

# UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION

## Caregiver: Get the Facts

What does it mean  
when a health care  
professional says  
“depression”?



Hearing a health care professional say your youth or young adult has depression can be confusing. The good news is that the emotions and behaviors you have been concerned about are actually symptoms of a treatable disorder. By engaging in treatment and entering recovery, people with depression can feel better and lead full, meaningful lives. Recovery does not necessarily mean a cure. It does mean that people are actively moving toward wellness.



Once we knew what it was,  
we were able to educate  
ourselves and work toward  
supporting him to live  
a happy, healthy life.

— Malisa, Parent



It is important to talk with a health care provider about treatment options and additional information. Your provider may be a child and adolescent psychiatrist, general psychiatrist, psychologist, pediatrician, social worker, or other health care provider. If you are concerned that your youth or young adult may have depression, it is important to seek a thorough evaluation. The evaluation includes talking about their symptoms, blood and urine tests, and perhaps other tests to ensure that there is no underlying medical condition that could be causing the symptoms. It is also important to ensure that your youth or young adult can tolerate medication, if recommended as part of a treatment plan.

### What do we mean by recovery?

*Recovery is a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.<sup>1</sup>*

*Recovery focuses on wellness and resilience, encouraging [people] to participate actively in their own care.<sup>2</sup>*



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## What is depression?

Depression is a mental disorder that is marked by a sad, empty, hopeless, or helpless mood that is present almost every day and lasts most of the day for at least two weeks. Everyone feels sad or anxious from time to time; however, the feelings associated with depression are far more intense and long lasting than the “ups and downs” of everyday life. The feelings interfere with day-to-day activities in families, school, at work, or in other social situations. Sometimes depression involves irritability. Depression may also involve physical symptoms such as fatigue, sleep difficulties, and weight changes. It can also be the cause of hopelessness, guilt, and suicidal thoughts.

Depression may happen in a single episode or be a recurrent condition. An individual could be diagnosed with major depression (which can be mild, moderate or severe) or persistent depression. However, youth and young adults can be resilient. Treatments that involve medications, psychotherapy, and other elements of an individualized treatment program can help your youth or young adult improve their coping skills, manage symptoms, improve daily functioning, and go on to lead a full and meaningful life. An individualized treatment program can include positive family or peer support.



## What caused this?

Researchers and health care professionals do not completely understand what causes depression. It is unlikely that a single factor causes depression. It is most likely caused by a combination of things such as genetics (i.e., family history of someone having depression), chemical changes in the brain, and/or environmental factors. Traumatic experiences can also contribute to the development of psychiatric disorders. If your child has experienced a traumatic incident, it is critical to share that information with their mental health specialist and pediatrician.

## Should I have known?

It is very difficult for parents and caregivers to know if their youth or young adult is acting like a typical youth or young adult or if their moods and behaviors are actually symptoms of depression. Teenagers may be moody and are reluctant sometimes to talk openly about emotions or behaviors. Perhaps you tried to ask questions but were not able to get answers. Working with a trained health care professional is important to help assess your youth or young adult's situation and understand how to start moving forward.

## What do we mean by resilience?

*Resilience is the ability to respond to stress, anxiety, trauma, crisis, or disaster. It is critical in recovery [from mental disorders].<sup>3</sup>*

## What are the treatment approaches?

Depression can be best managed by one or more of the following interventions: medication(s), behavioral therapy, and family or peer support, depending on the level of impairment. You should discuss treatment options with your youth or young adult and their health care provider, and make decisions based on individual health goals and priorities. Youth or young adults of consenting age may need to provide written consent for parents or caregivers to participate on the treatment team. Decisions should be made based on several factors and should always include your youth or young adult's health goals and ambitions. It is important to talk to your child's health care providers about other types of treatment, such as complementary medicine, as well as programs that can provide additional support related to education, employment, housing, and vocation and career development. It is also important to encourage good self-care, such as a healthy diet, exercise, sleep, and abstinence, from illicit drugs. Understanding how treatment works will help you to play an active role in your youth or young adult's recovery.

### *Medications*

Medications can help manage many of the symptoms of depression. Each person reacts differently to these medications. For that reason, the prescribing health care professional may try different doses and different kinds of medication before finding the most effective approach for your youth or young adult. To find the most effective approach with the least side-effects for your youth or young adult may take time and patience. For some people with mild symptoms of depression, their health care professional may not prescribe medication. They may suggest initial treatment with therapy.

### *Therapy*

Health care professionals may recommend behavioral therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), or other forms of psychotherapy as stand alone treatments or in combination with medications. This kind of treatment helps your youth or young adult to enhance their resiliency skills and develop behaviors and routines that can protect them from experiencing frequent, severe, or prolonged symptoms. The good news is that there are many evidence-based therapies that are effective for treating depression in youth including cognitive behavioral therapy and interpersonal psychotherapy.

### *Support*

Peer and family support are also important for youth or young adults with depression. Family members with positive attitudes, caregivers, and peers who are recovering from similar disorders, can be great assets to a treatment team. As a partner on this team, you can help to identify problems early and provide important support and encouragement to help your youth or young adult to stay focused on reaching their treatment and recovery goals. Additionally, talking with other caregivers who also have a child with depression can help you to learn more and know what to expect. You may benefit from having someone further along in the process with whom to discuss your own questions, thoughts, and feelings.



**Find others who have been through what you are going through. Find someone who can walk with you and help navigate the helping systems. Find those who support the idea that there is hope and a brighter future despite the diagnosis.**

*—Shannon, Parent*



### Is this my fault?

No, it's not. Decades of medical research provide evidence that depression and other mental health disorders can be the result of a complex interaction of genetics and biological, environmental, social, physical, and emotional influences. None of the contributing factors alone are sufficient to cause depression. Your youth or young adult is not to blame and neither are you.



### How common is this disorder?

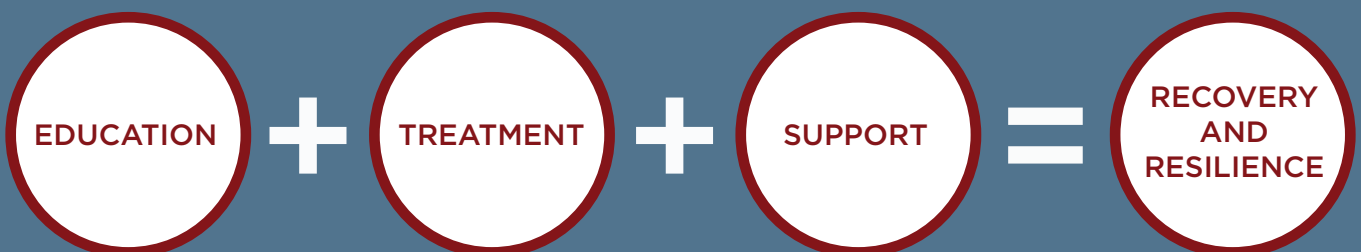
Data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration show that 11.4% of youth, ages 12-17, had at least one major depressive episode in the past year.<sup>4</sup>



### How can I help?

Parents, caregivers, and family members can be important partners in treatment and recovery from depression. You can play a major role by monitoring your youth or young adult's symptoms and responses to medication changes, and encouraging them to stick with their treatment and treatment plan. Alert healthcare providers promptly if your youth or young adult uses drugs, excessive caffeine, nicotine, or alcohol—these are frequently an attempt to self-medicate symptoms of depression. Seek help immediately if your youth or young adult has thoughts or plans of harming themselves or others (For more information, see hotline and website below\*). There is significant evidence that your involvement can improve treatment outcomes. Your own self-care is also an important part of caring for a child with a mental health disorder. Self-care may include talking to your own mental health professional, friends, or family, as well as joining a local support group through the National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health or the National Alliance on Mental Illness, exercising, getting a good night's sleep, or meditation.

\* **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255).** <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>



## Where can I learn more and get support?

SAMHSA would like to thank the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the Caring for Every Child's Mental Health Campaign Family and Young Adult Councils for their collaboration in developing and disseminating this fact sheet. This report was prepared for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) under contract number HHSS280201500007C, with SAMHSA, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Lisa Rubenstein served as the Project Manager and Eric Lulow served as the Government Project Officer.

### REFERENCES:

<sup>1</sup> (2012). *SAMHSA's Working Definition of Recovery*. SAMHSA.

<sup>2</sup> American Psychiatric Association. (2005). *Position Statement on Use of the Concept of Recovery*.

<sup>3</sup> (2013). *SAMHSA Annotated Bibliography*.

<sup>4</sup> Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, & RTI International (2015). Results from the 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Mental Health Detailed Table. Retrieved from <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUH-MHDetTabs2014/NSDUH-MHDetTabs2014.htm>

#### American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

[http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Resource\\_Centers/Anxiety\\_Disorder\\_Resource\\_Center/Home.aspx](http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Centers/Anxiety_Disorder_Resource_Center/Home.aspx)

#### American Academy of Pediatrics—Information for Parents

<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Childhood-Depression-What-Parents-Can-Do-To-Help.aspx>

#### American Psychiatric Association

<http://www.psychiatry.org/depression>

#### American Psychological Association

<http://www.apa.org/topics/depress/index.aspx>

#### Anxiety and Depression Association of America

<http://adaa.org>

#### Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

<http://www.dbsalliance.org>

#### Families for Depression Awareness

<http://familyaware.org>

#### HelpGuide.Org

<http://www.helpguide.org/home-pages/depression.htm>

#### Kids Health-Information for Parents

[http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/understanding\\_depression.html](http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/understanding_depression.html)

#### National Alliance on Mental Illness

<http://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-Conditions/Depression>

#### National Center for Complementary & Integrative Health

<https://nccih.nih.gov/health/integrative-health>

#### National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health

<https://www.ffcmh.org>

#### National Institute of Mental Health

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

#### National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>  
1-800-273-TALK (8255)

#### Ok2Talk

<http://ok2talk.org>

#### Parents Med. Guide: <http://www.parentsmedguide.org>

#### Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

<http://www.samhsa.gov/disorders/mental>

#### Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

**National Helpline:** <http://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

#### The Family Run Executive Director Leadership Association

<http://www.fredla.org>

### Disclaimer

The views, opinions, and content of this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of SAMHSA or HHS. The information presented in this document should not be considered medical advice and is not a substitute for individualized patient or client care and treatment decisions.



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