

Depression

in Children & Young People

Factsheet for young people

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What is depression?

Most people, children as well as adults, feel low or 'blue' occasionally. Feeling sad is a normal reaction to experiences that are stressful or upsetting. When these feelings go on and on, or dominate and interfere with your whole life, it can become an illness. This illness is called 'depression'. Depression probably affects one in every 200 children under 12 years old and two to three in every 100 teenagers.

What are the signs of depression?

- ~ Being moody and irritable – easily upset, 'ratty' or tearful
- ~ Becoming withdrawn – avoiding friends, family and regular activities
- ~ Feeling guilty or bad, being self-critical and self-blaming – hating yourself
- ~ Feeling unhappy, miserable and lonely a lot of the time
- ~ Feeling hopeless and wanting to die
- ~ Finding it difficult to concentrate
- ~ Not looking after your personal appearance
- ~ Changes in sleep pattern: sleeping too little or too much
- ~ Tiredness and lack of energy
- ~ Changes in appetite
- ~ Frequent minor health problems, such as headaches or stomach-aches
- ~ Some people believe they are ugly, guilty and have done terrible things.

If you have all or most of these signs and have had them over a long period of time, it may mean that you are depressed. You may find it very difficult to talk about how you are feeling.

<http://www.trippin.co.nz>

What causes depression?

Depression is usually caused by a mixture of things, rather than any one thing alone.

Events or personal experiences can be a trigger. These include family breakdown, the death or loss of a loved one, neglect, abuse, bullying and physical illness. Depression can also be triggered if too many changes happen in your life too quickly.

Risk factors People are more at risk of becoming depressed if they are under a lot of stress, have no one to share their worries with, and lack practical support.

Biological factors Depression may run in families due to genetic factors. It is also more common in girls and women compared to boys.

Depression seems to be linked with chemical changes in the part of brain that controls mood. These changes prevent normal functioning of the brain and cause many of the symptoms of depression.

Where can I get help?

There are a lot of things that can be done to help people who suffer from depression.

Helping yourself Simply talking to someone you trust, and who you feel understands, can lighten the burden. It can also make it easier to work out practical solutions to problems. For example, if you are stressed out by exams, you should talk to your teacher or school counsellor.

If you are worried about being pregnant, you should go and see your general practitioner or family planning clinic. Here are some things to remember:

- ~ talk to someone who can help keep as active and occupied as possible, but don't overstress yourself
- ~ you are not alone – depression is a common problem and can be overcome.

How parents and teachers can help

It can be very hard for young people to put their feelings into words. You can help by asking sympathetically how they are feeling, and listening to them.

When specialist help is needed

If the depression is dragging on and causing serious difficulties, it's important to seek treatment. Your general practitioner will be able to advise you about what help is available and to arrange a referral to the local child and adolescent mental health service.

Many young people will get better on their own with support and understanding. For those whose symptoms are severe and persistent, the most effective forms of treatment include cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and sometimes antidepressant medication. CBT is a type of talking treatment that helps someone understand their thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

Antidepressant medication may help and usually has to be taken for several months. They are not addictive, but there may be some withdrawal symptoms for a short time when you stop taking them. All medicines have side-effects, but if you are concerned about these, you should talk to your general practitioner or psychiatrist.

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