



When A Parent has Depression – What Children Want to Know

Children have a lot of questions when someone in their family is ill. When the problem is about depression, it often becomes a secret that nobody talks about. When children do not have answers to their questions, they tend to come up with their own, which may 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 information 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 information will give you details 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 children have

What is depression? How does depression work?

- Depression is an illness 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 are well.
- Depression is not a weakness.
- Depression is a common illness, 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 Mum's head when she is not herself?

- Depression causes people to act in ways that are different from how they act normally.
- It can be hard living with a parent who is depressed because that person may do or say things that make a child 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 to cope with.
- 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 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 an illness, much like diabetes or high blood pressure.
- 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 some cases, the symptoms seem to come after a life crisis, stress, or other illness.
- It is 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 Mum 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 like themselves.
- Talking therapy helps people who are depressed, they 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 more positive ways.

Is there anything I can do to make Mum or Dad better?

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

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 is 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 most 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 I don't get depression?

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

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

No. Depression is not like a cold. There is no germ. It is not contagious. There is no way of catching it. So, you can hang out with someone who is depressed without ever having to worry about catching it.

Questions about Self-harm

These questions touch on 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 can manage "spin-off" questions (e.g., Why is Mum in the hospital? When is Dad coming home?).

The topic of suicide is harder to handle

Many people with depression do not have suicidal thoughts. Therefore, this material is not included in the 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 that 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, occasionally, 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 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.

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