in all forms - risk taking behaviours, drugs, alcohol, cutting, burning, etc
- ✔ Thoughts of death or suicide



## WHAT IF YOU THINK THEY'RE 'JUST BEING A TEENAGER'?

Ask yourself - how long has this been going on? Is it a short term situation that changes or disappears, or is this a constant for your child? It's normal to feel sad, disappointed, frustrated, angry or overwhelmed - but if it's a constant in your child's life, this requires support to help your child through it.

Hormones, school and work pressure, relationship challenges, expectations to conform, and dealing with life changes such as death, divorce, moving house or school can all challenge your child's mental health and can create some of the same signs as depression. But they stop

and your child returns to an equilibrium. Depression is when these feelings continue over the long term.

Keep a diary of your child's mood - this will give you valuable facts about how long your child has had low mood and how it manifests.

Consider any triggers - if you feel your child has possibly been depressed for some time, think back to any triggers that may have caused their mental health decline. While you can't change them, this may give you some insight into why your child feels like they do, and can help if you seek professional support.



## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

**1 Take it seriously** - caring about your child's mental health isn't indulgent, won't turn them into a 'snowflake' or someone who is unprepared for the world. You have an opportunity to help them through this time and build resilience in them for life.

**2 Get professional help** - take your child to see you GP or doctor. They will be able to help you access more specialised support,

including therapy and medication, including antidepressants.

**3 Be kind** - how would you treat your best friend if they were depressed? Show the same kindness and engage the same empathy for your child, even if you feel they aren't helping themselves or they won't listen to you. They need support and empathy - and so do you. Be kind to yourself as you make sense of what you're facing.



**4 Stop the blame game** - blaming yourself, your child or the trigger for their depression isn't helpful and will only make things worse. This doesn't get any better if you point the finger at someone, so accept that you are where you are, and look to get the right support for your child. There is no shame in asking for help and the sooner you

**5 Park the guilt** - it's an awful feeling when your child is depressed - you want to make it all right and you can blame yourself for them being in this situation. Park the guilt so you can focus your time, energy and attention on your child and yourself. It's important you are present for them, not churning over what you might have done wrong.

**6 Challenge your expectations** - your child's depression doesn't mean they won't ever be well, or happy or able to do what they want in life. It's that it's a bit of a challenge now. Step back from unrealistic expectations that layer obligation onto your child. Reduce the expectations in the moment - around school and chores and focus on the positive things your child can do.

**7 Be consistent** - being consistent in the way you behave towards and speak to your child is a positive and nurturing act and gives them

a sense of security when they might feel they don't have any.

**8 Get a plan** - look at the basics - sleep, food, exercise and stress - get a plan to improve sleep, aim for healthy food and plenty of fluid, encourage time outdoors and exercise they enjoy, and look to reduce extra stress from school, work or family.

**9 Get support from school** - let school know what your child is dealing with so they can support them. They can offer help with extra time, help to catch up on missed work, or a safe space to go if your child becomes overwhelmed. Speak to the form teacher, head of year, SENCo, pastoral support, school nurse or counsellor. There are extra forms of support available, including EHCPs in the UK and IEP and 504 plans in the US.

**10 Take care of yourself** - you may not be the one who is ill, but caring is a very draining thing to do. Make sure you take time to do things that make you feel good - see friends, exercise, engage in hobbies. If this is triggering for you, get yourself some therapy - seek out a counsellor who can help you - and don't forget the strength you can gain from being in a support group like Parenting Mental Health. We get it, we understand.