

When a parent is struggling



Recognizing depression, understanding the impact and knowing when to ask for help

Being a good parent doesn't mean you never struggle. Parenting can be exhausting, stressful and emotionally demanding. While occasional ups and downs are normal, persistent changes in mood, energy, motivation or daily functioning may be symptoms of depression.

Recognizing these signs isn't about blaming yourself. It is about noticing when you may need support and remembering that getting help can benefit both you and your child.

1. How can parental depression affect children?

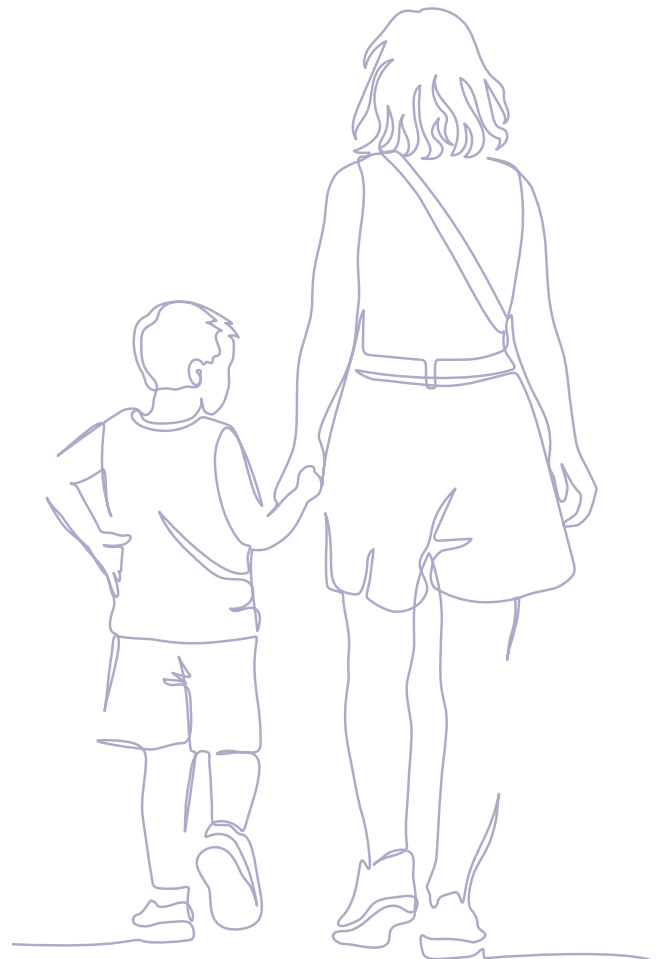
Children are sensitive to changes in the people who care for them. When a parent is experiencing depression, it can sometimes affect family life, communication, routines and the parent-child relationship.

A parent experiencing depression may have difficulty:

- Being emotionally available or responsive
- Having the energy to play, talk or participate in activities
- Maintaining consistent routines
- Responding patiently to challenging behaviors
- Keeping up with household responsibilities
- Showing affection or enthusiasm
- Communicating with their child
- Recognizing and responding to their child's emotional needs
- Taking care of their own physical and mental health

Research has found associations between parental depression and increased emotional or behavioral difficulties in children. This has been observed with both maternal and paternal depression.

IMPORTANT: A parent's depression does not mean their child will develop a mental health condition. Children are influenced by many factors, including genetics, relationships, environment, temperament and access to support. The goal is not to be a "perfect" parent. The goal is to recognize when additional support can help.



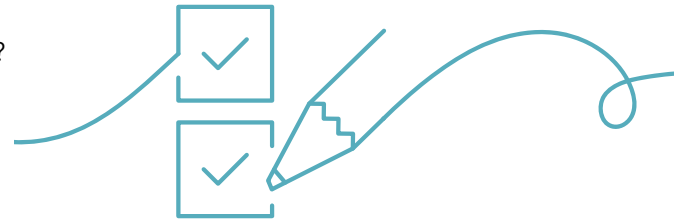
2. Know the signs in yourself

Depression does not always look like sadness. Some parents experience depression primarily as **irritability, exhaustion, numbness, frustration or feeling overwhelmed**.

Over the past **two or more weeks**, have you noticed any of the following?

MOOD & EMOTIONS

- ☐ I've felt sad, empty, down or hopeless.
- ☐ I've been more irritable, frustrated or angry than usual.
- ☐ I've felt emotionally numb or disconnected.
- ☐ I've been unusually tearful.
- ☐ I've felt guilty, worthless or like I'm "not a good enough parent."
- ☐ I've felt overwhelmed by things that normally feel manageable.



INTEREST & MOTIVATION

- ☐ I've lost interest in activities I normally enjoy.
- ☐ Things that used to make me happy don't feel enjoyable anymore.
- ☐ I've had difficulty getting motivated.
- ☐ I've been avoiding people or activities.
- ☐ I've felt like I just want to be left alone.

ENERGY & PHYSICAL CHANGES

- ☐ I feel tired or exhausted most of the time.
- ☐ I have difficulty getting out of bed or starting my day.
- ☐ I've noticed changes in my sleep.
- ☐ I've noticed changes in my appetite.
- ☐ I've experienced unexplained aches, pains, headaches or digestive problems.

THINKING & DAILY FUNCTIONING

- ☐ I've had difficulty concentrating.
- ☐ I've had trouble making decisions.
- ☐ Everyday tasks feel unusually difficult.
- ☐ I've fallen behind on responsibilities.
- ☐ I've had difficulty keeping up with parenting or household routines.
- ☐ I've noticed that my reactions to my child are different than they used to be.

These are common symptoms associated with depression. Not everyone experiences all of them, and symptoms can vary from person to person.



3. Take a closer look at parenting

Sometimes depression becomes easier to recognize when we look at how we function as a parent. Use the following prompts to explore parenting patterns.

Lately, I have noticed:

My patience is...

- ☐ About the same
- ☐ A little lower than usual
- ☐ Much lower than usual

My emotional availability for my child is...

- ☐ About the same
- ☐ Somewhat decreased
- ☐ Significantly decreased

My ability to keep up with routines is...

- ☐ About the same
- ☐ More difficult than usual
- ☐ Very difficult

My interest in spending time with my child is...

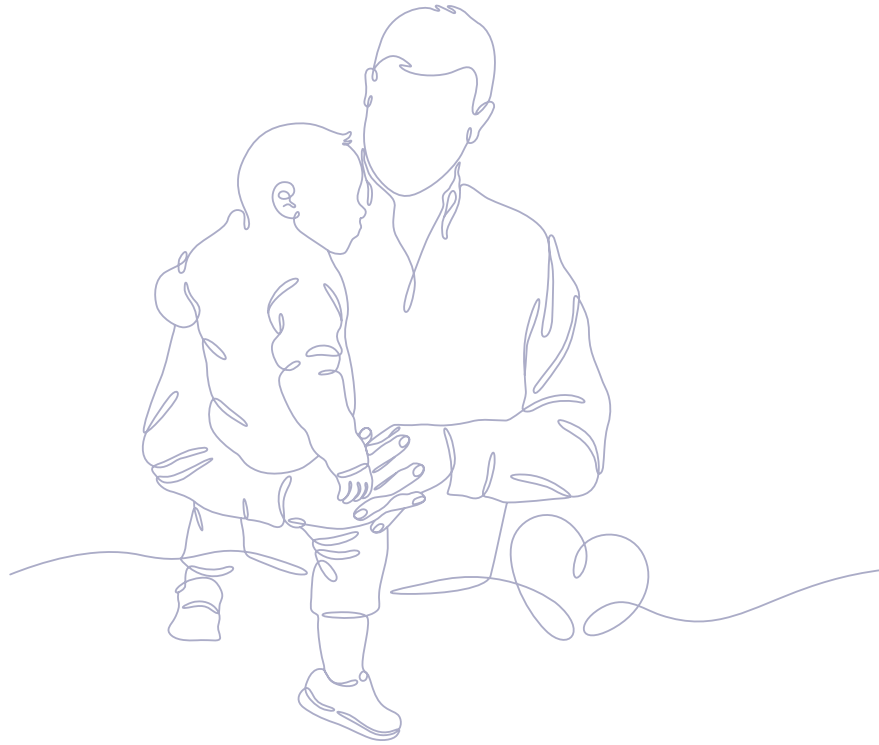
- ☐ About the same
- ☐ Somewhat decreased
- ☐ Significantly decreased

My ability to respond calmly when my child is upset is...

- ☐ About the same
- ☐ More difficult than usual
- ☐ Very difficult

One change I've noticed in myself as a parent is:

One thing I miss about how I used to feel or function is:

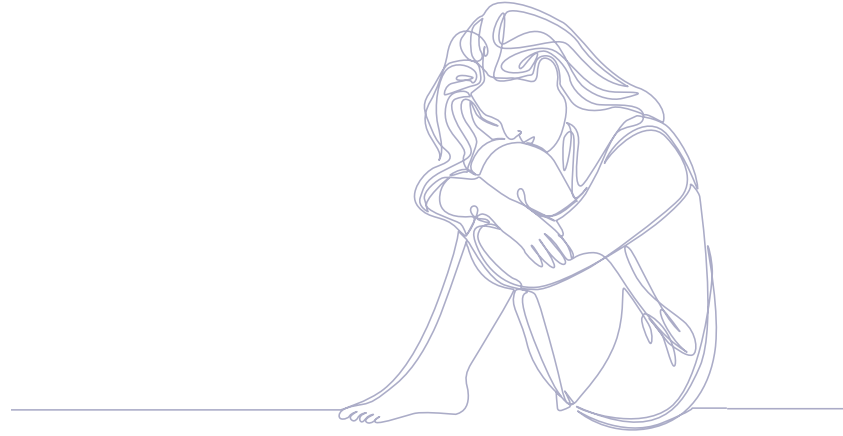


4. What might my child be experiencing?

A child may not say, "My parent is depressed." Instead, they may respond to changes in family life through their own emotions or behaviors.

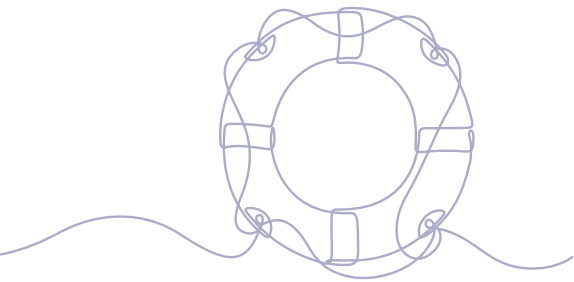
You might notice:

- Increased irritability or emotional outbursts
- Increased worry or fearfulness
- Becoming more withdrawn
- Changes in sleep
- Changes in school performance
- Difficulty concentrating
- Physical complaints such as headaches or stomachaches
- Increased clinginess or separation worries
- Loss of interest in activities
- Changes in relationships with friends or family
- More frequent behavioral difficulties



These signs do not automatically mean a child is experiencing a mental health disorder. However, persistent changes that last weeks, cause significant distress or interfere with functioning at home, school or with friends are worth discussing with a health professional.

5. When should I ask for help?



Consider reaching out to a health care or mental health professional if:

- Your symptoms have lasted two or more weeks.
- Your symptoms are getting worse.
- Depression is interfering with your parenting or daily responsibilities.
- You are withdrawing from family or friends.
- You are struggling to care for yourself.
- You feel overwhelmed by everyday tasks.
- Your sleep, appetite or energy has changed significantly.
- You are having difficulty functioning at work or at home.
- Someone you trust has expressed concern about you.
- You simply feel that something isn't right.

Experts recommend seeking professional help when significant or distressing symptoms persist for two or more weeks or interfere with everyday functioning

6. Asking for help can start with one sentence

You don't need to have the right words. Use the following sentences as a guide to say what you're feeling in an authentic way. Try:

To your doctor: "I've noticed some changes in my mood, energy, sleep and motivation, and I'm concerned I may be experiencing depression. I'd like to talk about my options."

To a therapist: "I'm having a difficult time emotionally and it's starting to affect my parenting and daily life. I'd like some support."

To a partner, family member or friend: "I've been struggling more than I've let on. I could use some help and support right now."

If you're not sure what's wrong: "I don't feel like myself lately, and I'm having a hard time managing everything. Can you help me figure out what I should do next?"



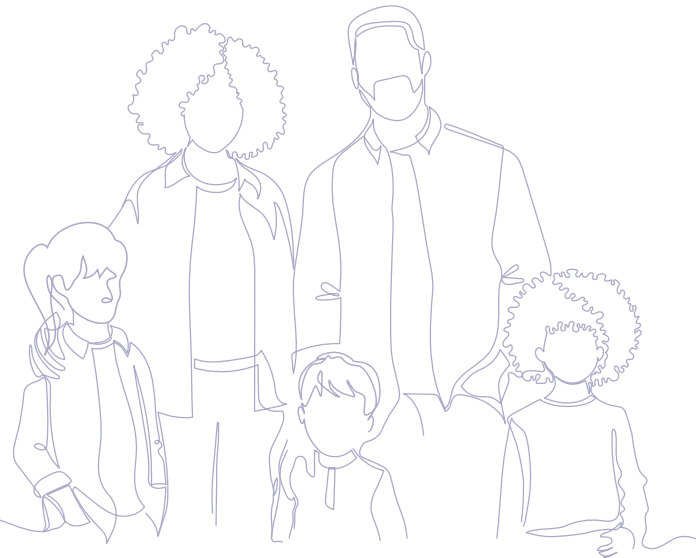
7. Remember

Your child doesn't need a perfect parent.

They need a parent who is willing to notice when something is wrong, seek support and keep showing up in whatever ways are possible.

Taking care of your mental health is part of taking care of your family.

Depression is treatable, and reaching out for help is a sign of strength, not failure. Treatment may include psychotherapy, medication or a combination of approaches depending on the individual's needs.



If you need immediate help

If you are experiencing a mental health emergency or having thoughts of suicide or harming yourself, seek immediate help. In the United States, call or text 988 for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. If there is an immediate danger, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department.

You deserve support, too.