

Depression in children

What we should know as parents?

There are a number of ways to work out how serious our children's feelings are:

1. Do our children have the signs that they are not just sad but are depressed?

Depression is more than feeling sad or being miserable. Depression can involve feelings of sadness, anger, hopelessness, resentment, guilt or low self-esteem. Growing up, particularly in the teenage years, can be a time of confusion, moodiness and over-sensitivity. It is often seen as a time of rebellion. As parents, it is our job to notice when our children's feelings of sadness, anger, resentment, guilt or low self-esteem are signs that they are feeling very sad. When our teenagers drink alcohol or take drugs to feel better, it may be a sign that they are feeling depressed.

2. Do our children's low feelings show in other parts of their lives?

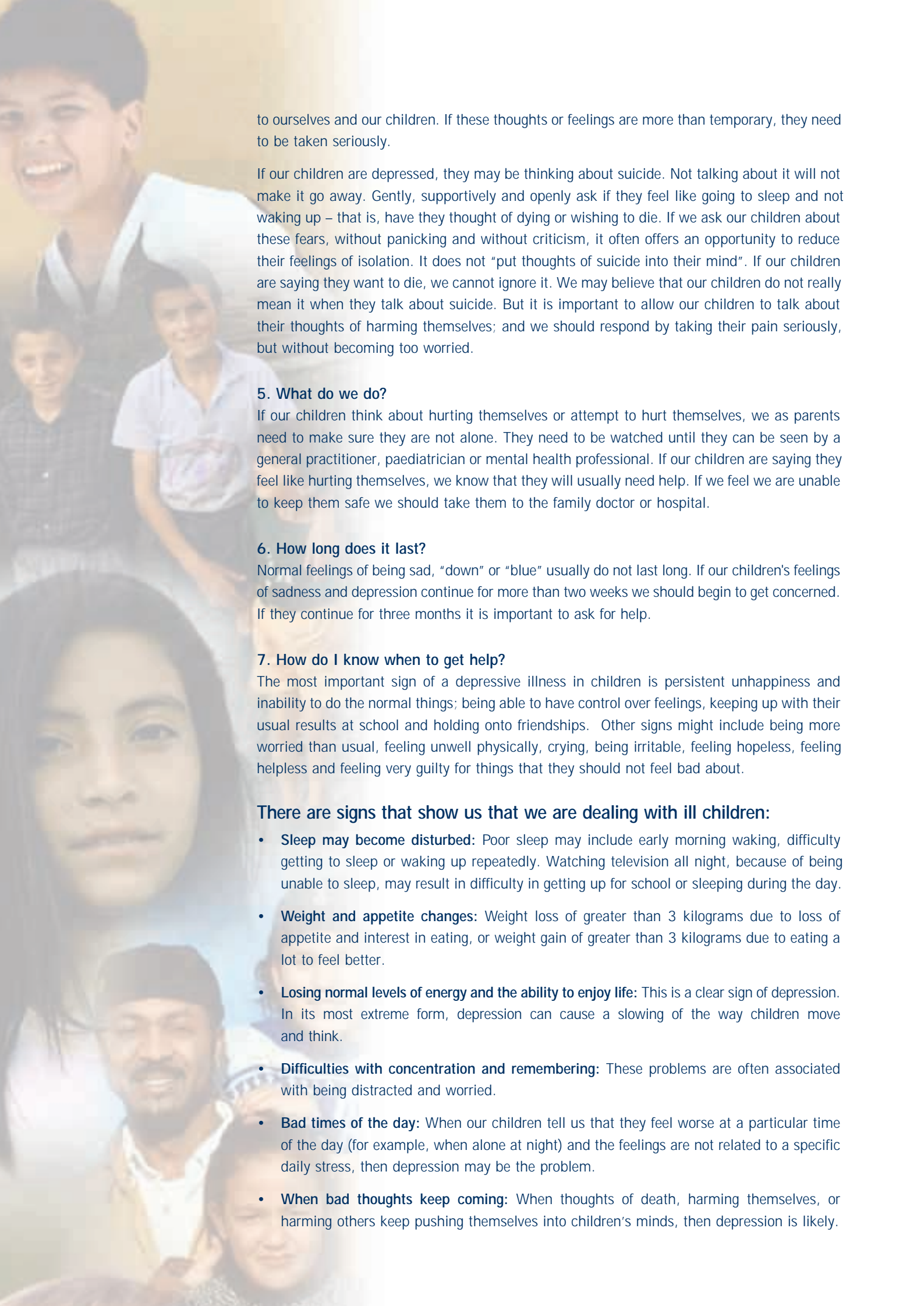
Our children may have mixed with others, played with friends or enjoyed meeting with their peers. But now they may have lost friends and they may spend most of their time alone, withdrawn at home and in their own rooms. Activities and interests they once enjoyed may no longer be of interest to them. They may have been doing well with their schoolwork but the standard of their work may have dropped due to loss of concentration. Our children, may not have as much energy as they used to have. They may have felt good about themselves but now they dislike themselves. They may take risks regularly. These changes can be gradual over a few weeks or even months. Depression may be developing.

3. Can our children explain how they feel?

Sometimes our children and teenagers who get into trouble at home or at school may actually be depressed but not know it. Because our children may not always seem sad, we as parents may not realise that the bad behaviour is a sign of depression. When asked directly, our children can sometimes say they are unhappy or sad. But our children and teenagers with depression may struggle to find the words to describe their emotions and moods. Often our children won't know they are depressed, so they don't ask for or get the right help. As parents it is up to us to notice changes in our children's day-to-day life and how they are coping with different feelings. When young people do not share how they are feeling, this is one sign that something is wrong.

4. Do our children have thoughts of suicide and death?

We as parents, are often worried when our depressed children and teenagers express feelings and thoughts that "life just isn't worth living", or that "life is so bad I feel like giving up". Hearing our children say they wish they were dead, or hearing them talk about suicide, is often overwhelming. Things said in an emotional moment may not mean much but can be frightening



to ourselves and our children. If these thoughts or feelings are more than temporary, they need to be taken seriously.

If our children are depressed, they may be thinking about suicide. Not talking about it will not make it go away. Gently, supportively and openly ask if they feel like going to sleep and not waking up – that is, have they thought of dying or wishing to die. If we ask our children about these fears, without panicking and without criticism, it often offers an opportunity to reduce their feelings of isolation. It does not “put thoughts of suicide into their mind”. If our children are saying they want to die, we cannot ignore it. We may believe that our children do not really mean it when they talk about suicide. But it is important to allow our children to talk about their thoughts of harming themselves; and we should respond by taking their pain seriously, but without becoming too worried.

5. What do we do?

If our children think about hurting themselves or attempt to hurt themselves, we as parents need to make sure they are not alone. They need to be watched until they can be seen by a general practitioner, paediatrician or mental health professional. If our children are saying they feel like hurting themselves, we know that they will usually need help. If we feel we are unable to keep them safe we should take them to the family doctor or hospital.

6. How long does it last?

Normal feelings of being sad, “down” or “blue” usually do not last long. If our children's feelings of sadness and depression continue for more than two weeks we should begin to get concerned. If they continue for three months it is important to ask for help.

7. How do I know when to get help?

The most important sign of a depressive illness in children is persistent unhappiness and inability to do the normal things; being able to have control over feelings, keeping up with their usual results at school and holding onto friendships. Other signs might include being more worried than usual, feeling unwell physically, crying, being irritable, feeling hopeless, feeling helpless and feeling very guilty for things that they should not feel bad about.

There are signs that show us that we are dealing with ill children:

- **Sleep may become disturbed:** Poor sleep may include early morning waking, difficulty getting to sleep or waking up repeatedly. Watching television all night, because of being unable to sleep, may result in difficulty in getting up for school or sleeping during the day.
- **Weight and appetite changes:** Weight loss of greater than 3 kilograms due to loss of appetite and interest in eating, or weight gain of greater than 3 kilograms due to eating a lot to feel better.
- **Losing normal levels of energy and the ability to enjoy life:** This is a clear sign of depression. In its most extreme form, depression can cause a slowing of the way children move and think.
- **Difficulties with concentration and remembering:** These problems are often associated with being distracted and worried.
- **Bad times of the day:** When our children tell us that they feel worse at a particular time of the day (for example, when alone at night) and the feelings are not related to a specific daily stress, then depression may be the problem.
- **When bad thoughts keep coming:** When thoughts of death, harming themselves, or harming others keep pushing themselves into children's minds, then depression is likely.



What should we be aware of as parents?

As parents, it may be difficult living with children who are lonely, miserable, depressed or angry. During this time we may experience many feelings, including feeling scared for our children, feeling helpless, hopeless and overwhelmed when our children are hurting. Because of these feelings it will be important to find ways to manage our own anger, sadness, frustration and reactions to our children.

What can we do?

1. **Be available to listen and offer help:** When our children are feeling sad and down, it is important to let them know that we will listen, to spend time with them, and to find professional help for them when needed.
2. **Find out what we don't know:** We should get to know how most children grow and mature. We can ask for information from health professionals and our children's school teacher or school counsellor. For example "what's happening with my child to make them behave like this?" We may not come up with the answers but at least we can begin to think about what we need to know.
3. **Ask for help from others but trust ourselves to do the best for our children:** Attempting to sort out a problem within our families can give our children the message that we are taking care of them and shows our love and support for them. Sharing ideas, feelings and sorting out problems as a family will make it easier for our children to talk to us when they are feeling sad. Showing encouragement and appreciation and not criticising can also help.
4. **Encourage our children to:**
 - Talk and express their feelings
 - Spend time with supportive friends
 - Share feelings with others they trust
 - Join in activities they enjoy
 - Do exercise that is non-competitive
 - Learn new ways to relax such as seeing a movie or going for a walk

Ways we can deal with hard times:

1. **We can start to sort out practical problems:** We can offer to make an appointment to see a professional to support our children and also to be someone who can begin to help to sort things out.
2. **We can do special things that make us and our children feel good:** An example would be actively planning some future event together.
3. **We can put effort into feeling good:** Children need to know that we care for them and that we have confidence that things will get better.
4. **We can actively prepare for setbacks and disappointments:** We can accept that for things to get better, it will take time, lots of effort and energy.

Depression is usually a temporary condition in children, if recognised and helped. Even when it is a bigger problem it will almost always respond to professional treatment. The most important part of recognising depression is to realise that depression can happen to our children and to keep talking to our children.



What can we do when our children need help and we don't have the answers?

- Call the Transcultural Mental Health Centre for advice in your language
- Call the Children's Hospital at Westmead for advice and information
- Talk to the children's school counsellor
- Call the local community health centre
- Talk to a general practitioner for advice about local professionals such as child psychologists or paediatricians.

Transcultural Mental Health Centre

Tel: (02) 9840 3767 (during business hours)

Freecall for rural and remote areas of NSW: 1800 64 8911

Kids Help Line

Tel: 24hr 1800 55 1800

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