

Depression Proofing your kids

Andrew Fuller

About 20% of people experience depression at some time in their lives. That means that almost every family has someone with some times of depression.

Unfortunately once someone has experienced depression, they are at far greater risk of feeling that way again.

While I can't guarantee that we can protect everyone from depression, there are things that we can do to make it less likely.

Sadness is not always bad

Everyone loves being happy but being sad at times is not such a bad thing. Sadness gives us time for thinking things over, sometimes regretting things we have done and helps us to resolve to be better people. Feelings of sadness, disappointment and set backs are part of human lives and without them we don't live whole lives.

We all want our kids to be happy but know that there will be times they will be sad. Helping young people to know that they won't be happy all the time is important. Realising that all feelings pass and that we can learn from the whole range of feelings, sadness included, is part of being human.

Lower the amount of stress

Try to identify some of the major sources of stress in your life and develop systems to deal with them. If you can't avoid the stressful situations at least develop a de-compression strategy. This is a way of winding ourselves down after being revved up. Going for a walk, doing some exercise and being active are some of the best ways.

Find some good friends

Friends are a treasure. Along with family, having a few good friends that we can talk things over with enriches our lives and protects us in difficult times.

Eat healthily

What we eat changes our moods. For example, countries that eat low levels of fish have higher levels of depression. Fish contains a fatty acid known as EPA, which is lacking in those with depression. Fatty acids are also found in flaxseed, walnuts and chia seeds and are good fats.

These are the good fats so if you are hesitant about eating them don't be. Whole grain oats have been shown to help with depression as they have folic acid and B vitamins and helps with a slow release of energy versus the crash and burn of blood sugar levels that can happen. Foods high in selenium which is found in meat, fish and cereal grains has also been shown to decrease symptoms of depression. Leafy greens have magnesium in them which helps with depression and helps with sleep patterns.

Have some sources of "Flow"

We experience "flow" when we get involved in an activity that captivates us. At the end of these types of activities people often think, "Where did the time go?" There are many sources of flow – computer games, sports, drawing, dancing, reading, swimming and surfing are some. These are the things that you do that absorb you and take you away from your day to day cares and worries.

Losing yourself in a few pleasurable activities that challenge you is highly protective against depression.

Belong to the karma club

Decide to increase good will in the world by doing something positive for someone else. Try this out for one week. Pick someone you know and try to "knock their socks off" as much as possible. Give them compliments, greet them exuberantly and take time to be with them. You'll be amazed at how much benefit you get from increasing someone else's happiness.

Be grateful and lucky

Even people who have had rotten things happen to them can rise above them. They usually do this by deciding to be lucky. While we can focus on the things that have upset us, most of us have many things and people to be grateful for. Focusing on that part of your life and deciding that you are lucky makes an enormous difference to your life.

Get enough sleep and rest

Getting enough sleep is one of the most powerful ways we can protect ourselves against depression. The structures in the brain that support the most powerful anti-depressant, serotonin, are built and re-built between the sixth and the eighth hour of sleep.

Over 60% of people who sleep 5 or less hours a night end up obese and depressed.

If you are having difficulty sleeping:

- *decrease caffeine consumption late in the day
- *decrease sugar in your diet
- *go to bed at the same time every day and wake up at the same time every day.
- *avoid late nights
- *avoid naps especially after 4pm
- *avoid spicy, sugary or heavy foods before bedtime
- *have the room at a comfortable temperature (some kids want to heat up the room and sweat the night away)
- *block out distracting noise
- *don't sit in bed while studying get in the habit of reserving it for sleep
- *warm milk before bed is good as it is high in tryptophan, which aids sleep.
- *try relaxation methods before sleeping
- *write out a to-do list for the next day before getting into bed.
- *have a pre-sleep ritual e.g. reading or warm bath
- *switch off the electronics especially phones

Get some exercise

Exercise decreases stress hormones such as cortisol and increases endorphins (happy chemicals). Exercise also helps release dopamine, adrenaline and serotonin, which work together to make you feel good.

Endorphins are a hormone like substance, produced in the brain and function as the body's natural painkillers. During exercise endorphins can leave you in a state of euphoria with a sense of wellbeing.

The most effective type of exercise for the release of endorphins is cardiovascular exercise and aerobics.

Moderate exercise for 10 minutes a day is enough to improve your mood and increase energy but it is suggested that you do 30 minutes per day.

Laugh more.

Laughter raises our levels of serotonin and dopamine. Make a point of watching TV shows or movies that make you laugh. Share funny stories and jokes with friends. People report that laughing even when they don't feel happy improves their mood and sense of well-being.

Checklist of Signs: When should I worry?

In the childhood and teenage years depression can be harder to pick because it is obscured by heightened emotions and times of grumpiness.

Some signs of depression are:

Loss of interest in usual activities - their get up and go, has got up & gone
Increased use of drugs and alcohol
Sleep problems
Changes in energy levels –either sluggish or agitated and restless
Changes in eating patterns change - either disinterested in food or over eating
Speaking about death and hopelessness
Increased and inexplicable irritability.
Your own feelings of anxiety about your child.

It is worth getting some help if your child or adolescent is appearing to be depressed. One way to do this to say, "I'm worried about you and I want you to come with me to see someone so that I can work out whether I should be worried or not". Try to find a good local psychologist, psychiatrist or doctor who can relate to young people.