

Depression

+ YOUNG PEOPLE



Depression is more than feeling sad or down, it is a mental illness that is unfortunately common. Among Australians aged between 12–25 years, depression causes more burden than any other illness, either physical or mental. Around 1 in 6 young people will experience depression during adolescence and the rates are higher among young females than young males.

There's no single cause for depression, but a number of factors can contribute including family history, genetic factors, personality traits, coping styles, and stressful life events – for example, difficulties with friends and personal losses.

The consequences of untreated depression can be serious. If you're feeling depressed make sure you get support. If you know a young person who is depressed, encourage them to get support. A range of treatments can help manage and alleviate symptoms of depression. Talking to someone you trust, exercising regularly, eating well and getting enough sleep all help.

What are normal feelings and what is depression?

People use the word 'depression' in different ways. We all feel down from time to time. It's a part of being human. But it is important to know the difference between depression and sadness. Sadness is a feeling that lasts for only for a short time after a difficult experience, like following a break up, or an argument with someone.

Depression is different because this feeling of sadness doesn't go away – it persists over time and seems to cast a dark cloud over life. Depression is a problem because it can inhibit the enjoyment of most things and stop people from taking part in activities

that used to be easy to do. Depression can cause changes in thinking, how a young person responds to things, motivation and activity levels, sleep, and relationships. This may lead to significant difficulties that affect a young person's life, including difficulties with friends and family, poor performance at school or work, substance use or dependence, and in some young people, suicidal behaviour.

Typical symptoms of depression in a young person include:

- Feelings of irritability or unhappiness for most of the day – some young people may describe this as 'numbness' or 'emptiness'.
- Less interest and pleasure in activities that were once enjoyed.
- Significant change in appetite and weight (some young people lose weight even when they are not dieting, others eat more and may gain weight).
- Sleep changes – insomnia (not being able to sleep) or hypersomnia (sleeping more than usual).
- Restlessness and agitation.
- Being tired and fatigued – no energy nearly every day.
- Feeling bad, worthless, hopeless, or guilty, and generally being self-critical or self-blaming.
- Concentration, memory, and decision-making problems.
- Preoccupation with dark and gloomy themes and thoughts of death or suicide.

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What to look for?

Young people, parents, guardians, carers and supports, should look out for some of the changes listed below, as these changes may indicate underlying mental health difficulties with depression:

- Not going out, avoiding social contact, not spending time with friends or family, not doing usually enjoyed activities.
- Not getting things done at school or work, trouble concentrating, and difficulty making decisions.
- Increased drug or alcohol use.
- Increased moodiness, irritability, anger outbursts for no apparent reason or more than usual.
- Feeling overly stressed, worried, down, or crying for no apparent reason.
- Expressing negative thoughts about their situation, or their future. For example, 'I'm a failure', 'It's my fault', 'No one cares about me', 'They'd be better off without me', 'I can't see a way out of this mess', 'Nothing can help', 'What's the point?', 'Things will never get better', or 'I can't take this anymore'.

What are the common depressive disorders?

Major Depressive Disorder (MDD)

MDD is the most common type of depression, and is sometimes called 'clinical depression'. A depressive episode tends to build up slowly over a couple of weeks or months. The loss of pleasure, energy or motivation that occurs from depression can cause a young person to experience significant difficulties with their school, work, family and social activities. This can create a vicious cycle because withdrawing from these interests or activities and spending more time alone can actually make the depression worse.

Young people mostly experience depression in the same way that adults do; however, they may experience more mood swings, and seem more irritable, withdrawn and sensitive than usual. This can make getting help and diagnosis harder because some people may believe the changes in a young person are 'just teenage problems'.

Persistent Depressive Disorder (Dysthymia)

The difference between MDD and persistent depressive disorder (dysthymia) is the duration of the symptoms experienced. Dysthymia reflects a depressed mood that occurs for most

of the day, for more days than not, for at least two years (or one year for people younger than 15-years-old). Young people may be irritable, have less confidence, poor appetite or overeating behaviours, sleep disturbance, low energy, difficulty making decisions or concentrating. These symptoms cause distress and young people might also struggle with other difficulties, such as anxiety or substance use. Seeking treatment for these conditions has a positive effect on a young person's quality of life.

Substance and Medication-Induced Depression

Young people often experiment with alcohol and other drugs. Sometimes, persistent mood problems – such as: irritability, emotional outbursts, sadness, lack of energy, less enjoyment of activities, changes in sleep or appetite – can be linked to excessive use of alcohol or other drugs. Young people can become more impulsive or quicker to act when under the influence of drugs and alcohol, which can put them at greater risk of hurting themselves. When mood and depression difficulties appear during or soon after using a substance, they will usually improve as the substance wears off.

Other difficulties

Young people with a depressive disorder can experience other difficulties. They might have medical issues, a physical disability, or other mental health challenges. Many people with depression also experience anxiety.

Depression and substance use often go hand in hand: symptoms of depression may cause a person to drink more, or drinking more may contribute to depressive symptoms. Drinking alcohol or taking drugs may seem to work in the short-term by causing feelings of numbness but once this feeling wears off people often feel worse. Using substances in this way may also lead to dependence where a person can't function without the substance/s. This may cause long-term health, mental health, and relationship difficulties. Getting the right support for what's going on can assist with recovery from depression and substance use through planning for getting back on track with education, work and relationships.

Suicidal thoughts

Suicidal thoughts are common among young people with depression and tend to improve or resolve with the right support and treatment. Talking about suicidal thoughts with young people can be difficult for friends, family members, and for the young person themselves. Young people who might be at risk of self-harm or suicide will need a referral to a specialised clinician or mental health service. If their risk is very high, a young person may need more immediate assistance from emergency professional supports. Call 000 in an emergency, or go to a hospital emergency department. Objects that a young person could potentially use in a suicide attempt should be removed, and this should be discussed with the young person's clinician or worker.

Advice and referral

Everyone should talk about their mental health with someone that they trust. This might be a school counsellor, family friend, a parent, or teacher. GPs can also help sort out what is and isn't depression and help with a plan for getting better.

If you think someone you know is depressed, let them know you're there to support them and, if needed, encourage them to get professional support.

There are effective treatments to help people who experience depression. One of the most commonly used treatments for depression is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). CBT is based on the idea that moods and emotions are created by thoughts, and it explores thinking patterns, and how they affect our behaviour and emotions. There are other treatments for depression including interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT), mindfulness, and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). In certain instances, antidepressant medication may also be helpful, especially when used in combination with psychological treatment.

Getting help

If you or someone you know is experiencing symptoms of depression, or need some help, you can:

- Talk to someone you trust. Tell family or friends about what you're feeling and thinking so they can support you.
- Try to eat healthily, get some regular exercise, and find ways to relax.

- Distract yourself by listening to music, reading, and doing things you enjoy.
- Ask family and friends to support you to do more.
- Try to avoid alcohol and other drugs, as they often make depression worse over time, and can lead to dependency.
- Think ahead about warning signs, safe and trusted people to speak to, and places to go to when depression is affecting your functioning. Seek professional help if there are suicidal thoughts. A mental health clinician can help with developing a safety or crisis plan that aims to stop the rise of very distressing and painful emotions and is designed to ensure a young person's safety in a time of crisis.
- Research more about what options for help and information are available. It may be useful to seek professional help from a counsellor, psychologist, psychiatrist or doctor.

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Further information

For further information regarding mental health, or for information in other languages, visit:

www.orygen.org.au
www.headspace.org.au
www.reachout.com
www.youthbeyondblue.com
www.beyondblue.org.au
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
www.sane.org
www.healthdirect.gov.au
www.oyh.org.au

Related factsheets

Anxiety + Young People
Eating & body image disorders + Young People

Disclaimer: This information is not medical advice. It is generic and does not take into account your personal circumstances, physical wellbeing, mental status or mental requirements. Do not use this information to treat or diagnose your own or another person's medical condition and never ignore medical advice or delay seeking it because of something in this information. Any medical questions should be referred to a qualified healthcare professional. If in doubt, please always seek medical advice.