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CONNECTIONS

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CHILDREN AND DEPRESSION

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There are ups and downs in everyone's life. We all become unhappy when we experience problems and set-backs. These unhappy feelings are usually temporary. For some people, though, sad feelings last a long time and are quite severe. "Depression" is a clinical term used by psychiatrists to describe a long period when a person feels very sad to the point of feeling worthless, hopeless and helpless.

Depression can be caused by stress, a loss, or a major disappointment. Sometimes, it seems to happen for no particular reason at all. Depression can be the result of a chemical imbalance in a person's body, and some people are born with a tendency to become depressed.

Whatever the reason may be, depression can affect all aspects of our lives: work, family relationships, friendships, and even our physical health.

Depression does not affect only adults. It can happen to children and teenagers too, and it is just as real a problem for them as it is for adults.

Very likely, a depressed child will think that no one else feels the same way and that no one will understand his/her problems. Often, a depressed child will feel that he/she is disliked by everyone.

Sometimes it can be difficult for adults to understand how difficult children's problems can be because we look at their problems through adult eyes. But the pressures of school and growing up can be very hard for some children to cope with successfully. It is important that we remind ourselves that, while their problems may seem unimportant to us, they can be overwhelming to them.

Signs of Depression in Children and Teens

If your child becomes depressed, he/she is unlikely to talk about it. Your first warning signs will probably be changes in behaviour that may suggest a troubled and unhappy state of mind. A child who used to be active and involved may suddenly become quiet and withdrawn. A good student might start getting poor grades.

Some of the common signs of depression can occur when school, social or family pressures become too great. Do not assume that your child is experiencing a major depression if he/she shows only one of these signs. Your child may, however, be depressed and need professional help if there are unexplained changes in his/her behaviour or if you notice several of the following signs of depression:

Changes in Feelings

Your child may show signs of being unhappy, worried, guilty, angry, fearful, helpless, hopeless, lonely or rejected.

Physical Changes

Your child may start to complain of headaches, or general aches and pains. He/she may have a lack of energy, sleeping or eating problems, or feel tired all the time.

Changes in Thinking

Your child may say things that indicate low self-esteem, self-dislike or self-blame. He/she may have difficulty concentrating or frequently experience negative thoughts. He/she might even think about suicide.

Changes in Behaviour

Your child might withdraw from others, cry easily or show less interest in sports, games or other fun activities that he/she normally likes. He/she might over-react and have sudden outbursts of anger or tears.



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How to Help a Depressed Child

Talk to your child. If you have noticed any of the signs discussed here, do your best to encourage your child to talk to you about how he/she is feeling and what is bothering him/her.

If you think your child is seriously depressed, do not panic. Professional help is available to both your child and yourself.

Depression is very treatable. Children, teens and adults can all be helped to overcome depression. Start by checking with your family doctor to find out if there could be a physical cause for your child's feelings of fatigue, aches and pains, and low moods.

Talk to your child's school to find out if any teachers have also noticed changes in behaviour and mood.

Talking to your child's teacher about his/her difficulties may change the way the teacher interacts with your child and can increase your child's sense of self-esteem in the classroom.

Many school boards have professional counsellors on staff. The school counsellor may be able to refer you to individual or group counselling to help children and teens cope with stress.

Depression Affects the Whole Family

It is important to recognize your own feelings about your child's depression. Since it is not always known why children become depressed, you might find that you are feeling guilty or frustrated. Without wanting to, you may let your child know this and make him/her feel rejected and misunderstood.

It is not easy to cope with the needs of a depressed child. You may need help in learning how to help your child deal with his/her unhappy feelings as well as how to deal with your own feelings about his/her problems.

You should also be honest with brothers and sisters, and other family members about your depressed child's needs. That way, he/she will have several sources of support and understanding.

Contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program to schedule counselling for yourself and your child. EFAP/North's library also has many helpful books that can help you understand your child's depression and other books which give good advice on parenting.

Source: CMHA


