



HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH DEPRESSION IN THE FAMILY

Life can be very difficult for a child living with a sibling, parent or other relative who has depression. The ill person's behavior can be very disturbing or painful, requiring immediate attention from the family and throwing daily routines into disarray. Children deserve clear, age-appropriate explanations of their relative's problems. As they grow older they will need to feel free to ask questions, express their feelings and offer their own support.

YOUNGER CHILDREN

Younger children may not understand all of the subtleties of depression, but they are capable of understanding a great deal regarding its causes and nature. By expanding the child's understanding of the illness, you'll help both the child and the depressed person cope with the illness.

THINGS TO TELL THE CHILD:

- Depression is an illness that makes people feel and act differently than they normally do, just like other illnesses make people cough or have a fever. They might act differently, but they still love you—even if they can't always show it.
- Explain the symptoms of the illness, and how each is caused by depression—not the child.
- You can't catch depression from someone the way you catch a cold.
- People with depression sometimes have to take medicine and/or go to the hospital to get better.
- Depression can go away for a while and then come back.
- You are not responsible for the person's illness or behavior.
- It's OK to feel angry or resentful about the person's behavior and still love him or her.

It's important to make sure the child's emotional needs are met during the illness. Provide relief from the stress of living with someone with serious depression by planning activities outside the home or away from the depressed person. If the child seems to be having a particularly difficult time coping with the illness, don't hesitate to seek professional help from a mental health professional.

OLDER CHILDREN

As children grow older, they can absorb more information about their relative's depressive disorder. They need to know that even those who are severely depressed are aware of their family's concerns, even though they might not be able to express it. The child should know that when an episode ends, the relative will be able to understand and appreciate as he or she could before. It's important that children understand the difference between normal feelings of depression and a serious depressive disorder. Many children fear their own negative moods may be the beginning of an illness similar to their relative's; reassure them that while some feelings in life aren't pleasant, they are normal and not the same as clinical

depression. Children living with depression in their family have to face problems that other children know little about, and each child will react differently to events at home.

They may . . .

- allow their own needs to be ignored,
- have to make some unfair compromises,
- become hostile, angry or withdrawn,
- develop behavior problems at home or in school.
- Or become lonely or isolated from others their age.

In any situation where the illness in the family seems to have a seriously negative effect on the way in which the child grows or learns to cope with life, consider getting help from a mental health professional. Ask your physician or the school counselor for a referral.

REFERENCES,

For younger children:

He's My Brother, Joe Lasker, Albert Whitman & Co., 1974

For older children:

The Eden Express, Mark Vonnegut, Praeger Publications, 1975

Contact these organizations for additional information:

National Mental Health Association
1021 Prince Street,
Alexandria Va. 223214
(800) 969-NMHA or (703)684-7722

National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association
730 North Franklin, Ste 501
Chicago, Illinois 60610 (312)
642-0049

National Foundation for Depressive Illness
P.O. Box 2257
New York, N.Y. 10116-2257

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill
2101 Wilson Blvd, Se. 302
Arlington, Va. 22201
703) 524-7600

Depression Awareness, Recognition and Treatment Program
National Institute of Mental Health
5600 Fishers Lane, Room 14C-02
Rockville, Md. 20857
(301)443-4140

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
3615 Wisconsin Avenue, N. W.;
Washington, D. C. 20016 (202) 966-7300