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Kids

DEPRESSION IN CHILDREN

Depression is the most common mental health problem in Canada. Each year it affects 3 million Canadians of all ages, races, and economic backgrounds. Depression in children is common and affects 1% to 2% of children and 3% to 8% of teens. Before puberty, depression is just as common in boys and girls. After puberty, girls are twice as likely to become depressed compared to boys.

Unlike adults, who have the ability to seek assistance on their own, children rely on parents, teachers, or other caregivers to recognize their struggles and get them the help they need. While it might seem that recognizing depression is easy, the signs aren't always obvious. For one, children with depression don't necessarily appear sad. Irritability, anger, and agitation may be the most prominent symptoms. Other signs and symptoms of depression are:

- Sadness or hopelessness
- Irritability, anger, or hostility
- Tearfulness or frequent crying
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Loss of interest in activities
- Poor school performance
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Restlessness and agitation
- Feelings of worthlessness and guilt
- Lack of enthusiasm and motivation
- Fatigue or lack of energy
- Difficulty concentrating
- Unexplained aches and pains
- Thoughts of death or suicide

A certain amount of moodiness and acting out is typical in children and teens. But persistent changes in personality, mood, or behaviour indicate a deeper problem.

Don't ignore the problem. Depression can be very damaging when left untreated, so don't wait and hope that symptoms will go away. If you suspect that your child is depressed, bring up your concerns in a loving, non-judgmental way. Even if you're unsure that depression is the issue, the troublesome behaviours and emotions you're seeing are signs of a problem that should be addressed. Open up a dialogue by letting your child know what signs of depression you've noticed and why they worry you. Then ask your child to share what he or she is going through. Hold back from asking a lot of questions, but make it clear that you're ready and willing to provide whatever support they need.

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH A DEPRESSED CHILD

- **Focus on listening, not lecturing.** Resist any urge to criticize or pass judgment once your child begins to talk. The important thing is that your child is communicating. You'll do the most good by simply letting your child know that you're there for them.
- **Be gentle but persistent.** Don't give up if they shut you out at first. Talking about sadness can be very tough for kids. Even if they want to, they may have a hard time expressing what they're feeling. Be respectful of your child's comfort level while still conveying your concern and willingness to listen.
- **Acknowledge their feelings.** Whatever you do, don't try to talk your child out of sadness, even if their feelings or concerns appear silly or irrational to you. Well-meaning attempts to convince your child why "things aren't that bad" will just come across as if you don't take their emotions seriously. Also, try to avoid using too many directives. To make them feel understood and supported, simply acknowledging the pain and sadness they are experiencing can go a long way in making them feel understood and supported.
- **Trust your gut.** If your child says nothing is wrong but has no explanation for what is causing the behaviour, you should trust your gut. If your child won't open up to you, consider turning to a trusted third party: a school counsellor, favourite teacher, or psychologist. The important thing is to get them talking to someone.

Keep Them Busy. When people are depressed, they start to withdraw from their daily tasks. One of the most effective initial treatments for depression is to get the person to engage in everyday tasks, like doing the dishes, making their bed, taking a shower. This is called **behavioural activation**. If your child can't handle a complex task, give them simple ones, but keep them busy. Depressed people should not be allowed to lie in bed, because it just makes the situation worse. In addition to daily living tasks, you can also encourage your child to do enjoyable activities. Try to schedule tasks and enjoyable activities into a calendar as opposed to leaving timing to chance.

Encourage social connection. Depressed individuals tend to withdraw from their friends and the activities they used to enjoy. But isolation only makes depression worse, so do what you can to help your child reconnect.

- **Make one-on-one time a priority.** Set aside time each day to talk—time when you're focused totally on your child (no distractions or multi-tasking). Connecting can play a big role in reducing your child's depression.
- **Reduce isolation.** Do what you can to keep your child connected to others. Encourage them to go out with friends or invite friends over. Participate in activities that involve other families and give your child an opportunity to meet and connect with other kids. Encourage time with cousins, and others in the extended family.
- **Get your child involved.** Suggest activities, such as sports or clubs, that take advantage of your child's interests and talents. While your child may lack motivation and interest at first, as they reengage with the world, they should start to feel better and regain their enthusiasm.
- **Promote volunteerism.** Doing things for others is a powerful antidepressant and self-esteem booster. Help your child find a cause they're interested in and that gives them a sense of purpose. If you volunteer with them, it can also be a good bonding experience!

Make physical health a priority. Research indicates that physical and mental health are highly connected. Depression is exacerbated by inactivity, inadequate sleep, and poor nutrition. Help our child combat these behaviours by establishing a healthy, supportive home environment.

- **Get moving!** Exercise is essential to mental health. Ideally, your child should be getting at least 30 minutes of physical activity a day. Think outside the box: walking the dog, going for a hike, dancing, yoga, jumping on the trampoline, riding bikes, skateboarding. Research has shown that even low-impact exercise, like walking, is highly effective for improving mood. Get your child a pedometer or Fitbit and set daily targets! If possible, encourage your child to get out in nature. Research has shown that taking photos while outside can help children immerse themselves in their environment and get out of their head!
- **Set limits on screen time.** Older children often go online to escape their problems, but excessive computer use only increases isolation. When screen time goes up, physical activity and face time with friends goes down.
- **Provide nutritious, balanced meals.** Make sure your child is getting the nutrition they need for optimum brain health and mood support: things like omega-3 fats, healthy protein, and fresh produce. Eating a lot of sugary, starchy foods is not going to make the body or brain happy. Talk to your doctor about supplements and request blood work to rule out low iron or other deficiencies.
- **Encourage plenty of sleep.** Children need more sleep than adults to function optimally; up to 9-10 hours per night.

Know when to seek professional help. Support and healthy lifestyle changes can make a world of difference for depressed children, but it's not always enough. When depression is severe, or if your child is having suicidal thoughts, don't hesitate to seek professional help from a psychologist or pediatrician. A mental health professional with advanced training and a strong background treating children is the best bet for your child's care.

Medication. While medication should not be the first line of treatment for depression, certain antidepressant medications, called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), can be beneficial to children and adolescents with depression. While SSRIs have not been formally approved for use in children and adolescents in Canada, some are approved in the United States. Fluoxetine (Prozac) is the only medication approved by the FDA for use in treating depression in children. Sertraline (Zoloft), however, is also frequently prescribed. There is some research indicating that a very small subset of children who begin taking an SSRI develop suicidal thoughts. Should your child begin to develop these thoughts after beginning an SSRI it should be discontinued immediately.

Take care of yourself (and the rest of the family). As a parent dealing with a child's depression, you may find yourself focusing all your energy and attention on your depressed child. Meanwhile, you may be neglecting your own needs and the needs of other family members. It's extremely important that you continue to take care of yourself during this difficult time. **You can't put from an empty cup!**

- **Don't bottle up your emotions.** It's okay to feel overwhelmed, frustrated, helpless, or angry. Reach out to friends, your spouse, or see a psychologist of your own.
- **Look after your health.** The stress of your child's depression can affect your own mood, so support your health and well-being by eating right, getting enough sleep, and making time for things you enjoy.
- **Be open.** Don't skirt around the issue of depression in an attempt to "protect" your other children. Kids know when something is wrong. When left in the dark, their imaginations can often jump to far worse conclusions. Be open and straightforward about what is going on and invite your children to ask questions and share their feelings.
- **Remember the siblings.** Depression in one child can cause stress or anxiety in other family members, so make sure "healthy" children are not ignored. Siblings may need special individual attention or professional help of their own to handle their feelings about the situation.
- **Avoid blaming.** It can be easy to blame yourself or another family member for your child's depression, but it only adds to an already stressful situation. Furthermore, depression is normally caused by a number of factors.

Sources: Reynolds, W. & Johnston, H. (2013) *Handbook of depression in children and adolescents; Child, youth, and depression*, Canadian Mental Health Association; *Parent's Guide to Teen Depression*, HelpGuide.Org; *Antidepressant Medications for Children and Adolescents*, National Institute of Mental Health.