

**CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL BOSTON**  
**Department of Psychiatry**

**Depression Information Sheet for Families**

Depression is a mental illness that affects not only the depressed individual, but also the whole family. This information sheet has been developed to help your family understand the causes and symptoms of depression as well as the treatment options available.

**OVERVIEW**

**Depression a complex illness with many contributing factors.** There are many possible causes of depression including stress and biology. While all depressions have certain common features each person's situation is unique.

- Depression is a biological illness that may include a variety of types of trouble with the brain's chemical messengers. We know that these changes can occur because of stress and that this stress can be emotional, environmental or physical. There is a strong link between brain biology and the way we experience the world. Thus serious depressions are more than just being sad; most people generally can't just "get over it" right away.
- Depression has a genetic underpinning in many people, which means that it runs in certain families and that it can be, at times, associated with other illness including anxiety, behavioral and substance abuse disorders.
- There are two basic types of depression--one that has symptoms only on the down side (unipolar) and one that includes both ups and downs (bipolar).
- Depression may start in response to a serious or not so serious (to the outside observer) event or circumstance but then it appears to be self-sustaining. We do know that it is a product of stresses over time for many people and that this stress and the depression make people feel bad about themselves. This feeling is the source of the low self-esteem that is generally part of the depression.
- Depression is more common in adolescents and adults than in children and more common in women than men. Estimates are that about 1 in 5 teenagers will have a significant episode and lifetime estimates are that about one in every 4 women and one in every 6 men will be affected.
- Depression is a recurrent illness. Most people will have more than one episode in their lifetime and once you have been depressed it increases your vulnerability throughout life.
- **MOST IMPORTANTLY DEPRESSION IS A TREATABLE ILLNESS.** Nearly all depressed people get better with treatment. The earlier the treatment, the better.

## **PRESENTATION**

- The most common presentation in depression is a disturbance of mood. Depression may begin in different ways, but most often includes some type of unpleasant mood. This may be sadness, irritability, or anger, which can appear as hopelessness, severe boredom or decreased self-esteem.
- There are less common disturbances of mood in patients with Bipolar Disorder, that may present as an alternation between depressed symptoms and “high” symptoms--increased energy, sleeplessness, driven out of control behaviors compounded by poor judgment.
- These difficulties may be episodic or may be present around the clock but there is some continuity from day to day.
- The mood disturbance is almost always accompanied by symptoms of decreased performance at home and school and social isolation. In addition there may be the physical symptoms with impairment in sleep, energy and appetite and concentration. In some cases people may feel so bad that they become self-destructive.

## **THINKING**

- Depression alters the way that people think about the world and themselves.
- Negative thoughts and pessimism characterize depressed thinking. Depressed thinking means that people almost always see the world and themselves as a series of “half-empty glasses” rather than coming to an accurate perception of things as they are.
- Depressed thinking makes one believe that they are to blame for negative events.
- Depressed thinking makes people feel that they are powerless to change for the better.
- Depressed thinking makes people “forget” the positive events.
- Depressed thinking generally changes with treatment and when it does the depressed mood changes as well.

## **IMPACT ON FAMILY**

- Parents and children are not to blame for the depression.
- Children and adolescents exist in the context of a family. Therefore the depression will affect the entire family and the family must be involved in the treatment.
- Since depression has a genetic component, there is often more than one depressed individual in the family.

- Depression, like any serious illness disrupts family functioning.
- Family therapy and support will be very important to all family members and often can make a big difference in helping the depressed individual.
- Having an opportunity to tell “their family story” will help in managing the illness and in family functioning as a system.

### **TREATMENT**

- Depression is a highly treatable disease that is best approached with multiple treatment modalities. However not every approach is right for every person.
- Individual psychotherapy with the child/adolescent will focus upon identifying and resolving faulty, depressed thinking, difficulties in social relationships, and other problems of functioning.
- Family therapy and support are vital to the child’s progress.
- Medication is generally safe and can be helpful for severe depressions or depressions that fail to respond to psychotherapy.
  - At Children’s Hospital Boston, we generally try treatment with psychotherapy first and add medication only if a child is not responding to psychotherapy after a month.
  - For children with severe or suicidal depressions, we generally begin medication immediately.
  - Medications target specific symptoms that are tracked to see if a child improves. If a child does not improve, the medication will be changed or stopped.

### **PROGNOSIS**

- The majority of depressions will resolve over time on their own; however we can dramatically shorten the time course and lessen the child’s suffering with treatment.
- Over 2/3rds of patients respond to psychotherapy alone.
- About 1/2 of patients who need medication respond to medication.
- The majority of people will dramatically improve with treatment.

### **MORE INFORMATION**

- **eAACAP Resource Centers** (<http://www.aacap.org/cs/eaacap.resource.centers>)  
Developed by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, this center contains consumer-friendly definitions, answers to frequently asked questions, clinical

resources, expert videos, and abstracts from the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, *Scientific Proceedings* and *Facts for Families* relevant depression.