

Depression

What is the issue?

Depression has been predicted as one of the major health problems of the 21st century. More adolescents and young people are experiencing depression. This is known to increase their risk for other mental health problems such as hazardous use of alcohol and other drugs and suicide.

While it is not unusual for children and young people to feel "blue" or "down", when this feeling persists for more than a few weeks additional help may be needed. Depression is serious and if left untreated may become life threatening.

When young people's moods disrupt their ability to manage usual activities, it may indicate a serious mental health problem. It can be difficult to know when children and young people are feeling depressed because adults expect them to be moody. Adolescents and young people do not always understand or express their feelings very well. When asked they may deny that anything is wrong. They may also express their feelings through aggressive, hostile and

risk taking behaviour. These behaviours only lead to more problems and possibly worsen any feelings of depression.

The most common forms of treatment for young people are counselling, therapies (such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) and social interventions. Counselling and therapy involve talking about your concerns and techniques for solving problems and for coping with stress now and in the future. This may involve individual and family therapy and group work.

Medications are used less often to treat depression in young people but are sometimes needed for severe depression.

Sometimes adolescents and young people may feel so depressed they may consider suicide. Feelings of anger, resentment, guilt or worthlessness may lead to impulsive, self-destructive acts. Few children or young people will seek help on their own. They need encouragement from their friends, families and concerned adults.

What are the signs of Depression?

Most forms of depression involve both physical and psychological symptoms.

The following signs may indicate depression, particularly when they persist for more than a few weeks:

- Sadness or irritability.
- Difficulty concentrating, deterioration in school performance.
- Lack of energy, enthusiasm or motivation, feeling slowed down.
- Restlessness or agitation.
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns.
- Feelings of guilt or worthlessness.
- Withdrawal from friends, family and previously enjoyed activities.
- Suicidal thoughts or actions.

Some people experience periods of excitement and overactivity as well as feeling down. This is a bipolar disorder (sometimes called manic-depression).

Recent surveys suggest up to 1 in 5 young people experience depression at some time. Adolescence is a challenging time involving many changes. These changes occur emotionally, physically and socially. Young people are also exposed to varying messages from parents, schools and the media including the Internet.

Helping young people with depression

When adolescents and young people are feeling down there are a number of things families can do to help them. Offer help and listen. Encourage them to talk about their feelings. Acceptance and belonging are very important to adolescents so encourage them to:

- Talk to someone they trust.
- Ask for help when they need it.

Some other things that may be helpful include encouraging them to:

- Spend time with friends.
- Participate in sports, school activities or hobbies with a focus on positive activities and achievements.
- Be involved in organisations that provide support for young people and help them develop additional interests.

If a young person is severely depressed they may not be able to participate in usual activities.

Young people should be encouraged to talk to someone they trust.

Where to get help

In an emergency contact your
general practitioner or
local hospital **Emergency Department**

24 hour telephone services are:

Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800
Lifeline 131 114

Youthline (youth counselling)
(Sydney) Tel: 02 9951 5522
(Parramatta) Tel: 02 9633 3666

For other help, the first point of contact can be:

- Your local Area Health Service (during business hours) including community health centres or specialist child and adolescent mental health services.
- Other specialists who work with children and adolescents such as paediatricians and child psychologists may also be able to provide help.

If you would like more information about mental health and services contact:

NSW Association for Mental Health, Mental Health Information Service

Monday to Friday, 12.30pm - 4.30pm

Phone: (02) 9816 5688

Rural areas: 1800 674 200

When adolescents and young people recognise they have a problem it is the first step towards getting better. However, few adolescents will seek help on their own. They need support and encouragement from concerned adults and their friends. If a situation seems like it is serious seek help promptly. Sometimes this may mean breaking a confidence but it may be necessary to save a young person's life.