

# When a parent or caregiver is depressed

## *How to talk to kids*

KIDS HAVE A LOT OF QUESTIONS WHEN someone in their family is sick. When the problem is depression, it often becomes a secret that nobody talks about. When children don't have answers to their questions, they may turn to social media or peers and access information that could be incorrect or scary.

This pamphlet prepares you to talk about depression with the child in your life. It lists common questions children have about depression, as well as suggestions for how you can answer them.

Every family's "beginning conversation" about depression will be different depending on the child's age and ability to manage the information. You know your child best.

## Questions about depression

Use these notes to help respond to your child's questions.

### What is depression?

- Give the child clear facts about depression:
  - Depression is an illness that affects how a person feels, thinks and acts.
  - Our brains help us to think, feel and act in certain ways. So when someone is depressed, they think, feel and act differently from how they do when they're well.
  - Depression is not a weakness, nor is it simply sadness. It is a medical illness, just like asthma or diabetes.
  - Many people have depression at some point in their lives, even though people don't always talk about it.

### Why does my parent or caregiver act the way they do?

- Listen to the child's concerns and provide information about depression:
  - Depression causes a person to act in ways that are different from how they usually act.
  - It can be very hard to live with a parent or caregiver who is depressed because they may do or say things that make their children feel bad or confused.
  - Depression can cause the person to be impatient or more irritable. They may also get angrier than is usual for them or feel sad and cry a lot.
- If you are the parent or caregiver experiencing depression, you can remind the child of how you feel about them even if you are acting differently some days.
- Reassure the child:
  - The behaviour is not their fault and they do not deserve to be treated badly.
  - Once the depression lifts, the parent or caregiver will often act more like themselves again.

### How does it feel to be depressed?

- Depression can affect people in many different ways.
- You can give the child specific information about your or their parent or caregiver's symptoms, or use these examples:

- A person with depression may get tired more easily and spend a lot of time in bed.
- Sometimes people who are depressed have trouble concentrating or putting their thoughts together.
- People with depression may worry a lot more than they usually do, or they may have a negative attitude about life or themselves.
- Some people with depression get body aches and pains, stomach upset or headaches. They also may feel more or less hungry than usual.

### What causes depression?

- Explain to the child:
  - Nothing they did caused their parent or caregiver's depression.
  - Sometimes the causes are not known. What causes depression in one person can be different from what causes it in another.
  - In some cases, symptoms can appear suddenly for no known reason. In other cases, the symptoms seem to come after a crisis, stress or illness.

### Will the depression ever go away?

- Depression is very treatable—75 to 85 per cent of adults treated for depression get better.
- Sometimes the depression comes back, but it can be treated again.
- Some people may have depression their whole lives. Through support from family, their community or treatment, they can live full, meaningful lives.

### How can my parent or caregiver get better?

- Many treatments are available for depression:
  - Medicine helps to make the chemicals in the brain work better, and that can help the person think, feel and behave more like themselves.
  - A person can talk with a therapist about what they are experiencing. The therapy helps them learn new ways to cope, and to think, feel and behave in ways that keep them healthy.
- Some people may find other things that work for them, such as light therapy, exercise, meditation or wellness practices specific to their culture.
- Many people combine different aspects of treatment to find what works best for them.

### **Is there anything I can do to make my parent or caregiver better?**

- Remind the child:
  - Adults are the ones responsible for helping the child's parent or caregiver get better.
  - Doctors and therapists are responsible for helping the person get better, and other adults like family members and friends can provide emotional support.
  - The child can show they care in ways that are age-appropriate (e.g., making a card, telling the parent or caregiver they care, calling if the parent or caregiver is away from home).

### **How can I make sure I don't get depression?**

- Reassure the child:
  - Although depression is an illness, it is not contagious like a cold.
  - Depression may be more likely for people who are related to someone with depression, but not everyone with a family member who is depressed will get depression.
  - Learning how to deal with stress and live a balanced life can help them stay mentally healthy.

### **What can I do if I start to feel really upset?**

- Some children who have a parent or caregiver with depression don't talk about the times when they're feeling angry, sad, scared or confused. They think that maybe their parent or caregiver or other adults don't want to hear about those feelings. Remind the child that they are not alone:
  - You want to hear how they are feeling and care about how they are doing.
  - It's healthy to let parents, caregivers or other adults in their life know what they're going through.
  - By opening up to parents or caregivers and other adults who care, children can get the help they need to feel better and solve problems in their lives.
- Encourage the child:
  - Participating in sports, hobbies and other activities with healthy adults and children can help the child feel less alone.
  - Another way to feel better is to keep up with activities that make them feel happy, have fun and feel good about themselves.

### **Questions about self-harm**

Once you start a conversation about depression, it is difficult to know exactly what children might ask. "Spin-off" questions (e.g., Why is my mom in the hospital? When will she come home?) might be something you are able to manage, but the topics of suicide and self-harm can be harder to handle. Use these notes to help you talk about them with a child.

### **What should I do if my parent or caregiver wants to hurt themselves?**

- Reassure the child and help them prepare:
  - They are not responsible in this situation. Instead, they need to call 9-1-1, a suicide crisis helpline like 9-8-8 or a trusted adult.
  - Offer to create a safety plan with the child (e.g., phone numbers they can call, an adult to contact, what to do in an emergency). You can use the template from Kids Help Phone (see "Other resources") if you need a starting point.

### **Will my parent or caregiver die from depression?**

- Tell the child:
  - Depression does not cause the body to stop working like a heart attack might.
  - There are times when a parent or caregiver might feel so bad that they say things like "I want to die." Often they don't actually want to die, but still, it can be a scary thing for a child to hear.
  - Some people with depression do try to hurt themselves when they think and feel this way.
  - Suicide is a risk with depression, but many people with depression do not have suicidal thoughts, and some people never want to hurt themselves.
- Explain specific things that the child's parent or caregiver with depression is doing to prevent them from hurting themselves, such as:
  - going to treatment
  - taking medication
  - going to the hospital
  - creating a safety plan
  - having other adults there to support.

## Need someone to talk to?

### Canada's 9-8-8: Suicide Crisis Helpline

Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling or texting 9-8-8 anywhere in Canada.

[988.ca](http://988.ca)

## Other resources

### Kids Help Phone

#### "My Fill-in-the-Blanks Safety Plan"

Visit [kidshelpphone.ca](http://kidshelpphone.ca)

### ***Can I Catch It Like a Cold? Coping with a Parent's Depression***

This book, in story format, answers questions about depression and is an ideal starting point to discuss the disorder. You can order copies through our online store or pick up copies in the RBC Patient and Family Learning Space (see column on the right).

### More information about depression for children and families

- Speak to your family doctor.
- Call the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health at 416 535-8501 (select 2).
- Visit the CAMH Family Resource Centre (see column on the right).

For more information on addiction and mental health issues, or to download a copy of this pamphlet, visit our website:

[www.camh.ca](http://www.camh.ca)

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If you have questions or feedback about services at CAMH, contact the Patient and Family Experience (PFE) Office: 416 535-8501, ext. 32028; [pfe@camh.ca](mailto:pfe@camh.ca)

Family members can access the Family Resource Centre (FRC) and the RBC Patient and Family Learning Space (PFLS) for support, resources and help connecting to services.

1025 Queen St. W. (McCain Complex Care and Recovery Building)

FRC: 416 535-8501, ext. 32028; [pfe@camh.ca](mailto:pfe@camh.ca)

PFLS: 416 535-8501, ext. 33995; [pfls@camh.ca](mailto:pfls@camh.ca); [www.camh.ca/pfls](http://www.camh.ca/pfls)

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