

Treating Depression In Children

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Diagnosing Depression in Ill Children

Illness Versus Mood Symptoms

Distinguishing between the effects of physical illness and true depressive symptoms is an essential but challenging part of diagnosis.

Caregiver Assumptions

Caregivers often believe depression is unavoidable in sick children, risking both over-treatment and neglect of psychiatric needs.

Need for Individual Assessment

Every child requires a tailored approach for accurate diagnosis, free from bias and assumptions, to ensure proper support.

(American Academy of child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2025)

DSM-5 Depression Criteria

Mood and Interest Changes

A persistent depressed mood or loss of interest in usual activities is a key symptom of depression.

Physical and Sleep Symptoms

Depression often causes significant weight changes, sleep disturbances, chronic fatigue, and low energy.

Cognitive and Emotional Signs

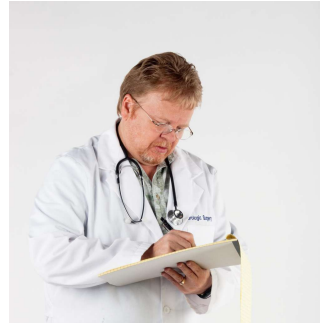
Feelings of worthlessness or guilt, poor concentration, and thoughts of death may be present.

(Uptodate, 2025)



DSM 5- Depression Exclusion Criteria

(Uptodate, 2025).



Exclude Medical Conditions

Symptoms must not be due to a medical condition, for example, hypothyroidism or physical illness.



Rule Out Substance and Medication Effects

Substance use or medications cannot explain the presented symptoms to ensure accurate diagnosis.



Consider Psychological Factors

Symptoms should not meet mixed episode criteria or be better explained by bereavement, such as a grief reaction.



Types of Childhood Depression

Major Depressive Disorder

This clinical depression in children is marked by ongoing sadness and a lack of interest in daily activities.

Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder

PMDD can develop after the first period, causing emotional symptoms like irritability and anxiety before menstruation.

Physical Symptoms of PMDD

PMDD is also associated with physical symptoms like cramps, body aches, and fatigue in affected children.

(Clevelandclinic, 2025)



Types of Childhood Depression

Seasonal Affective Disorder

Seasonal affective disorder causes depression-like symptoms that change with the seasons, often intensifying during winter.

Disruptive Mood Dysregulation

Disruptive mood dysregulation disorder leads to frequent, severe angry outbursts and aggression in children beyond typical age expectations.

Dysthymia

Dysthymia presents as mild but persistent depressive symptoms that may last or reoccur for years.

(Clevelandclinic, 2025)



Signs of Childhood Depression

Emotional Symptoms

Children may display persistent sadness, irritability, or withdrawal from activities, which are emotional signs of depression.

Behavioral and Physical Signs

Changes in sleep patterns, academic decline, headaches, and appetite changes are physical and behavioral indicators frequently seen in childhood depression.



Depression in Toddlers: Signs

Behavioral Changes

Toddlers may withdraw from friends and family, show less interest in play, and have trouble focusing.

Regression to Earlier Behaviors

Regression such as **thumb sucking** or **bedwetting** can emerge as a sign of toddler depression.

Physical Symptoms

Physical signs include loss of appetite, fatigue, and complaints of headaches or stomachaches.

Recognizing Childhood Depression



Emotional Signs

Children may show persistent sadness, irritability, or withdraw from activities and friends, signaling emotional distress.

Behavioral Changes

Decreased academic performance, sleep changes, or neglecting **personal hygiene** are noticeable behavioral shifts in depressed children.

Physical Symptoms

Fatigue, headaches, and altered appetite are common physical complaints in children experiencing depression.

Cognitive and Anxiety Indicators

Trouble concentrating, increased sensitivity to criticism, and feelings of anxiety or overwhelm often accompany childhood depression.



Depression in Teens: Key Signs

- **Emotional changes**
 - Be alert for emotional changes, such as:
 - Feelings of sadness, which can include crying spells for no apparent reason
 - Frustration or feelings of anger, even over small matters
 - Feeling hopeless or empty
 - Irritable or annoyed mood
 - Loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities
 - Loss of interest in, or conflict with, family and friends
- **Low self-esteem**
 - Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- **Fixation on past failures or exaggerated self-blame or self-criticism**
- **Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure, and the need for excessive reassurance**
- **Trouble thinking, concentrating, making decisions and remembering things**
- **Ongoing sense that life and the future are grim and bleak**
- **Frequent thoughts of death, dying or suicide**



Behavioral Changes in Teens

- Tiredness and loss of energy
- Insomnia or sleeping too much
- Changes in appetite — decreased appetite and weight loss, or increased cravings for food and weight gain
- Use of alcohol or drugs
- Agitation or restlessness — for example, pacing, hand-wringing or an inability to sit still
- Slowed thinking, speaking or body movements
- Frequent complaints of unexplained body aches and headaches, which may include frequent visits to the school nurse
- Social isolation
- Poor school performance or frequent absences from school
- Less attention to personal hygiene or appearance
- Angry outbursts, disruptive or risky behavior, or other acting-out behaviors
- Self-harm — for example, cutting or burning
- Making a suicide plan or a suicide attempt

(Mayoclinic, 2025)

Depression Risk in Chronically Ill Children



Increased Depression Risk

Chronic illness exposes children to ongoing pain, loss of independence, and anxiety about treatments, elevating depression risk.



Recognizing Symptoms

Common signs include persistent sadness, irritability, social withdrawal, or changes in sleeping and eating habits.



Loss of Enjoyment

A child may lose interest in previously enjoyed activities, indicating possible depression related to their chronic condition.



Impact of Chronic Illness on Childhood

Disrupted School Attendance

Chronic illness often causes children to miss school, leading to academic challenges and sometimes requiring alternative education.

Social Isolation

Restrictions and treatment schedules can disrupt friendships and social activities, making children feel isolated from peers.

Challenges to Development

Emotional and psychological growth may be affected, impacting independence and social skills compared to healthy peers.



Key Factors in Childhood Depression

Genetic Predispositions

A family history of depression raises the risk for childhood depression due to inherited genetic factors.

Stressful Life Events

Events such as parental separation, divorce, relocation, or bereavement can trigger depressive symptoms in children.

Bullying and Trauma

Experiences of bullying or trauma significantly contribute to childhood depression and emotional distress.

Physical Health and Substance Use

Physical illnesses and exposure to substances can also increase the likelihood of depressive symptoms in children.

(Cleveland Clinic, 2025)

Screening for Depression

Self-Report Questionnaires

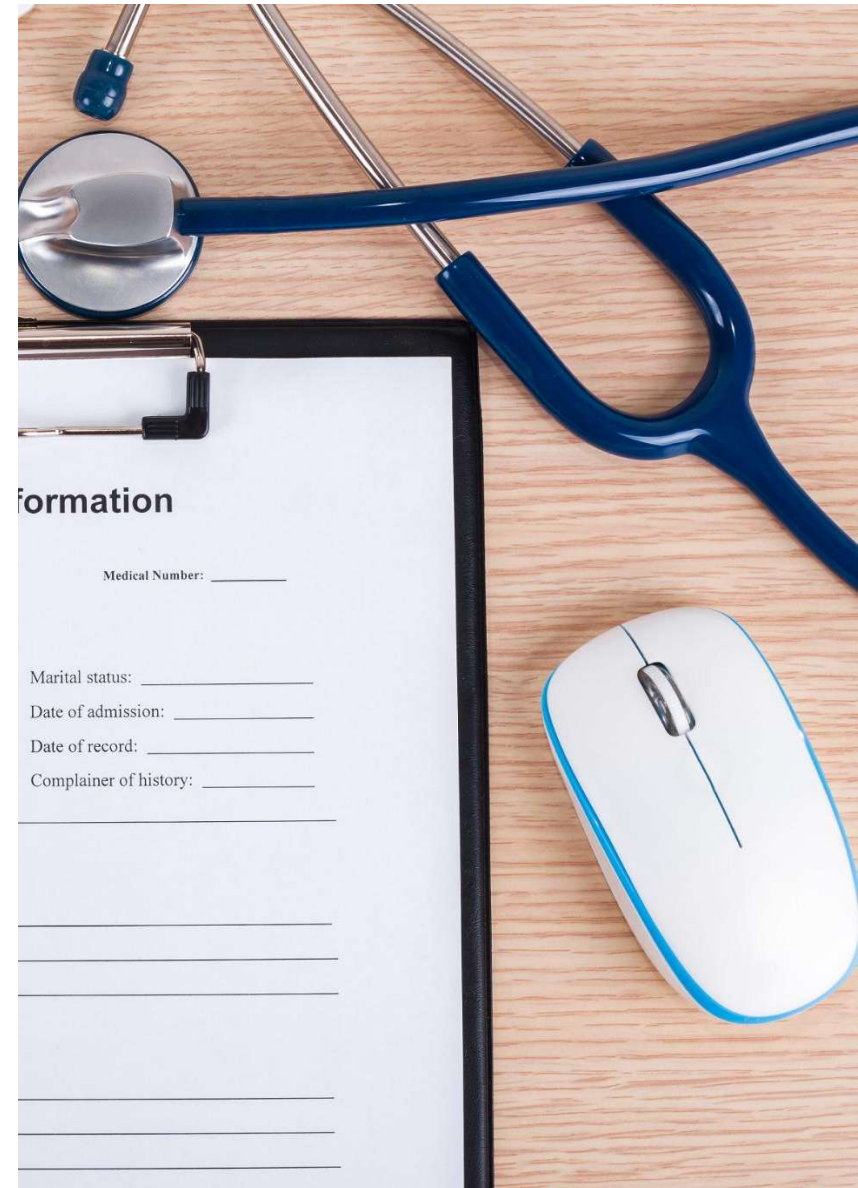
Screening for depression typically involves self-report questionnaires that measure the intensity and persistence of symptoms.

Common Screening Tools

Tools like the Beck Depression Inventory and PHQ-9 are widely used for identifying depressive symptoms quickly and efficiently.

Clinical Applications

These instruments help clinicians track symptom changes and guide further evaluation or treatment for depression.





Treating Childhood Depression

Combination Therapy Approach

Talk therapy and medication are most effective when used together to treat childhood depression.

Role of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

CBT helps children develop positive thinking and coping skills for managing depression.

Use of SSRIs in Treatment

SSRIs are the most prescribed medications for childhood depression, boosting serotonin to improve mood and well-being.

In-Person Therapy for Kids

Safe Supportive Environment

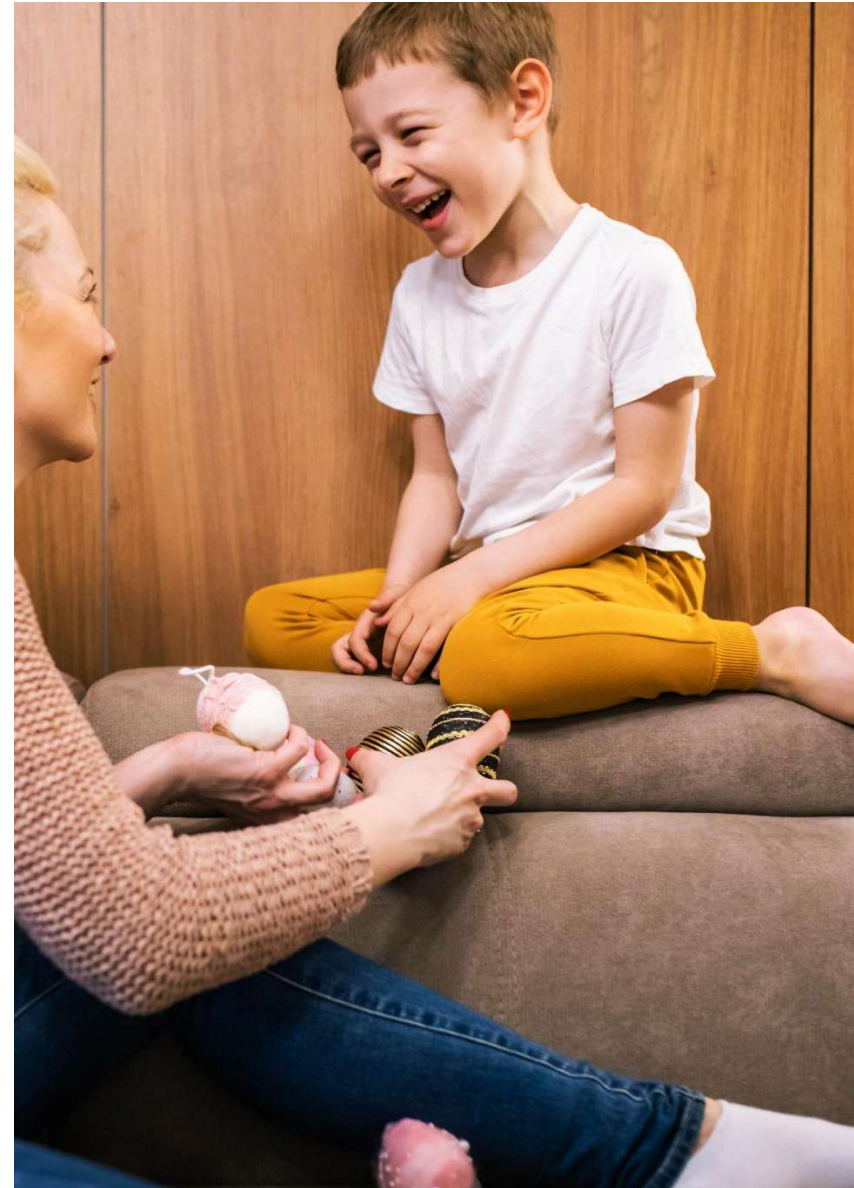
In-person therapy offers children a secure space to address emotional challenges like depression and anxiety.

Building Trust Through Interaction

Face-to-face sessions help establish trust, allowing therapists to notice nonverbal cues and emotional responses.

Personalized Coping Strategies

This personalized approach helps form stronger relationships and more effective coping strategies for children.



Coping Strategies for Kids

Active Listening and Validation

Listening to children and validating their feelings about illness helps build trust and emotional safety.

Encourage Social Connection

Social activities and support groups help reduce isolation and foster peer connection for children.

Creative Emotional Expression

Art, music, storybooks, and role-playing allow children to express and process emotions in healthy ways.



Supporting Depressed Children

Importance of Support Systems

A strong support system from family, teachers, and friends is crucial for helping children with depression feel understood and cared for.

Early Intervention Matters

Early counseling or therapy can help address emotional challenges and prevent depression from worsening in children.

Encouraging Open Expression

Creating a safe, open environment helps children express feelings and seek help when needed without fear of judgment.



Supporting Chronically Ill Children

Fostering Communication and Trust

Open communication and trust between providers, children, and families is crucial for effective chronic illness care.

Multidisciplinary Care Coordination

Coordinating multidisciplinary teams addresses both physical and emotional needs of chronically ill children.

Mental Health Screening and Intervention

Regular screenings and early intervention support coping skills and quality of life for these children.

Support for Chronically Ill Children



Integrated Behavioral Health Services

Pediatric hospitals offer mental health care alongside medical treatment, supporting chronically ill children with depression.



Community and Nonprofit Support

Nonprofits provide support groups and education for families, creating a network of care beyond medical facilities.



School and State Initiatives

School-based counseling and state-sponsored programs ensure families can access therapy and crisis intervention when needed.

Key Actions for Providers

Regular Depression Screening

Frequent screening for depression ensures early detection and timely intervention, improving patient outcomes and well-being.

Thorough Psychosocial Assessment

Comprehensive psychosocial evaluations help identify underlying issues and address patients' specific support needs effectively.

Connecting to Community Resources

Linking patients to community-based resources from the beginning enhances access to crucial support services.



Support for Families in Crisis

Mental Health Specialists

Mental health professionals offer tailored guidance for families coping with chronic illness, supporting emotional well-being and resilience.

Family Counseling Benefits

Family counseling provides a safe space for open dialogue and helps families develop effective coping strategies together.

Immediate Crisis Lifeline

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline ensures 24/7 immediate support, making help accessible during difficult and urgent times.



Key Mental Health Organizations

Support and Resources for Families

Organizations offer crucial support and resources for families facing mental health challenges, helping them find guidance and assistance.

Specialized Support for Mood Disorders

Specialized support groups are available for caregivers of children with depression and bipolar disorder, providing targeted help and community.

Extensive Libraries and Networks

Organizations maintain libraries, local affiliates, and nationwide networks, ensuring families have access to information and community resources.



Top Mental Health Resources



Online and informational resources

- **HealthyChildren.org:** The American Academy of Pediatrics website has articles on dealing with emotional problems and depression.
- **Child Mind Institute:** Provides articles and advice on mental health in children with chronic illness.
- **Calm.com and Headspace:** Offer free meditations and calming exercises.
- **National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH):** Provides information on mental health and the link between chronic disease and mental health.
- **Understood.org:** Offers a community forum for families to connect and share experiences.

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