



# As a Parent

Be understanding, patient and supportive of your child.

Provide lots of encouragement to motivate him/her.

Give positive comments and praise for every achievement, no matter how small!



It is often in the darkest skies that we see the brightest stars.

The information provided in this publication is meant purely for educational purposes and may not be used as a substitute for medical diagnosis or treatment. You should seek the advice of your doctor or a qualified healthcare provider before starting any treatment or if you have any questions related to your health, physical fitness or medical conditions.

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## Depression in Teenagers

A guide for Parents



### What is depression?

It is normal to feel sad, upset, or frustrated from time to time. However, if the sadness becomes more intense and persistent, it can affect a teenager's ability to do well in school and maintain positive relationships with friends and family. A diagnosis of depression needs to be considered when there are five or more of the following features and these symptoms persist for two weeks or longer:

- Low mood, tearfulness. Some youths become more withdrawn
- Irritability, anger outbursts
- Loss of interest in hobbies
- Poor appetite or excessive eating, or changes in weight
- Poor sleep quality or sleeping excessively
- Low energy levels
- Difficulty concentrating
- Excessive guilt
- Hopelessness and thoughts of death or suicide

### What causes depression?

Neurochemicals provide a link between the cells of mood-regulating centres of the brain. These neurochemicals send signals from one brain cell to another, and are essential for normal brain function.

The levels of stress hormones in the body increase when we experience stress. High levels of circulating stress hormones can disturb the normal balance of neurochemicals in the mood centres of the brain. When this happens, an individual then experiences symptoms of depression.

Usually, there is no one single cause for depression. Rather, it is often caused by a mixture of different factors. These may include:

- A family history of mood disorder (depression can run in families)
- Stressful events e.g. conflict in the family, demise of a loved one, relationship problems, pressure to excel in school, bullying, or serious medical illness
- Hormonal changes during puberty
- Abuse of alcohol and drugs

### Are there treatments available for depression?

There are many effective forms of treatment for depression. These treatment methods have been extensively researched in many countries around the world. In Singapore, there are numerous centres with trained healthcare professionals who can treat depression.

In mild depression, symptoms can improve with counselling and psychotherapy ("talking treatment"). In moderate to severe depression, medication is the recommended treatment. Combination treatment with both medication and psychotherapy has also been shown to be effective.

### What is the role of medication in depression?

Antidepressant medications improve cell-to-cell signaling in the mood centres of the brain. This reduces the symptoms of depression. When energy levels and concentration improve, other forms of therapy such as psychological therapy can then work better.

### The multidisciplinary team approach to the treatment of depression

A multidisciplinary team approach is the best way to treat depression. The teenager is the most important member of the team, followed by parents and family members. Parents who take on an active role in supporting the depressed teenager can help them to recover sooner.

Members of the multidisciplinary team may include:

- **Psychiatrist** – A medical doctor with specialty training in Psychiatry, who oversees the management of patient's condition and prescribes medication if needed.
- **Psychologist** – A therapist with postgraduate training in Psychology, who can provide psychological treatment for the depressed teenager to reduce his/her psychological distress.
- **Occupational therapist** – A therapist who can provide guidance for relaxation techniques, coping with stress, and using activities as a form of enjoyment and self-discovery to promote recovery.
- **Art therapist** – A therapist who uses art to encourage the expression of inner feelings and stress. The healing effect of art therapy is through the process of creating, and not the product itself.
- **Medical social worker** – A healthcare professional who offers marital and family counselling as indicated, and arranges for financial subsidy for medical bills if there is a need.

### Why is it important to treat depression?

Depression can affect a person's functioning in many areas. An individual with depression has difficulty concentrating, feels tired, and becomes more forgetful. This can have an impact on their learning and performance in school.

An individual who is depressed often feels irritable and socially withdrawn. Friendships and relationships with family members may become strained as a result.

Most importantly, suicidal thoughts can occur in severe depression. This carries a risk of self-harm and suicide attempts.

Early detection and treatment of depression increase a person's quality of life, reduce the risk of harm, and bring about improvement in daily function.

### What can parents do to help?

- Be understanding, patient and supportive of your child.
- Actively encourage your child to motivate him/her.
- Give positive comments and praise for every achievement, no matter how small!

**Breaking the wall of silence** - It can be frustrating when teenagers choose to keep their problems to themselves. Allow them to first process their thoughts and emotions, rather than repeatedly asking them to express their feelings. Reassure them that you are available to listen, when they feel ready to talk. Other forms of communication such as writing letters, emails or phone texts can provide encouragement for the time-being, until the child feels ready to share his/her problems.

When your child is ready to talk, aim to listen and understand the situation from their point of view. Teenagers might not like remarks that sound critical or imposing. Depressed individuals often find it difficult to stop worrying or dwelling on the negative side of things. Acknowledge these thoughts and feelings. Draw on your own personal experiences, and share your coping strategies with them.

**Motivating your child** - Teaching them positive self-talk is a good way of showing them how to cope with negative thoughts and emotions. Individuals who are depressed are often focused on their flaws and weaknesses rather than their strengths. Remind your child of his/her strengths and talents, and talk about how you can build on them together.

**Finding solutions** - Teach your children problem-solving methods to allow them to cope with negative situations instead of reacting emotionally. Being objective helps in many situations, e.g. if there is a conflict with friends, or bullying in school.

**Giving your child an energy boost!** - Encourage your child to be active. Exercise and social activities help in their recovery, increase energy and interest, and also build confidence.

**Caring for the caregiver** - Self-care is important for parents too! It is difficult to try to help your child if you are feeling angry, stressed, or discouraged. Talk about how you feel with your spouse, and find time for your own rest and relaxation. Seek help from school teachers and counsellors, as well as healthcare professionals. Working as a team helps to achieve a better outcome for your child.

### Managing Risk

**Self-harm** - Deliberate self-harm in the form of cutting, burning or other methods can occur when young people feel distressed. Try to find out why it is happening by offering to listen to what is troubling your child. Being non-judgmental helps; focus on the problem, rather than the behaviour. Discuss how you can work with your child to cope with stress in other ways – e.g. by listening to music, folding origami, or exercising.

**Suicidality** - It is particularly worrying if a young person starts talking repeatedly about death or suicide. Other possible indicators of suicidal plans include:

- Writing 'goodbye' notes
- Giving valuable personal belongings or pets away to others
- Collecting and keeping large amounts of tablets

If the above-mentioned indicators are present, it is important to arrange for an urgent assessment of the child's psychological condition to determine the level of risk. You can seek urgent advice by calling the Samaritans of Singapore 24-hour hotline at 1800-221-4444. Emergency services at hospitals in Singapore can also provide urgent psychiatric assessment and risk management.

Services are available within the following settings:

- **School** - counsellors, teachers
- **Community** - Response, Early Intervention and Assessment in Community Mental Health (REACH), family service centres, students care centres
- **Medical** - polyclinics, family doctors, psychiatrists

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Speak out, Seek help,  
Stay hopeful!