

# Depression in Youth: Youth Edition

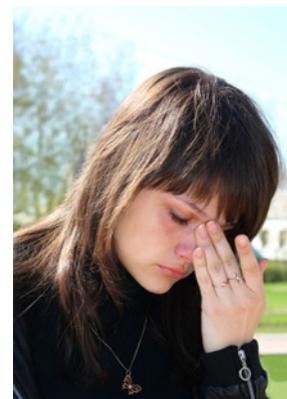


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**Summary:** Depression is a medical condition that can make you feel so sad, that you have troubles functioning. It can get so bad, that you feel that life isn't worth living. The good news, is that depression can get better. With support from family and friends, or with help from doctors, depression can get better. If you think you are depressed, start by telling a trusted adult, such as a parent, relative, or teacher. If there is no adult to talk to, then contact a HelpLine (such as KidsHelpLine) in your area.

## Amanda's story

When I was 15 years old, my parents split up, and I stayed with my mom. She had to work longer hours, so I had to take on more responsibilities at home. When I got home each day, I'd have so much stuff to do, that it became hard to keep up with school, homework, and my friends. I felt completely overwhelmed and was literally getting sick from all the stress I was under. I couldn't eat and I couldn't sleep. I felt like my life was unraveling.

My mom was having a hard time with the separation, and was working a lot. I didn't see my dad much. I started to turn more to my friends and my boyfriend. This helped for a while-my friends listened to me and made me feel good. But after a while, I started feeling really sad and overwhelmed again. I started drinking more, and using drugs-I didn't feel so sad when I was high. But my life was not getting any better-my grades were dropping and I wasn't very interested in school anymore. Soon nothing made me feel better.

Things really started to fall apart when my boyfriend broke up with me. He posted some really mean things online about me, things that weren't true. I think my friends believed him, though, because they stopped wanting to be around me.

I felt so alone. I felt like nobody cared about me. I started thinking about ways to end my life. But then I saw a picture of myself with my parents, when I was younger. I remembered how happy I used to be. I decided to give my mom a chance, so I told her what was happening and how I was feeling...

## What is depression?

It is normal to feel sad from time to time. But this sadness shouldn't stop you from going on with your everyday activities. And it goes away on its own. Depression, on the other hand, is a sadness so severe that it interferes with everyday life. Youth going through a depression often:

- Feel sad, worried, irritable or angry

- Have trouble enjoying anything
- Feel hopeless and worthless
- Have trouble coping with everyday activities at home, school, or work
- Have trouble doing simple things, like having a shower or brushing teeth
- Have problems with sleep, energy, appetite and concentration

With severe depression, youth may even hear voices, or have thoughts of harming themselves or others.

Depression is more than normal sadness. A depressed person can't 'just snap out of it'. Studies even show physical changes in people's brain chemistry when they are depressed.

## 5 quick facts about depression

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1. You can recover from depression.
2. It's really common.
3. It can happen to anyone.
4. It can change the way you think, feel and act.
5. There are lots of effective treatments for it.

## How common is depression?

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Depression is common. Researchers believe that about 1 in 5 people will go through a depression by the time they turn 18.

Studies also tell us that at any one moment, between 4 and 8 out of every 100 children and youth are having a major depression. Sadly, most people with depression do not get help. But getting help is important, because there are effective treatments for depression. Early treatment can stop depression from coming back in the future.

## What causes depression?

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Depression is usually caused by a few things going on at the same time:

**Family history:** If your parents or other family members have had depression or other emotional problems, there is a bigger chance that you may have depression.

**Stress:** Upsetting things in your life, like:

- Problems with parents, brothers and sisters;
- Your parents are really stressed or depressed;
- Your parents are separating or getting divorced;
- Being bullied;
- Problems with friends or classmates;
- Not doing well in school or feeling too much pressure to do well in school;
- Someone close to you dies.

## What should I do if I think I'm depressed?

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If you had a broken arm and were in pain, you'd go to a doctor, right? Instead of causing pain on the outside, depression causes pain on the inside. But you still need to get help for this pain. Start by talking to your parents, or an adult you trust. You can also talk to friends for support.

Parents or a trusted adult can help you see a doctor. Let the doctor know how you're feeling. She can check for medical

problems that might be causing the depression. The doctor may suggest mental health services, and can help you link with psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers or counsellors.

If you are thinking about hurting yourself, tell a trusted adult. If there is no adult that you feel you can call, then contact a crisis line.

## Depression treatments at a glance...

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Many different treatments are available for depression. They can be used alone or together, depending on you. Some treatments work well with some youth, but not with others. If a treatment isn't working (after giving it a good try, of course), your mental health professional may talk with you about trying something else. Try not to stress if something doesn't work, you will find something that helps.

### 1. "Talk Therapy" or Psychotherapy

There are different types of talk therapy, including:

- Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT): Helps change the negative, depressive thoughts and behaviours that contribute to depression, and replaces them with more helpful thoughts and behaviours.
- Interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT): Helps resolve tension and conflict that can contribute to depression.
- Solution-focused therapy: Focuses on your strengths. It helps you to focus on what you would like to change in your future, and what you can do to 'get there'.

### 2. Medications (antidepressants):

- Are tools that doctors and psychiatrists can use to help ease depression
- Adjust brain chemicals to improve your mood and let you feel a little happier
- Can make it easier for you to take part in talk therapy
- Are not needed by everyone who has depression

### Something to Think About!

If you had asthma, would you think it would be better to 'get over it' without treatment?

Are antidepressants safe? Some people are worried about the safety of antidepressants for youth. Research shows that when used in the right way, and monitored by a doctor, antidepressants are safe and effective. Like prescription eye-glasses, medications must be chosen and adjusted for each child or teen.

While some people have strong views about medications for depression – a balanced look at antidepressant treatment is the most helpful. Medications are not all bad, but they are not needed all the time, either.

### 3. Outpatient and Inpatient Services

Youth with depression are usually treated in 'outpatient' clinics or community mental health centres. If the depression is severe, you may need more intensive support from a day/ evening program or by staying in hospital.

## Healthy living makes a difference!

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Taking care of the basics can go a long way to helping you feel better. A healthy body supports a healthy mind. Try to:

- Get enough sleep. Poor sleep can cause lower mood and energy levels.
- Eat well. Do your best to eat lots of fruit and veggies. Some research studies suggest that a lack of Omega 3 fatty acids can make depression worse.
- Exercise. You need about an hour a day of physical activity, and it's best to exercise outside in the sun. Aerobic exercise (exercise that

increases the heart rate and breathing) can have an anti-depressant effect.

- See the light! Lack of sunlight (or vitamin D) can trigger depression in some people who are sensitive to 'seasonal depression'.
- Stay away from street drugs and alcohol. While getting high can sometimes make you feel better at first, it might cause more problems and can make things worse after a while.

## Getting support from your parents

Your parents are probably the people who can give you the most support. For most youth, parents are the ones who'll be there for them when no one else is. Sometimes though, parents who are struggling with their own difficulties can't give their kids needed support. If this is your situation, you'll need to reach out to other adults in your life—a grandparent, aunt, uncle, teacher, coach or counsellor.

## If you're having conflict with your parents

Most youth have conflicts and disagreements with their parents at one time or another. But if this is happening all the time, then it's time to try to work on things. Conflicts often arise over things like your parents' expectations about school, chores or house rules (like curfews).

The fact that your parents have expectations for you is actually a good thing (although you might disagree about what the expectations should be). It means that your parents care about you. But conflict and arguments are no fun for anyone. But there are ways to make it easier to talk with your parents and resolve conflicts.

## How to talk with your parents

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**Invest in a little time together.** Try to spend some one on one time with one of your parents. Maybe start with the parent you feel closest to. Invite your parent to do something with you—a walk, shopping, a movie, a game of cards, cooking or tossing a frisbee around. Parents love it when you show that you want to spend some time with them. This positive time together gives you a chance to strengthen your relationship, and you may feel more comfortable sharing what's on your mind.

*"Mom, I've been really stressed out lately. Could we find some time to talk about it? Maybe go for a coffee tonight?"*

**Pick a good time to talk.** Think about the best time to approach your parents. When they are tired or grumpy after work may not be the best time.

**Think about your parents' point of view.** You don't have to agree, but it helps to understand 'where they're coming from'.

**Tell parents how they can support you.** Most parents really do care and want to help. But they may not always know what to do, and they can't read your mind. You have to tell them.

*"Dad, I know you're really trying to help, but when I tell you how I'm feeling—I just need you to listen. When you jump in with advice, I feel like you don't really understand the way I feel. It helps me to just get things off my chest. Then, if I need advice, I can let you know."*

**Use "I messages".** Using "I-messages" is the best way to get your points across, and can prevent the other person from reacting defensively.

So what are "I-messages"?

"I" messages are ways of expressing yourself, beginning with "I". They are a respectful way to get your point across, without threatening others.

- "I think..."
- "I'd like..."
- "I feel..."
- "I need..."
- "I believe..."

## What's stressing you?

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We all carry our worries and stresses with us in a kind of backpack. When it gets too full, it's heavy and it weighs us down. It makes us feel sad, depressed, anxious, angry, irritable or overwhelmed. Think about the stresses you're carrying around with you.

### Lightening your load

You can unpack some of the stresses and worries in your backpack by taking a problem solving approach. It can really help to talk with a parent or another adult you trust about this. Talk about a situation that is bothering you, and try to come up with ways to improve things. Remember that solutions don't always work out at first. And you may need to try a few different things to make things better.

For example, if you're having trouble in school, you could:

- Talk with your mom about it
- Together, come up with ideas that might make things better (Get help after school? Talk with your teacher about extra time for that assignment? Maybe cut back on activities that are causing the most stress? Explore different ways to manage your time? Cut down on some things until you're caught up? Change your courses?)

If you've been having a lot of conflict with one parent:

- Talk with your other parent (if you can't, talk with another adult you trust). Say something like, "Something's really bothering me, and I need some help with it."
- Try talking with the parent you're having trouble with. Remember to use 'I messages'. It can help to start off by saying something positive like, "I remember when we used to be able to have fun together-I really miss that. I feel sad because it seems to me that you're always criticizing me. It makes me feel that I can't do anything right."

Remember! Problems in a family aren't just for you to solve. And there are some problems that you shouldn't try to solve on your own. Family violence, sexual abuse or drug and alcohol abuse by parents are situations where you'll need the help and support of professionals (see the resource list at the end of this fact sheet).

## Getting better: advice from youth who've been there

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Youth who have experienced depression wanted to share their experiences to help you! Here are some things that they want you to remember...

- Don't underestimate your parents. They can be a great source of help and support.
- Talking to friends can also help, try to open up to people you trust.
- If you don't have anyone you feel you can talk to right now, try to connect with other youth who would understand-like at YouthNet! [www.youthnet.on.ca](http://www.youthnet.on.ca). Check the 'Support' section on the last page of this fact sheet.
- Depression can feel different for everyone. Youth don't all have the same symptoms or react to treatments the same way. What works for some people may not work for others. And that's OK.
- Everyone goes through rough spots, and it's really important to get help if you're struggling.
- Taking a walk, or getting some exercise can make a big difference.
- Expressing yourself through art, music or writing can help you feel better.
- Yoga and meditation are great ways to relax and focus.
- Create a 'chill out space' where you can go to relax and calm yourself. Make it a comfortable place that stimulates your senses: soft pillows, nice smells, music, play dough to keep your hands busy, gum to chew.

## How to help a friend who is going through depression

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Depression might make your friend seem 'different'. Your friend might seem really sad, or even angry. Depression can sometimes cause people to be really critical of themselves and others. Try to cut your friend some slack. You can help by...

- Just being there, hanging out and doing everyday things.
- Asking if they are OK, letting them know you care.
- Listening when they want to talk.
- Looking for help from a trusted adult if your friend isn't getting help yet.
- Remembering that you're a friend, not a therapist. Your friend needs the right kind of help for depression, and needs to connect with professionals for that.
- Telling a trusted adult if your friend shares thoughts of suicide. Don't keep this private, even if your friend asks you to. Sometimes you have to 'tell' to be a good friend. Think more about saving your friend than saving the friendship. If friends have thoughts of suicide, they need to talk to someone right away.

## Amanda's story part 2...

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...My mom was so worried. She felt bad that she'd been so upset with the stuff with my dad, that she didn't realize how hard things were for me. She brought me to see our family doctor. I talked with the doctor for a while. She helped me to feel a little better, and we made a plan to keep me safe. She talked with my mom too. She arranged for me to see a counsellor every week. My mom started seeing a counsellor too. I learned a lot about resources to help people in my situation.

Soon, my life began getting better. I stopped using drugs, and really cut down on my drinking. I joined the drama club after school, and started making new friends. My mom and I worked out times to be together. Even if we couldn't be together for dinner, we tried to sit down with a cup of tea to talk about our day. We took walks together and cooked together on the weekend. I talked to my dad about how I needed to see him more, and we're working on that too.

I've also found some hobbies that give me the time I need to concentrate on myself. Painting, reading and drawing help me escape and help me handle my stresses. They are very important parts of my week.

Now I know that I have depression. I didn't know that it could happen to a 15 year old girl, like me. But I'm so much better, because I know what I have and I've learned how to control it without getting high to self medicate.

## About this Document

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Written by Michel Poirier (social worker) and the Mental Health Information Team at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO).

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## Disclaimer

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