

# when a parent is depressed...

# what kids want to know



CHILDREN HAVE A LOTS 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 tend to come up with their own, which can be incorrect and scary!

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

This pamphlet will help prepare you (whether you are the well parent, the parent with depression, a grandparent or another adult in the child's life) to take the first step. If you have already started talking to a child about depression, this pamphlet will give you more information to keep the conversation going. It lists common questions children have about their parent's depression, as well as suggestions for how to answer their questions.

## Questions kids have

### What is depression? How does depression work?

- Depression is a disorder that affects how a person feels, thinks and acts.
- When people are depressed, their brain works differently from when they don't have depression. Our brains help us to think, feel and act in certain ways. So when people are depressed, they think, feel and act differently from how they do when they're well.
- Depression is not a weakness.
- Depression is a fairly common disorder, even though people don't always talk about it.

### Why does my dad act the way he does? How does it feel to be depressed? What goes on in my mom's head when she's not herself?

- Depression causes people to act in ways that are different from how they act normally.
- It can be very hard living with a parent who is depressed because that person may do or say things that make children feel bad or confused.
- Most children notice that a parent who is depressed is not as available to do things with them, like playing, talking or driving them places.
- Depression causes many people to be impatient, to be more irritable and to get angrier than normal. It can also cause someone to feel sad and cry a lot. These reactions from a parent can be very hard on children.
- 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.

- People with depression may worry a lot more than normal.
- Sometimes people who are depressed have a negative attitude about life, or have low self-confidence.
- Depression can affect people in many different ways. (\*This would be an opportunity for the parent to discuss his or her own symptoms with the child.)
- As the depression lifts, the person slowly starts acting more like him- or herself again.

### What causes depression? How does it start?

- Depression is a disorder, much like diabetes or high blood pressure (hypertension).
- There are many possible causes of depression. Sometimes the causes are not always 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 life crisis, stress or other illness.
- It's unclear why, but some people become depressed more easily than others.
- The child is not the cause of the parent's depression.

### Will the depression ever be fixed?

- The good news is that depression is very treatable. 75 to 85 per cent of adults treated for depression get better.
- Sometimes the depression comes back, and it can be treated again.

### How can my mom or dad get better?

- Many different treatments are available, including medicine and talk therapy.
- Medicine helps to make the chemicals in the brain work better, and that can help the person who is depressed think, feel and behave more normally.
- Talk therapy gets people who are depressed to 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 more positive ways.

### Is there anything I can do to make my mom or dad better?

- Support from family is really important to people with depression, but it is the adults (e.g., doctors and therapists) who are responsible for treating depression, not the kids.
- Even though you can't fix the depression, sometimes just knowing what your parent is going through, and understanding that he or she has a disorder and will get better, can help your parent.

### Will it happen to me? Will I get it too?

- No one can ever know for sure if they will get depression at some point in their lives.
- It's natural to worry about this. Just like other illnesses (e.g., arthritis or diabetes), having depression in your family might put you at an increased risk, but then again, it might not. We don't really know. It's more important to focus on what you can do to help yourself deal with stress and lead a balanced life.

### Is there anything I can do so that I don't get depression?

- One of the most important things that kids can do to protect against getting depressed is to be open about how they're feeling. It's healthy to let parents or other grown-ups in their life know what they're going through.
- By opening up to parents and other grown-ups who care, kids can get the help they need to feel better and solve problems in their lives.
- Some kids who have a parent with depression don't always talk about the times when they're feeling angry, sad, scared or confused. They think that maybe their parents or other grown-ups don't want to hear about those feelings. But that's just not true!
- Participating in sports, hobbies and other activities with healthy grown-ups and kids is important because it helps to have fun and feel good about yourself.

### Can parents give it to other people? Is it like a cold? Can you catch depression?

- No. Depression isn't like a cold. There's no germ. It's not contagious. There is no way of catching it. So you could hang out with someone who is depressed without ever having to worry about catching it.



## Questions about self-harm

These questions touch on the major issues of interest to children. However, children can ask many different questions about family situations. Once a conversation starts, it is difficult to know exactly what children might ask. Most parents are able to manage “spin-off” questions (e.g., Why is Mom in the hospital? When will she come home?). The topic of suicide is harder to handle.

Many people with depression do not have suicidal thoughts. This is why we do not include this material in question-and-answer format. If questions arise around suicide or a parent self-harming, here are some ideas on how to share information with children.

When children hear that someone is ill, they naturally wonder if the person might die. Children sometimes ask if depression can kill a person. While suicide is a risk with depression, it is only one of the many symptoms a person might have. Children should understand that depression does not cause the body to stop working, like a heart attack might, so no, it doesn't kill people. But there are times when people with depression might feel so bad that they say things like, “I want to die.” This can be a scary thing for a child to hear. And, once in a while, some people with depression do try to hurt or kill themselves when they think and feel this way.

## If discussing this issue with children, it is important to reassure them that:

- The parent has never wanted to hurt or kill him- or herself. (Say this only if it's true.)
- If the parent were feeling so bad that he or she wanted to die, a doctor, therapist or other adult would help the parent to stop feeling that way.

## Need more help?

If you want more information about depression and how it affects children and families, speak to your family doctor or call the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health at 1 800 661-1111 or 416 595-6059 in Toronto.

## Also available from CAMH:



*Can I Catch It Like A Cold? A story to help children understand a parent's depression*

This engaging, educational resource answers the key questions children have about depression and is an ideal starting point to discuss the disorder.

Published 2009 • 32 pages • \$19.95  
ISBN 978-0-88776-956-6  
P5556



*Depressive Illness: A guide for people with depressive illness and their families*

Written for people living with depression and for their families, this resource provides key information about the disorder and its treatment.

Published 1999 • 48 pages • \$4.95  
ISBN 978-1-77052-540-5  
PM005

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