

# Parenting Through Tough Times

## Coping with Depression

### For Families



“It is circles within circles, a sadness out of control,” says one mother struggling to raise her three children. Life can be hard and it is normal to feel sad sometimes. Some people experience depression as “nerves” or “too much stress.” Others may have body aches and pains or experience that they are being visited by “unhappy spirits or ancestors.” Whatever the words, if you are unable to shake your sadness, you may be suffering from depression. What’s most important is to recognize that you are not alone and to find

others to talk to, others who can help you. Depression is an illness that can range from mild to severe. It can be very painful to live with depression. It causes people to withdraw from social contacts, from their children and families, and even from the help that could save them from years of suffering. Many people do not know how to recognize or talk about depression — yet it is one of the most common mental illnesses that caregivers, including parents, experience.

Yet there is every reason to be hopeful. In the last 30 years, a great deal has been learned about the causes of depression, its effects, and what can be done about it. The encouraging news is that depression is the most treatable of the major mental illnesses. Depressed parents can in fact be effective parents despite depression. The challenge is that depression goes largely unrecognized, is misunderstood, and often goes untreated.

The hopeful news is that much can be done to cope with depression. Simply talking it through with a trusted friend or caregiver may help. Keeping track of your moods can help, and so can trying to do things that improve your mood — exercise, spiritual practices, familiar routines and rituals, even humor can all be helpful. More formal treatments, whether delivered in health centers or mental health centers, also work for those who need it. Studies show that more than 60-70 percent of those who get treatment for depression will get better.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### How Can I Help Myself?

- **Learn more about the signs of depression** to figure out if they apply to you and what you are feeling.
- **Find out who you can talk to.** Don't feel like you have to deal with your feelings alone; talk to others about them. Share this paper with someone you trust and start a conversation. In some cultures, this

can be the hardest part, if you feel that you are breaking a taboo or norm against talking about your feelings.

- **Reach out.** Talk to a counselor, therapist, doctor, minister, or other professional you trust about getting help. Learn how to see depression as an illness and talk to someone about it.
- **Get help.** Reach out to your friends and family to find community resources that will work for you. For many, the primary care doctor will be an important resource. There are many types of treatment that can be effective, such as talk therapy, medication, changes in diet, or even paying attention to other medical problems (such as diabetes) that can put you at risk for depression.
- **Know that change takes time.** In exploring treatment options, choose a mental health professional and an approach to treatment that feels right to you, and give it time to work. Monitor what's going on if you're getting treatment with a mental health professional. Talk about what's working and what's not working.
- **Continue to try to be a good parent.** Remember that it's possible, even with feelings of sadness, to be a good parent. Continue the routines that help your child. We've described these in the short paper *The Ability to Cope: Building Resilience for Yourself and Your Child*.

## How Do I Know If What I Feel Is Depression?

Depression often occurs after difficult events such as the loss of a loved one, moving to a new community without supports, witnessing community violence, or losing a job. Perinatal depression may occur during pregnancy, right after the birth of a child, or during the following twelve months. Depression may look and feel different for every person. Different cultures may have different ways of describing depression, and different words for it. Here are some signs that may occur when someone is depressed:

- **Unpleasant mood** such as sadness, anger, and tearfulness. Perhaps things that normally would be minor annoyances are very upsetting, such as a child spilling food.
- **Feelings:** exhausted, forgetful, disorganized, sad, full of rage, irritable, hopeless, maybe empty or numb. You may feel like you are “losing it” or feel “overwhelmed.”
- **Different physical sensations:** Some people describe a “heaviness” or pain in their body or their heart. People who are very depressed might hear voices or see shadows that are not there.
- **Thoughts:** always seeing the bad side of things, glass half empty, forgetting positive qualities, not feeling good about one’s self, or “getting stuck.” Other symptoms include harsh self-criticism, feelings of

worthlessness, and thoughts like “No one likes me. They may think I am a bad person/mother/father.”

Depression may affect the ways we commonly behave or do things in daily life

- **Forgetting appointments,** details, or follow-up tasks.
- **Difficulty making decisions,** even about simple things like what to have for dinner.
- **Sleeping more or less than usual,** having a hard time getting out of bed, having trouble falling asleep, waking up early in the morning and not being able to get back to sleep.
- **Eating more or less than usual** with noticeable weight gain or loss.
- **Self-medicating behaviors,** including drug or alcohol use, as a way to numb out sorrow or pain.
- **Isolating behaviors** such as withdrawing from friends and family; wanting to be alone; thinking people do not want your company; having a harder time using the supports that are available, such as your child’s early care program.
- **Emotional outbursts,** like yelling or crying, then feeling guilty about “taking things out” on the children or others. Not being able to get things done like shopping, cleaning, getting meals on the table or the kids ready for their day. Not having energy to take a shower, wear clean clothes, or do your hair.
- **Not being able to get things done** like

shopping, cleaning, getting meals on the table or the kids ready for their day. Not having energy to take a shower, wear clean clothes, or do your hair.

- **Not enjoying things that used to make you feel good** like a hobby, time with the kids, family get-togethers, or sexual intimacy with your partner.

**Some people with severe depression might have thoughts about ending their lives. If you or someone you know is having these thoughts, call 911 or go or take them to an emergency room immediately.**

## Can My Depression Affect My Children?

While it's true that you can be a good parent while struggling with depression, it is also true that children are sensitive to their parents' moods and behaviors. Many children are able to grow up healthy and strong even when living with a parent who suffers from depression. Some infants of depressed parents may show high levels of distress and may avoid eye contact with their caregivers. Some toddlers and preschool children of depressed parents may cry easily, act aggressively, have more tantrums, get easily frustrated, or have problems sleeping and eating. Some older children may have a hard time controlling themselves, become withdrawn, or find it hard to make friends.

Depression may affect your child in these ways, but it's important to know that there are things that you can do to counteract the effects, and with help you and your children can do well despite parental depression. There is every reason to be hopeful.

## How Can I Help My Family?

The following suggestions can help parents recovering from depression to help their children as well as themselves. Many parents begin with one of the following suggestions. By making even a simple change, you are helping the people you love.

- **Take care of yourself** as an important part of taking care of your family.
- **Talk to your family** about your depression and make sure they know the illness is not their fault. Use words that make sense in your culture. Be ready to talk about it more than once in words that young children can understand. It often takes time for families and children to understand this sensitive subject.
- **Provide a safe, consistent and secure environment** for your child. Routines and guidance help children feel safe. Make sure your child attends school every day and enroll him or her in quality after-school activities. Predictable routines about meals, bedtime and other times of the day are important and reassuring.
- **Help your child** with the appropriate challenges he or she faces in their early care program or school.

- **Read to your child**, talk to your child, sing with your child, and encourage activities where your child enjoys learning.
- **Encourage your child's relationships** with his or her friends and other caring adults.
- **Use your resources.** Ask a partner, friend, or relative for help in watching your child or with transportation to school or activities. Find out more about the resources available to you through your child's early care program.

## Additional Family Connections Resources

### Short Papers

The Ability to Cope: Building Resilience in Yourself and Your Child <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/ability-to-cope.pdf>

Self-Reflection in Parenting: Help for Getting Through Stressful Times <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/self-reflection-in-parenting.pdf>

### Other Resources

American Psychological Association and Discovery Channel. The Road to Resilience. American Psychological Association. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>

Beardslee, W. R. (2003). *When a Parent is Depressed: How to Protect Your Children from the Effects of Depression in the Family*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003. Originally published in hardcover under the title *When a Parent is Depressed: Protecting the Children and Strengthening the Family*. (2002). Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.

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Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance. *Improving the Lives of People Living with Mood Disorders*. Retrieved from <http://www.dbsalliance.org/site/PageServer?pagename=home>

Families for Depression Awareness. *Bringing Depression into the Light*. Retrieved from <http://www.familyaware.org>



Nicholson, J., Henry, A. D., Clayfield, J. C., and Phillips, S. M. (2001). *Parenting Well When You're Depressed: A Complete Resource for Maintaining a Healthy Family*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

SCAN. Self Care for Parents. Retrieved from <https://www.scanva.org/support-for-parents/parent-resource-center-2/self-care-for-parents/The Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center. Five Action Steps to Address Maternal Depression in Head Start Programs>. Retrieved from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/mental-health/article/five-action-steps-address-maternal-depression-head-start-programs>



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