Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Childhood depression

All kids feel sad sometimes, but for some, clinical depression can be a daily struggle. About 20 per cent of kids will suffer at least one severe episode of depression before they reach adulthood.



Defining Depression

Depression is defined as an extended period of inappropriate sadness or hopelessness. Sadness is expected after the death of a pet or loved one. But if a pet dies and the child is still crying every day a month later, he or she could be suffering from depression. Early detection is the key and can help kids avoid serious repercussions down the road.

If two or more of the symptoms below last longer than two weeks, your child could be suffering from depression.

Signs of Depression

- Irritable mood
- Anger or rage
- Continuous sadness/feelings of hopelessness
- Low motivation or energy
- Decreased interest in regular activities
- Withdrawal from peers and friends
- Changes in eating and/or sleeping patterns
- Frequent physical complaints such as headaches and stomach aches
- Poor self esteem
- Feelings of guilt and worthlessness
- Thoughts of death or suicide

Why is This Happening?

If you've suffered from depression, there is an increased likelihood your children will too. This doesn't mean your child is destined for the same fate. Sometimes it's just luck of the draw.

Biology. Children and especially adolescents have bodies that are performing small miracles of growth and change every day. This can often have physiological effects on a growing brain. Chemical imbalances can contribute to depression.

Environment. Your child's surroundings play an important role in development. An unhappy home can breed unhappy children. Bullying, death or marital breakdowns often bring on depression.

Other external variables can include problems with television, cigarettes, food, drugs and alcohol. An addiction to any or all of these increases the risk for depression disorders.

Deterring Depression

While often rooted in genetics, there are steps you can take to discourage childhood depression from arising.

- **Stay connected.** Take note of your child's behaviour and moods. If they are unusually irritable or sullen, ask questions to determine if their response is appropriate.
- **Listen without judging or giving advice.** Sometimes kids just want to be heard, not told what to do or how to fix a problem. Reserving judgment on small matters makes you more approachable when your child needs help with a big issue.
- **Provide a safe, loving environment.** The outside world impacts all that happens in a child's mind. Conflicts between parents or siblings can add to a child's stress level. Avoid arguing in front of children. Kids tend to see themselves as the root of these conflicts. This can wreak havoc on their self-esteem. Monitor sibling arguments to ensure problems get resolved fairly and without threats or bullying.
- **Engage in daily physical activity.** Regular exercise can actually be as effective as medication in treating mild forms of depression. And it's no coincidence that as childhood obesity rates rise, so too does childhood depression. Encourage your kids to engage in at least 30 minutes of daily outdoor play and limit TV and computer time.

Getting Help

If you think your child is suffering from depression seek help immediately. Early detection can minimize impact and reduce recurrence rates. For the majority of childhood depression sufferers, therapy and counselling are the most effective treatments. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is the most popular form and involves getting the child to "think differently" and undo negative thought patterns. Interpersonal Therapy (IPT) is also used to treat depression and consists of working through problematic personal relationships, usually with family members.

Medication is sometimes and option but is usually most effective when combined with therapy and/or counselling. While depression often comes back, recurrences are usually less severe and last for shorter periods if therapy and counselling give children the tools they need to minimize the impact of depression.

Don't forget to get help yourself. Talk with other parents and seek support if your child is diagnosed with depression. You are not alone. Join a support group or contact a professional to get the assistance you need to cope during this challenging time.

Depression is a growing reality and can take its toll on our children's emotional health and well being. As a parent, you're the first line of defense. Arming yourself with knowledge so you can quickly spot signs of trouble is one of the best ways to deal with childhood depression.
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