



How Parents Can Help

We'd like to think that our children are immune to depression and thoughts of suicide. We've done everything possible to make them happy. We want the best for them. We want them to grow up to have fulfilling careers, loving families, good friends and success.

Sometimes, however, it's not quite that simple. About 5% of adolescents and adults can have long term issues with depression, often caused by a chemical imbalance of the brain. And concerns like school, parents or peer pressure, sudden loss, isolation, and abuse can cause significant stress in adolescents as well.

Becoming a "Safe" Person for Difficult Discussions

Supporting a young person during periods of stress and depression is crucial. Parental support can be the difference between hope and despair. As a parent, you can develop skills that help make you a safe person to talk to about difficult topics.

- Model talking about emotions: When you describe your feelings of anger, sadness or loss, your family can learn how to talk about emotions with you.
- Talk about the importance of mental and emotional health: Don't avoid discussions about friends and relatives who feel depressed. Talk about depression as an illness that can be helped. Lift the stigma of depression and emotional pain.
- Talk about sudden loss: Don't avoid discussions about sudden loss, like death and relationship break-ups. Talk about the sadness that occurs and how people come out the other side. Young people experiencing their first losses need to understand they can get through it.
- Talk about substance use and abuse: Like it or not, most teenagers experiment with alcohol and other substances and some will go on to abuse these substances. Open dialog about these issues can help avoid abuse and reckless behavior.
- Talk about being a friend: Teens and most adults are not therapists... but we can be good friends. Talk to you children about what it means to be a good friend. When we see a friend in trouble, we need to respond by talking to the friend, getting help together and/or going to an adult to report that a friend is in danger.
- Model talking about failure: Good and bad things happen to everyone every day. Talk to your family about your own triumphs and failures. If your kids know that you are not perfect, they can see that they do not need to be perfect either, and can express their failures, large and small, more easily.
- Learn to listen: If your child is depressed, don't be dismissive or over eager to "fix" the situation. Instead, sit down and listen to what your child has to say, giving him/her your full attention. Even though your child may say things that you do not like or that are difficult to hear, try to listen without interrupting or reacting and try to respond without anger. Depression in young people often mimics and evokes anger, so this is not always easy.

- Multiple safe people. Everyone needs multiple safe people to talk to. As a parent, you would like to believe that all information can come to you, but an adolescent's world is not that simple. Encourage your child to talk to other family members, counselors, coaches or teachers. Talk to your children and explore appropriate people to talk to about problems.
- Take a break as a family: Families are under stress and it is fine just to take a break, and go have fun as a family once in a while. Take a mental health day, even if that day is a school day.
- Find listening moments: Find moments when you and your child can just casually talk about life. Long drives, rainy days, and family dinners all can be moments where past communications gaps can break down.

Making an intervention

Sometimes, as a parent, you need to intervene. You need to be the person with the courage to bring up difficult topics such as suicide and self-destructive behaviors. A young person feeling suicidal might not have the courage to tell you directly, because these feelings are very difficult and confusing. Be especially careful after a sudden loss, like a relationship break-up or death in the family. Often when young people experience their first loss, they can act recklessly emotionally and physically. And watch for substance use and abuse. Many adolescents and adults that die from suicide have a substance in their bodies at the time of death.

Look and listen for clues that your child may be in trouble.

- Acting helpless and hopeless
- Suddenly isolating from friends and family
- Talking about or expressing fatalistic statements
- Talking about or expressing death in unusual ways, including journaling or art
- Today young people communicate through social media and many cries (Facebook account)
- Experimenting with acts of harm, like a sudden interest in guns, pills or high places
- Suddenly acting very irritable, perhaps violently (some people express their depression outward, not inward)
- Taking behavior risks that might not kill, but might cause serious harm to their bodies
- Having erratic sleep patterns causing mood changes
- "Medicating" depression with alcohol or drugs, which amplify depression and impulsive behavior.

How to Talk to Your Child About Difficult Situations

These behaviors and statements may or may not be a sign that your child is considering suicide, but they are a sign that something is wrong, and as a parent you need to have the courage to confront the situation. Your child may really want to talk to you about these concerns, but might not know how to approach you.

- Initiate a direct conversation. Find a time when the two of you can talk privately without interruption.
- Tell your child the behaviors you've noticed that cause you concern.
- Assure your child that you love him and that you want to hear whatever he has to say.
- Ask your child directly if she's been feeling depressed. How long has she been feeling depressed? Try to sense if her feelings have become more intense over time.
- Temper your reaction. It's okay to express your concern; however anger may cause your child to become defensive. Avoid interrogating or accusing.

- Focus on your child's feelings rather than your own.
- Ask your child what his ideas are about how to get help and express your own ideas. Reassure him that you want to go down this road together.
- Thank your child for sharing her feelings with you. Reaffirm that you are available anytime she needs to talk.
- Many youth resist talking to their parents. Perhaps you can get another trusted adult (relative, religious leader, coach, friend) to talk with your child about his feelings.
- Sometimes parents feel shame or guilt because their child is having mental health or emotional health concerns. If you feel that way, don't let it prevent you from finding help for your child. And get help yourself. Being a caregiver is difficult.

If your child is depressed or suicidal

Discuss with your child the possibilities of obtaining counseling services or participating in a support group or youth group where he can talk more about his feelings and concerns.

Supervision is an important part of suicide prevention. If your child is particularly depressed, take the time to just hang out, or make sure your child is scheduled to be around others. Adolescents usually kill themselves at times of isolation, not when others are around. Crisis periods are usually short term in nature, and constant supervision during a crisis may be important. In some cases it may require 24-hour supervision for a couple days (i.e. the young person is never left alone).

Take a mental health day, even if that is a school day. Sometimes you know your children may be at a breaking point. Taking a mental health day matters. Sometimes a young person just needs to stay home and sleep. Or maybe some days you both sleep late and go to a fun movie, amusement park or the beach. Sometimes a quick two day vacation is a good idea (and small hotel rooms mean 24-hour supervision). Young people can be very focused on the present. Change the present to something fun.

Discuss ideas about positive activities that are unrelated but may help with the expression of depression or anger, such as sports, art or community involvement.

Encourage sleep and good eating. The healthy mind needs a health body. Lack of sleep and nutrients do not allow the brain to function properly. Often it may be near impossible for a young person to get eight hours of sleep during stressful times. Encourage make-up sleep on the weekends.

Access to a gun or the medication of a family member causes a high percentage of youth suicide. If your child expresses the desire to die, remove all guns from the home and lock up all medications.

For better or worse, young people communicate electronically today. When possible monitor their Facebook and Twitter pages. A sudden termination of a Facebook page may be a bad sign. Many young people post their cries for help on Facebook.

If your child is searching for suicide websites, that may be a sign there is something wrong.

Watch closely. If reckless behavior or depression is getting worse, an intervention may be needed. If the situation is very serious or life threatening, call San Francisco Comprehensive Child Crisis. It is available 24-hours a day at 415-970-3800, or if needed just call 911.

Be there for your child. Always let them know that you are there to talk and that your love is unconditional.

And finally, feel free to use the services of San Francisco Suicide Prevention at any time for support or information. We are here 24 hours a day at 415-781-0500 or on the web at sfsuicide.org.