



# Understanding Depression in Children

## WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

Everyone feels sad sometimes. Sadness is a part of life. It is the appropriate response to the sad things that happen in life. “Normal” sadness lasts for a short time, and then goes away without leaving long-lasting effects. Depression is a change in mood that persists over time. It doesn’t go away on its own. It interferes with a person’s ability to enjoy life, even when good things are happening. It drains all your energy and stops you from taking part in activities you used to do easily. It makes everything seem pointless. Depression causes lasting changes in thinking, relationships, and way of life.

## SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION:

- Irritable, agitated, easily annoyed or upset
- Sad, crying easily and difficult to soothe
- Constantly bored and unable to find anything enjoyable to do.
- Low energy and difficulty getting motivated
- Overly sensitive to criticism, rejection or failure
- Saying negative things about themselves
- Sulking, withdrawing from social situations, not wanting to spend time with friends
- Whining and complaining - focusing on what’s wrong and inability to see what’s right in situations
- Sleep problems including difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, waking up during the night and having difficulty getting back to sleep, or sleeping all the time
- Nightmares or dreams that are disturbing or distressing
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Physical complaints such as headaches or stomachaches
- Changes in eating habits - eating too much or not at all
- Being very difficult to please
- Getting into fights or trouble at school
- Not wanting to go to school and/or not wanting to participate in other activities



## MISUNDERSTOOD SIGNS OF DEPRESSION IN CHILDREN

Although depression is typically associated with sadness, in children it is more likely to be expressed as irritability (easily upset over small things), anger, annoyance, or boredom rather than through overt signs of sadness like crying. This is often mistaken for a behavior problem rather than recognized as an emotional problem.

**“It makes such a difference,” said Pooh, “to have someone who believes in you.”**

- A.A. Milne, *Winnie the Pooh*



## CRISIS HELP

It is a myth that young children can’t be suicidal. If a child talks about wanting to be dead or wanting to take their own life, take it seriously. Even if it is a dramatic way of expressing distress and not genuine suicidal intention, support is urgently needed. For help on how to respond, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255), the Crisis Center 330-452-6000 or send a text to 741 741.

## HOW TO HELP A CHILD WHO IS STRUGGLING WITH DEPRESSION:



**Talk** with the child about what they're feeling. Let them know it is safe to express their feelings to you, even the ones that are not so comfortable for you to hear.



**Express** - If the child has a hard time expressing their feelings through words, help them find another form of expression, such as drawing.



**Build Emotional Vocabulary** - Help the child learn to recognize and name a wide variety of emotions. Things are less overwhelming when we know that they have a name.



**Listen** - You don't have to have all the answers or know how to fix every problem. Just listen and empathize with the struggle.



Counter the child's negative views of self by telling what you like or admire most about them. Try to focus on internal character traits (e.g. kindness or creativity) rather than surface features such as appearance (e.g. pretty).



**Help the child look for and recognize examples of what is good in the world and in humanity.**



**Plan** - Plan something enjoyable for every day. Plan something to look forward to in the near future and in the longer term. Display these plans on a calendar so the child has a visual reminder.



**Get active** - Exercise, dance, do a craft, go for a walk, actively engage with life.



**Accept** - It's never helpful to make light of a child's depression by saying they're feeling sorry for themselves. Depression doesn't feel good. If they could cheer up, they would.

## 3 TYPES OF THOUGHTS THAT SUSTAIN DEPRESSION

- **Negative view of self** - I'm not good enough, I am a bad person, I never get anything right, nobody likes me.
- **Negative view of the world and others** - The world is a cold, cruel place and people are awful and uncaring.
- **Negative expectations for the future** - My life is miserable and it's not going to get any better.

**Depression is a disorder, not a choice. You don't get over it just by deciding to be positive or cheer up.**

## COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

Children often find it difficult to explain how they're feeling. They may not be able to tell you that they're depressed. Instead they are likely to talk and complain about what they can understand - pain, aches and other bodily discomforts. The author C.S. Lewis explained it well, "It is easier to say 'my tooth is aching' than to say 'my heart is broken.'"



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