Depression: What Families Can Do

Families can provide strong mental health support and help their child handle depression by:

**Being Aware**
While most adults possess the self-awareness to recognize changes in their mood, appetite, sleeping patterns, etc., they may not realize at first that they are depressed or do not want to admit it. Similarly, children who have depression may keep their thoughts and feelings masked, push their sadness away, or may not even know how to describe what they are feeling. Many children may even put on a smile despite the fact that they are struggling inside because they want to please their parents.

It is important to be aware of age-specific depression behaviors and symptoms. For instance, younger children tend to have aches and pains, or cry and whine when they are sad. Slightly older children often get irritable, withdrawn and avoidant when they feel sadness. School-aged children often experience difficulties concentrating, feel insecure, argue or express that they do not like to do things or see friends that they once enjoyed.

Knowing the signs and symptoms to look for, working to identify any big changes in how you feel or how your children feel or behave, and being aware of how current events or a specific situation may be impacting you or your child will help you determine if you or your child has depression.

**Talking It Out**
Some children do not know how to identify their feelings, feel embarrassed or afraid parents will find their worries silly, or think expressing them is inappropriate due to their family’s cultural beliefs and behaviors. Talking openly, honestly and directly with your child about their feelings, things happening at home and at school, or current events that may be bothering them can help teach kids how to name their feelings, validate these feelings and experiences and enable you to determine together if they are depressed, sad, overwhelmed or just in a slump. These conversations can also strengthen your bond with your child, build trust, and help them understand their feelings do not make them flawed. By talking feelings out, you let your child know they are not alone and that they are loved and supported.

Additionally, parents who have experienced depression should consider talking honestly to their kids about their experiences versus hiding it. This sharing helps them see first-hand from you that depression can be successfully controlled and shows your child that you are a relatable person who struggles sometimes too.

**Getting Help**
The earlier you identify and treat symptoms of depression, the faster you interrupt the advancement of severe depression (which can lead to thinking about or planning for suicide), and help your child feel better and thrive again.

Your child must experience several persistent symptoms in addition to low mood for at least two weeks to meet depression diagnosis criteria. A primary care physician will do a physical, review your family history and conduct a mental health evaluation to confirm this diagnosis. Based on the results, your child may then be referred to a mental health professional for further evaluation and treatment.
Helping Them Cope

A person with depression needs to stick to their prescribed treatment plan, make healthy lifestyle changes and remain aware of any worsening symptoms. While some forms of depression are shorter term or tied to a specific situation, many forms of depression require that people learn to live with and manage it long term.

This maintenance can be difficult, tiring, lonely and frustrating. Therefore, the support of family members and friends, as well as school and community members is critical. Families can help their child cope with their depression and treatment by:

Planning Ahead & Monitoring
- Setting reminders to take prescribed medications.
- Making sure they have transportation to therapy appointments.
- Communicating frequently with doctors, teachers and school mental health services personnel.
- Watching for signs that their prescribed treatment is not working or needs to be adjusted.

Establishing New at-Home Routines and Expectations
- Helping them establish a daily routine.
- Scheduling time each week to touch base about how they are feeling or any concerns they have.
- Providing healthy foods and exercising together.
- Lowering expectations around school grades and house chores.

Creating Support Systems
- Offering support, understanding, patience and encouragement.
- Breaking down something that is overwhelming into smaller, achievable tasks.
- Seeking out peer groups or other support services in your community.
- Reminding them that, with time and treatment, the depression will be easier to handle.

Modeling Good Mental Health Behavior
Children learn from watching their parents. If you are an adult with depression, it is important to role model good mental health behavior by sticking to your own treatment plan as prescribed, being honest about how you are feeling (even when you are struggling), and practicing healthy coping strategies.

Prioritizing Healthy Lifestyles
We must take care of our minds like we take care of our bodies. When we have a chronic physical condition like diabetes or obesity, we treat the condition, make lifestyle changes, and remain aware of any changes in how we feel. The same is true for our mental health. It is important to be proactive about good mental health, give it constant attention, and make changes to our lifestyle or behaviors to ensure our minds stay healthy and strong.