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Depression and Anxiety in Children and Youth

“**Mood**” is another word to describe “feelings.” Moods can be positive or negative. Changes in mood (e.g., sadness, anger, excitement) are normal responses to a range of situations. Moods help to give us (and others) information about how what is happening is affecting us, and then energy to respond to the situation. Emotions become disordered when they are too intense for the situation we are in *or* when we have them for too much of the time. Mood disorders are common in children, adolescents and adults, and often run in families. There are a number of different mood disorders that look somewhat different at various ages.

Depression typically involves an intense period of deep sadness/irritability or loss of interest/motivation to do things that once were enjoyable (lasting as little as 2 weeks). Dysthymia tends to be less intense overall but goes on for a longer period of time (lasting at least 1 year in children). Other symptoms can also be associated with Depression or Dysthymia, such as: change in appetite or weight, change in sleep, fatigue, loss of concentration, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, and thoughts of death/suicide. Depressed people tend to withdraw from others. They may feel worthless, helpless, hopeless, useless. They are often pessimistic and negative, usually seeing the worst in a situation. In children, depression is often exhibited through irritability or interpersonal reactivity.

Anxiety is a normal response to a stressful or fearful situation. Anxiety gives people energy to run from or deal with the problem. At low levels, anxiety is manageable and can be our friend. Anxiety becomes disordered when we have too much of it for the situation we are in **or** when we have it for too much of the time. Anxiety is the most common family of disorders in children, adolescents and adults, affecting about 15 to 20 percent of the population over their lifetime. It often runs in families. Anxiety is typically characterized by anxious thoughts and a physiological response. The physical response is very real and is usually the result of the body releasing stress hormones (adrenaline, steroids) and/or becoming tense. Anxiety presents itself in different ways. Some people ask a lot of questions (e.g., “When are we going?” “Is that a tornado?” “What if we crash?”) Some people become quiet and withdraw. Others become active and agitated. Some can become angry and belligerent.

Anxious people tend to **avoid** what they are afraid of. They can become quite clever and creative in order to stay away from what they fear.

- Some find that withdrawing allows them to avoid situations (“I don’t want to.”).
- Others become more restless, agitated and out of control as they get closer to the feared situation (“I’m terrified!”).
- Some resist with anger and aggression (“I hate you! This is stupid!”).
- Others become quite controlling/difficult (“I’m not going. You can’t make me.”).

In the end, *all of these people are attempting to control the situation in order to control their anxiety.* Often, controlling the situation also means controlling others around them.

There are many things we can do to help children and youth with depression and anxiety.

1) **Talk about emotions.**

Help youth to build an emotional vocabulary. If we have words to describe the way we feel, emotions will seem less overwhelming and more manageable. Send the message that emotions are normal and should be talked about. If children cannot describe how they are feeling, you can say things like, “*You look sad,*” or “*You seem upset,*” or “*You sound angry.*”

2) **Encourage them to express their emotions in various ways.**

When emotions are bottled up, they tend to become more intense and difficult to manage. When they are expressed in a healthy way, they will lose their energy and intensity. Send the message that emotions are normal and should be expressed (as long as it is done without hurting yourself or others). Young people can be quite creative and can *draw* or *paint* their feelings. They can *play out* their feelings with toys and plastic figures. They can even *sing* or *dance* or *actively work out* their feelings (e.g., clean, organize, run). Help youth to modulate their emotions so that they aren’t out of control (this goes for excitement as much as for anger or fear or sadness).

Try saying things like:

- ❖ “I know you are sad about how your friend treated you. Could you do a painting of how you are feeling and share it with me?”
- ❖ “You look angry. I want you to use that energy to organize your desk (or go for a run, etc...).”
- ❖ “You’re frustrated with your work. Why don’t you try some easier questions and leave the difficult ones for now?” or “I know this seems like a lot. Why don’t you try every other question?”
- ❖ “I know that you’re excited, but I think you need to calm down. Please take a break to read a novel or sketch for a few minutes.”

3) **Encourage them to face what they fear.**

The main treatment for anxiety is *exposure*. We want to support young people to face their fears; however, we do not want to overwhelm them. Begin with small steps and support them along the way.

Try saying things like:

- a. “I know this is hard for you, but I’d like you to try your best.”
- b. “I’ll help you to try a little bit of it.”
- c. “You’re doing great!”
- d. “I’m proud of you.”

4) **Keep Them Active**

Anxious and depressed people tend to withdraw from others and become highly self-focused. Getting them out to do things can work wonders. Clubs, teams, and recreational classes can all help. Encourage them to visit others and to have friends over. Physical exercise is very important and has been shown to improve and stabilize mood. It can also improve sleep, appetite, and energy level.

5) **Build Self-Esteem Through Positive Self-Reflection.**

Help youth to recognize their successes, talents, abilities, and positive qualities. These are areas that they can be proud of, including:

- Achievements (completing, earning, learning, winning...)
- Independence (accomplishing things on own)
- Ethical actions (helping, caring...)
- Possessions or activities (owning something, going on a trip...)
- Qualities (being humorous, generous, caring, kind...)
- Belonging (joining teams, clubs, having family, friends...)

Have them write or draw their ideas. Make a “Success Scrapbook” or a set of “Pride Pages.” Have them paint, or draw, or create collages. Encourage them to organize collections of photographs, awards, ribbons, medals, and other important memorabilia.

6) **Be proactive.**

Recognize situations where anxiety might arise (e.g., tests, field trips, public speaking, new situations, changes in routines). Help to prepare young people for these events. Ask them about concerns or questions they may have. Talk about what might take place. Talk about how they feel. Make a plan for success. When the time comes, you might want to accompany your anxious child (or, for teachers, pair your anxious student with a relaxed, confident, supportive partner).

7) Teach them to relax.

Relaxation is natural but bad habits can creep in. Help young people to recognize the difference between tension and relaxation. Remind them to relax their muscles.

A good way to do this is to *tense the muscles and then let them go*. This way, they learn what it feels like to be relaxed.

Another good way to relax is to *breathe slowly and deeply*. Proper breathing triggers the body's natural relaxation response by absorbing adrenaline. When we breathe properly, the stomach should be pushed out for a second or two before letting it go.

Another way to relax is to close your eyes and imagine that you are in a relaxing situation. Then visualize yourself as relaxed and successful in the anxious situation.

8) Use rewards to motivate. Avoid punishment.

The best rewards are natural ones and are easy to deliver. *Rewards should be immediate, frequent, small, and tangible* if possible.

Rewards can be:

- ❖ Verbal (things to say)
- ❖ Activity (things to do)
- ❖ Material (things to get)

Teach youth to reward themselves (e.g., “I did a good job!” or “Now I can go play that video game I love!”).

9) Help youth to focus on positives. Avoid negative statements.

- Teach youth to reward themselves verbally and use positive self-talk (“I’m proud of myself,” “I did a good job,” “I tried my best.”).
- If young people make negative statements, particularly ones that are distorted, then help them to reframe things:
 - ❖ “I know you’re sad because your friend ignored you at recess, but he/she doesn’t *‘always’* exclude you.”
 - ❖ “You seem to have many complaints about school. Today, I want to hear one good thing for every negative thing you say. Let’s start with something good.”
 - ❖ “I know this work is hard for you and seems impossible. Let’s see if we can break it down into smaller steps so that you can have some success and start to feel good about yourself.”

10) Help them to clean up their thinking.

Moody people are often filled with distorted negative thoughts. A common approach used by people trying to be helpful is to counter their distorted thinking (e.g., “It’s no big deal - there’s nothing to be sad about.” “Cheer up.”). *This approach does not work.* What we need to do is to follow a 4-step process in dealing with the thoughts and feelings. Don’t skip any steps!

1. **Help them to recognize how they are *feeling*** (especially sad or scared feelings).

ASK: “How are you **feeling**?”

2. **Help them to recognize their *negative thoughts*.**

ASK: “What are you **thinking** about? “
“What are your (sad, angry, worried,...) **thoughts**?”

3. **Help them to recognize *helpful things they can think and do*.**

ASK: “How can you **think differently**?”
“How true is that thought?”
“What can you **think** that would be more helpful?”
“What can you **do** to help yourself feel better?”

4. **Help them to *evaluate results and reward their success*.**

ASK: “How will/did it turn out?”
“How can you reward yourself for your efforts?”

11) Reduce perfectionism.

Anxious people often want to get things perfect the first time. Encourage them to take risks and try new things. Help them to recognize that effort counts as much as results, especially when they are learning new things. Remind them that no one is perfect and help them to focus on what they did right and what they can learn from their mistakes. Emphasize improvements and personal bests, as well as setting realistic and achievable goals.

When Should A Specialist Be Involved?

Sometimes all our best efforts and supports are not enough, and youth need to see a specialist. People who treat depression and anxiety disorders come from many professions, including physicians, psychologists, counsellors, and social workers. Sometimes medication can help, but this can only be prescribed by physicians (e.g., psychiatrists, family doctors). If you are not familiar with a mental health specialist in your area, you can usually find one through your family doctor who will be able to make the referral.

Even when a specialist becomes involved, there is a lot you can do to help including monitoring the progress and providing important feedback to the treating professionals. You can also continue to try some of the preceding strategies.

*Mood and anxiety disorders are quite common.
Thankfully, they are also very treatable.*

If you would like to learn some more about mood or anxiety disorders in children and youth, the following books/e-books should be available online or through your local library/bookstore.

Understanding Your Teenager's Depression: Issues, Insights and Practical Guidance for Parents

Written by Kathleen McCoy, Perigree Books, 1991.

Helping Your Depressed Child

Written by Lawrence J. Kerns, Prima Publishing, 1993

Beyond the blues: A workbook to help teens overcome depression

Written by Lisa M. Schab, New Harbinger Publications, 2008

Antidepressant Skills Workbook

Ministry of Health and BC Mental Health and Addiction Services; found online at:
<http://www.comh.ca/publications/resources/asw/SCDPAntidepressantSkills.pdf>

Hear Me, Understand Me, Support Me: What young women want you to know about depression

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (2006); found online at:
http://knowledgex.camh.net/amhspecialists/early_intervention/validity/Documents/hear_me_understand_me.pdf

Keys to Parenting Your Anxious Child

Written by Katarina Manassis, M.D., Barrons Press, 1996