



# Supporting Kids and Teens Dealing with Depression



## Depression in Kids and Teens

*Children's Healthcare of Atlanta Strong4Life*

*Like many mental health concerns, depression is not something that is often discussed openly. Blame it on stigma or negative beliefs, associations, or attitudes, but many people believe depression should be dealt with in private or covered up. The sad truth is not talking about depression can actually make it worse.*

*Can kids suffer from depression? Yes. Children can experience depression, just like adults. Research shows there are many possible factors that lead to depression, including family history, stressors and life events, and environment.*

*As scary as it may be to hear that children can experience depression, the good news is depression is treatable. Knowing the signs and recognizing them early is critical.*

*Depression can look different in everyone, but here are some common signs and symptoms to look out for.*

## Common signs and symptoms of depression

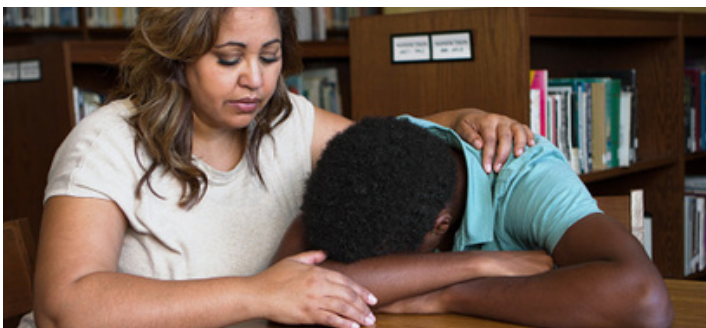
- *Feeling sad or hopeless most of the day, nearly every day (may or may not appear tearful).*
- *Acting irritable or being on edge.*
- *Loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy.*
- *Low self-esteem or confidence.*
- *Low energy or seeming more tired than usual.*
- *Having a difficult time concentrating.*
- *Feeling worthless, unimportant, or not valued.*
- *Changes in appetite and/or weight.*
- *Changes in sleep (difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much).*
- *Frequent thoughts of death and/or suicide\*.*
- *Frequent physical complaints that do not get better with treatment or have no known medical cause, such as headaches or stomachaches.*

## How do I know if it's depression or just sadness?

*It's normal for every child to feel sad, down, or have the blues from time to time; it is an ordinary part of growing up. Still, there's a difference between feeling down sometimes and experiencing clinical depression.*

*When it comes to teens, it can be a little more challenging to tell the difference between sadness and depression. On top of the increased social and academic pressures, teens are dealing with a lot of hormonal and developmental changes that may make them appear moody, on edge, or overly emotional at times. To help you understand the difference between a child experiencing sadness and a child experiencing depression, pay attention to the following:*

- **Symptoms** (listed on page 1).
- **How long symptoms last.** With depression, the symptoms will likely be present nearly every day for most of the day and for at least 2 weeks.
- **How the child is impacted by the symptoms.** Depression affects a person's functioning, including their ability to maintain social and familial relationships, sleep, concentrate, perform at school, or engage in certain activities.



## Talking to your child about depression

**Start the conversation, and follow your child's lead.** You don't have to wait for your child to come to you to talk about their feelings. Saying things like "I'm wondering how you are feeling" or "Tell me more about that" is a great way to let your child lead the conversation. Encourage and allow your child to speak freely about their feelings, and try to actively listen instead of interrupting or making assumptions.

**Validate feelings instead of dismissing them.** As hard as it may be to watch your child suffer, resist the urge to try to fix it or to dismiss their feelings by saying things like "Don't worry" or "Don't think like that." Many times, kids just want to feel seen, heard, and understood. Genuinely validate your child's feelings, and let them know you are listening by repeating back what you hear without any judgment. Let your child know their feelings are normal and that it's OK to feel the way they do.

**Share your calm.** Kids look to adults for cues on how to feel or react, so as hard as it may be, try to stay calm while talking to your child about how they are feeling. If you react too strongly, your child may feel discouraged from sharing their feelings with you again in the future. If you react calmly and with compassion, your child will likely feel reassured and comforted.

## Helping your child manage depression

**Keep simple routines.** *When your child is down and clearly struggling, you may think you should ease up on certain routines or expectations. While being understanding and flexible is important, maintaining certain routines creates predictability and allows your child to feel more comforted and secure. Even something as simple as having consistent mealtimes, wake times, and bedtimes can be comforting for a child of any age.*

**Maintain healthy habits.** *Getting enough sleep, getting balanced nutrition, and being physically active all have positive impacts on both the mind and body. Not only do healthy habits improve physical wellness, they contribute to emotional wellness, too.*

**Practice healthy coping strategies.** *Help your child learn how to manage their feelings and stress with healthy coping strategies. It's difficult to learn something new when we are anxious, upset, or distracted, so introduce coping skills when everyone is calm. Be sure to practice coping skills regularly so that they become a habit, just like brushing your teeth.*

## When to seek professional help

*Your child's emotional wellness (mental health) is just as important as their physical wellness, and it is never too early to seek professional help. We take our kids to the doctor when we are concerned about a physical injury or illness, so why should their emotional wellness be any different?*

*If you are worried that your child is showing potential signs of depression or you have other concerns about their emotional wellness, do not hesitate to reach out to your child's pediatrician or a mental health professional.*

*Depression can be hard on the entire family, so other family members may also need the support of a professional.*

*\*If you or a loved one are experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-harm, call the Georgia Crisis and Access Line (GCAL) at 1-800-715-4225. You can also chat or text for support by downloading the MyGCAL app in the app store or on Google Play. For those outside of Georgia, call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255. Any thoughts of suicide should be taken seriously.*