

# Parenting through Tough Times: Coping with Depression



*"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. But if you are unable to shake your sadness, you may be suffering from depression. **Depression** is an illness that is very painful to live with. 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 talk about depression and yet it is one of the most common mental illnesses that caregivers, especially parents, experience. In fact, one out of five Americans will be affected by depression during their lives.*

*The hopeful news is that treatment for depression works. More than 70 percent of those who get treatment 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.
- **Reach out** to a counselor, 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 treatment.** There are many types of treatment, including talk therapy, changes in diet, paying attention to other medical problems (such as diabetes) that can put you at risk for depression, and medication. Talk to your doctor and reach out to your friends and family to find community resources that will work for you.
- **Know that change takes time.** Choose a professional and an approach to treatment that feels right to you. And stick with it. If you are not satisfied, discuss other options with your doctor or other mental health practitioner.
- **Believe in yourself.** Remember that it is possible to have depression and still be a good parent.

### HOW DO I KNOW IF WHAT I FEEL IS DEPRESSION?

Here are some common signs that you may see 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."

#### Behaviors:

- **Forgetting** appointments, details, or followup tasks.
- **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 weight gain or loss of more than 10 pounds.
- **Risky behaviors**, including drug or alcohol use, as a way to numb out sorrow or pain.
- **Isolation:** 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 Head Start.
- **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 nice clothes, do your hair, or put on make-up. →



- **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.

**Different 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:** negativity, forgetting positive qualities, low self-esteem, or “getting stuck.” Other symptoms include harsh self-criticism, feelings of worthlessness, and thoughts like “No one likes me. Maybe they are talking about me, criticizing me, or laughing at me. They think I am a bad person/mother/father.” *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 to an emergency room immediately.*

#### CAN MY DEPRESSION AFFECT MY CHILDREN?

**Children are sensitive to their parents’ moods and behaviors.**

Many children grow up healthy and strong despite the fact that a parent 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 there are reasons to be hopeful because parents can be effective despite depression.

#### 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. Be ready to talk about it more than once. It often takes time for families and children to understand this sensitive subject.
- **Provide a safe and secure environment for your child.** Routines and guidance help children feel safe.
- **Build your child’s self-esteem** through praise and encouragement.
- **Consistency is important.** Make sure your child attends school every day and enroll him or her in quality after-school activities.
- **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. And find out more about the resources available to you through Head Start.

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**For more support on this topic please see the following Family Connections materials:**

#### Short Papers:

*The Ability to Cope: Building resilience in yourself and your child*  
*Self Reflection in Parenting: Help for getting through stressful times*

#### Additional Resources:

American Psychological Association and Discovery Channel. “The Road to Resilience.” American Psychological Association. <http://www.apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/feature.php?id=6> (accessed March 26, 2008).

Beardslee, William. *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*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002.

*Parenting Through Tough Times: Coping with depression* was developed by the Family Connections Project at Children’s Hospital Boston, under the Innovation and Improvement Project grant from the Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Authors of *Parenting Through Tough Times: Coping with depression* are William R. Beardslee, Mary Watson Avery, Catherine C. Ayoub, Caroline L. Watts, and Kristin Stephenson. Copyright Children’s Hospital Boston, January 2008.

