

Appendix 2:

Information for family and friends

Adolescence is often a complicated and confusing time for the young person going through it and for friends and family who watch all the changes that come with it. Relationships change, sometimes getting closer and sometimes more distant, and this can be unsettling and challenging for everyone involved. It is not surprising that, in the midst of all of this change, depression can be overlooked or thought of as being ‘typical teenage behaviour’.

However, depression is more than being a moody teen, and living with a young person with depression may also leave you feeling frightened, frustrated and confused. It can be difficult to understand what they are going through and so it is important for families and friends of a young person who is depressed to have good, clear information about depression. Knowing about this illness will help you to support the young person and deal with your own feelings, so that you can work towards recovery as a team.

The first step in tackling depression is to know what you are dealing with. Without understanding, you might battle with each other rather than depression.

One simple way to learn more about living with depression is to

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watch these two short films. The first short animation describes how you can help if someone you know is living with depression and in the second film, three young people who have experienced depression describe what it was like for them. Watching these films with the young person you know who has depression and talking about them afterwards can be a helpful way of understanding the impact this illness is having on your lives:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VRRx7Mtep8

www.bbc.co.uk/education/clips/zxqcd2p

What does it feel like to be depressed?

Depression is more than being sad. It changes how young people feel, how they see themselves and other people, how they feel in their changing bodies, how they plan, respond and manage their daily routines.

You may have noticed that the young person you are concerned about:

- is unhappy or irritable most of the time
- has lost interest in things and people they used to enjoy
- talks about feeling guilty, ashamed or worthless
- looks anxious and agitated
- has lost confidence in themselves
- has problems concentrating and making decisions
- isn't looking after themselves as well as usual
- is tearful and easily upset
- talks about life not being worth living or wanting to die
- has lost their appetite, or eats more than usual
- is forgetful

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- sleeps more than usual but is still tired all the time
- is not coping with things that used to be manageable

All these symptoms are difficult to live with and can be upsetting to see in someone you care about. These symptoms make it difficult to be around other people, and young people with depression often struggle to keep their normal routines going and to pick up on the new opportunities that are opening up for them at this time in their lives. It is important to try to be patient, and to understand that this kind of change is a common effect of depression and not a deliberate attack on you or your relationship.

Why do people get depressed?

The reasons why some young people get depressed are not always obvious. Some young people are more vulnerable to depression if they have been depressed before or if they are physically unwell, and the illness can run in families. Depression can also be triggered when young people face big changes or losses, such as relationship problems, family break-ups, changing school, becoming a young parent or bereavement. Feeling lonely and on the outside with peers is also strongly linked to depression in young people. Around twice as many teenagers experience depression compared to young children, because during adolescence life and the relationships we have with other people, family and friends, become more complicated. A teenager's brain works differently to an adult's and this means feelings are processed differently and the impact of other people is felt more intensely. The changes in teenagers' brains are fantastic for preparing young people to go out into the world but can also make some young people vulnerable to emotional disorders while these changes are a work in

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progress. This is one of the reasons why 50 per cent of lifetime mental illness starts by age fourteen and 75 per cent has started by the mid-twenties, when adolescence ends. To understand more about the changes that are happening in teenagers' brains, watch these films:

www.ted.com/talks/sarah_jayne_blakemore_the_mysterious_workings_of_the_adolescent_brain?language=en

www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/teenbrain/view/

What is useful to know about depression?

Depression is a very common mental health problem – it affects around 3 per cent of children and 8 per cent of young people over fourteen years old. Depression is identified twice as often in teenage girls as in teenage boys, although we suspect that depression in boys is often missed or overlooked when there are attention-grabbing behaviour problems. Depression is much more unpleasant than the low mood we all experience at times. It lasts longer and interferes with day-to-day life and relationships. As severity increases so do the range of symptoms experienced and the impact depression has on schoolwork, family and social life, all of which become very difficult to manage.

Young people typically become depressed for a period of time – usually about four to six months – and then recover, but an episode of depression can last longer than this. Depression also comes back for about half of the young people who have had it before. With support, and in some cases treatment, recovery from depression can also happen more quickly, and young people can develop skills to prevent or limit the impact of future episodes. It isn't possible to just 'snap out of' depression, but it is possible to

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help people to recover from this illness. This is important during adolescence because, as you will have seen in the films about adolescent brain development, the patterns developed in adolescence shape future experience so it is important to tackle the patterns depression promotes as quickly as possible.

What treatments are available?

Depression is treatable. Treatments include self-help (which really means a team effort), ‘talking therapies’ and medication. These different approaches can be used separately or together. Self-help is most useful when a young person has mild depression, but adolescents should not be left to try to sort this out for themselves – having a team of caring family and friends is an invaluable part of helping a young person to help themselves to feel better. If depression is moderate or severe, talking therapy and medication have been shown to be helpful for many young people.

The ideas behind Interpersonal Psychotherapy for adolescents with depression (IPT-A) can be used to guide assisted self-help because most of the ideas involve the young person and the people who are in their lives. That means you really can help the young person you care about to feel better. In IPT-A, depression is treated by tackling the difficulties that often crop up in relationships, focusing on those that are commonly experienced when a young person faces significant change, conflict, loss, or becomes isolated. Understanding and disentangling the connections between depression and what is happening in the young person’s relationships makes improvements in both more likely. Family and friends can make a very important contribution in this approach to the young person’s recovery.

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Anti-depressants can be effective if the depression is moderate or severe or goes on for a long time without change. They can help to reduce symptoms and to make it easier to join in with other people and to cope better, so that the young person can start to enjoy life and deal with their problems effectively again. Anti-depressant medications are not addictive and are designed to be taken over months and sometimes years, and the young person should continue to take them for some time after their symptoms have improved to help protect against future risk. Anti-depressant medications should always be closely monitored by professionals and parents or carers to help young people to use them safely and as prescribed. It can be very helpful for the person to have the support of the people around them to persevere with treatment so that they get as much benefit from it as possible.

Many people will recover from depression without active treatment, but this route to recovery can take much longer and is less likely to end in success if the depression is moderate or severe. It is in everyone's interests for depression to be treated as quickly and effectively as possible.

How can you help someone who is depressed?

Try to be a good listener – even if you hear the same thing several times or not very much at all from a silent young person. Try not to judge or rush to solve problems. It may be too soon to talk about solutions and stay focused on one subject at a time. It may be difficult for them to concentrate.

Encourage them to tell you how they feel and check that you have understood correctly. Being misunderstood is a painful experience for us all and it is better to check when you aren't sure than

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to try and mind-read. Admitting when you don't understand, and showing that you are interested in learning more, is more helpful than guessing and getting it wrong.

Only give advice if asked for it or if you have checked that they are ready to listen to your ideas. If you think you can see the problem that is behind the depression, you could offer to work with them to find a solution.

Sometimes depressed adolescents will need you to make decisions for them because they don't feel able to do it for themselves. This won't always be true and it is important to be open and clear about what decisions are being made and why and to give the young person an opportunity to be as much a part of the process as they can.

Spend time with them and support them in doing activities they might enjoy. Encourage them to keep going with helpful routines, such as going to school, spending time with friends, taking regular gentle exercise and eating well. This may be achieved slowly so be prepared to be patient and encouraging, noticing small successes as they gradually build up.

Help them to establish a wind-down routine before going to bed that includes switching off phones, computers and tablets an hour before going to sleep. This is a real challenge for most young people and they often need help to manage this important change in their routine.

If the young person with depression you are concerned about is quiet and withdrawn, let them know that you are available when they want to talk but also that you recognise this isn't easy for them. Lots of questions can feel overwhelming, especially when they don't have the answers you are both looking for. Don't

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underestimate the value of knowing you are there for them, even if nothing is said.

Recognise that your ways of relating to each other might change while the young person is depressed. Spending less time with the whole family and more time with friends or one family member at a time is normal and healthy in adolescence. They are likely to need more from the people around them than they can give back for a while. This will change again when the depression lifts. You can help by being flexible around these changes.

Remind them that depression is treatable and that it's not their fault that they are depressed. Be on their anti-depressant team.

If they are irritable, it is helpful to slow down and try not to react. Listen for opportunities to acknowledge their feelings and comments. At these times, conversations about important decisions or issues are unlikely to be productive. Plan to discuss important issues some other (specific) time, and make sure to return to the discussion at the time you've agreed to. This helps to build trust and encourages the young person to talk when they feel able to.

Take them seriously if they talk about feeling hopeless or harming themselves. Many young people with depression think about dying or harming themselves as a way of coping with difficult feelings. A smaller proportion of young people plan to act on these thoughts, but even if they don't, the thoughts themselves are frightening and can make people feel very isolated. Talking about them does not put ideas into the person's head and it can be reassuring to know that someone will listen and give support, without over-reacting, when it is most needed. Watch this film about a young person with depression who describes how self-harm was part of her experience to learn more about what can help:

www.bbc.co.uk/education/clips/zhjgkqt

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IPT-A will provide several opportunities for you to help the young person you know to recover from their depression. They will be developing their own personal story of depression and they will need your help to do that. This will help you both to understand their experience and to talk about it in a way that you will both find useful. They may ask you to help in developing this story, perhaps by providing information or by talking about your relationship. Accept this invitation and join in the exercises described in this book.

Some of the exercises in this book will be about using support more effectively; others can be used to sort out difficulties between you both, if your relationship has suffered while they have been depressed. Neither of you is being blamed. Depression is difficult to live with and puts even the best relationships under strain. Sorting out relationship difficulties can make an important contribution to helping someone recover from depression, and you can make a valuable contribution to this process.

Be ready for a relapse

It is tempting to try to forget depression as soon as it lifts. However, this is an illness many young people will have to face more than once. The best way to handle the risk of it coming back is to know what to do before it happens.

As your friend or relative recovers and is able to think and plan more clearly, the self-help guidance will prompt them to plan what to do if depression returns in the future. They will be asked to create a list of early warning signs. You will both have different points of view, so together you can create a more comprehensive list than either of you could do on your own. This will serve as a

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safety net for your friend or relative and for your relationship. The list should also include what you will each do in response to these signs to interrupt the depression as quickly as possible next time. Follow this plan if the need arises. Templates that will help you to structure your plan are available online to print out and complete together.

Create a support team that includes family, friends, and others the young person who has been depressed feels confident to include. When depression is kept secret, it is made stronger. Reverse the process by making sure the necessary people are well informed and ready to act when required, and you will help to protect your friend or relative now and in the future.