

Parent *pages*

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Depression: When it's more than sadness



If your child suffers from depression, remember that the burden for healing your child does not rest with you. Even through medicine and therapy, it is God who brings healing. Depression in your family should not be a source of shame. God loves you and your child.

“THE LORD IS NEAR THE BROKENHEARTED AND SAVES THE CRUSHED IN SPIRIT.” (PS. 34:18)

Some children rarely shed a tear, and others find a crisis around every corner. Sadness, frustration and disappointment are a part of every healthy childhood. As parents, we model for our children how to sense sadness in another person, how to provide comfort and how to cope. As a part of growing up, we learn to discern the trivial from the tragic and how to give glory to God through all of it.

Sometimes the sadness extends beyond what is expected. Sometimes the sadness is not so much a reaction to an event but an underlying presence. Sometimes sadness becomes a sense of hopelessness that may be a sign of depression.

Depression is an illness when sad feelings persist, regardless of life experience, and begin to interfere with the ability to function. Feelings flatten and activities that used to bring joy no longer do. Irritability or anger may be the only strong emotions. Other symptoms include low energy, rocky relationships, physical complaints and poor school performance.

In some cases, there will be talk of running away or even suicide. Any mention of suicide should be taken seriously; seek immediate help. (See the hotline link at the end of this article.)

It is hard to believe that children can suffer from depression, but statistics show that up to 20 percent of adolescents and 2 percent of younger children experience depression. Girls are twice as likely to suffer depression as boys. For many children, depression is short-lived, but for some it is chronic. Depression has a strong association with obesity, bulimia, peer victimization and substance abuse. If there is reason to think your child suffers from depression, it is wise to seek help early. Your child's pediatrician or family practice doctor has screening tools that will evaluate the situation.

The cause for depression is difficult to pinpoint. It is not unusual for an event such as divorce, transition to a new school, loss of friendship or a failure to precede the onset of depression. Still, not all children will develop depression from a major life event. Depression has a strong connection to heredity, suggesting some children have a genetic predisposition.

Personality issues also are associated with depression. Children who are perfectionists, passive, dependent or mull over events are at higher risk. However, even the most easy-going personality can fall victim to childhood depression in the face of an extreme life event.

Depression interferes with the ability to function in many different ways. Sleeping and eating habits are affected, which only contribute to the problem when a child either under-eats or over-eats, sleeps too much or can't fall asleep. This contributes to a loss of energy and frequent complaints of head and stomach pain.

A reduced ability to concentrate negatively affects school performance. The results of these changes in behavior contribute to sadness and encourage the sense of hopelessness that pervades depression. While some children seem to cope, intervention is needed to stop the symptoms of depression from feeding into the depression itself.

Children have natural stages to their physical, emotional and cognitive development. A child in a growth spurt will eat and sleep more; a child learning to discern good from unhealthy friendships will be irritable and sad during that learning time. These phases are a natural consequence of the amazing growth and development that God has planned for your child. These symptoms are normal, unless they persist or become more extreme than what you would expect from the child you know so well.

If you find yourself unusually worried about behavior that seems to persist, or you are unable to find a solution that helps your child to get past this phase, then it is wise to seek advice from an expert. Confer with your child's teacher or youth leader to see if he or she has noticed the same behaviors. While you know your child better than anyone, other adults who regularly see your child have expertise on what is normal behavior for children your child's age.

While some children require medicine to restore a chemical balance to the brain, most children will respond to therapy. A therapist can help children develop



healthy coping strategies for dealing with change and disappointment, and to learn to analyze their feelings in light of the events that caused them. These life skills are valuable long past the need to treat depression. Don't be surprised if the therapist recommends family counseling. Children do not grow, change and learn in a vacuum.

Whenever possible, seek help from a therapist who shares your values. Ask your pastor to recommend someone. If the first therapist you encounter is not effective, seek a second opinion. However, it is important to approach this with an open mind and a willingness to change. There is a difference between a change that is uncomfortable and one that goes against Godly principles. A visit with your pastor can give you perspective on the effectiveness of a therapist.

If your child suffers from depression, please remember that the burden for healing your child does not rest with you. Certainly God has given us many tools to help children in depression, but even through the medicine and therapy, it is God who brings healing. The presence of depression in your family should not be a source of shame. Depression is an illness that has symptoms

and treatments. God loves you and your child. It is His will to bring you and your family into His loving arms to and bless you with grace and healing.

“This God—his way is perfect; the word of the LORD proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him” (Ps. 18:30).

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For Discussion:

- ▶ Why does depression hold a stigma in our society?
- ▶ What resources are available in your community to help families dealing with depression?
- ▶ How can other Christians help a family struggling with depression?

For Further Study:

National directory for suicide hotlines:

- ▶ <http://suicidehotlines.com>