



# Signs of mood disorders in young people

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS, CARERS AND TEACHERS

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It is normal in life to experience fluctuations in our moods – sometimes we feel great and on top of the world, while at other times we feel like a flat tire – no energy, low self esteem. Drops in mood also typically accompany many of life's difficulties – such as grief, loss, shock, having a car accident, being diagnosed with a serious illness etc. It is also quite normal to worry and be anxious about certain things in our life – we all worry at times about money, our loved ones or whether our footy team is going to win the next game. Life truly is like a rollercoaster!

How do we tell, though, whether someone is just suffering the normal ups and downs of life, or if they are experiencing something more significant – a mood disorder?

## Symptoms of mood disorder:

Young people with mood disorders generally experience a specific set of

symptoms that have a significant impact on their daily function:

- A depressed mood most of the day for most days of the week;
- Feelings of worthlessness and or guilt;
- Problems with sleep – too much or too little;
- Significant lowering of self-esteem;
- Withdrawal and isolation from friendship groups and family;
- Changes in appetite or weight;
- Loss of interest and enjoyment in daily activities;
- Difficulties with concentration and memory;
- Lack of energy and motivation;
- Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness;
- Boys (and girls!) may become more angry or agitated –

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males often exhibit signs of depression as anger;

- Self-harming behaviours, or suicidal ideation.

## How do we find these things out?

- Ask them how they are feeling and inquire about some of the symptoms above;
- Find out how **frequently** the feel these symptoms – all the time, once a day, a few times a week, only about once every week. The more frequently they experience the symptoms the more seriously we need to think about an intervention;
- How **severe** are the symptoms? That is how much of an impact do the symptoms have on the life of the person – do they stop them doing all of

- the important things of life (come to school, learn, go out with friends, talk with parents etc, or do they have almost no impact?). The more impact, the more severe the symptoms, and the greater the need for an intervention;
- How long has the person been feeling these symptoms – **duration**? Find out how things have been over the past **2 weeks**. If they have been feeling really low for more than two weeks we should become more concerned.
  - What sort of **support** does the young person have from family and friends (quantity and quality)? If low quality/quantity support, then there is more risk of a mood disorder;
  - Are the symptoms **experienced across all areas** of the young person's life (more risk), or only at school,

or only at home, work or with friends?

- Are there any environmental stressors that are impacting on their moods, and what are their attitudes to these stressors (healthy/unhealthy);
- Observing them is important – particularly for major changes in behaviour;
- Putting all the pieces together – talk with other people (teachers, parents, friends) and get their feedback;
- How has the young person been at home? If the young person is experiencing these difficulties at home and in other settings, then we should be more concerned.

2. Help them to be active, eat healthy food and to get plenty of good sleep;
3. Encourage them to be socially active and to maintain friendships;
4. Help them stay involved in things which are fun and enjoyable;
5. Listen to them and let them know you are there to support them;
6. They may need help staying up to date with school work, assignments or study;
7. If there is any concern about suicidal ideation and their safety, seek urgent medical assistance.

### What can adults do?

1. Seek advice from a *registered health practitioner* if you are concerned about a young person's moods – school counsellor, GP, psychologist;

#### RECOMMENDED READING

- *Coping with depression in young people – a guide for parents*, Carol Fitzpatrick and John Sharry.
- See [www.youthbeyondblue.com/](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com/)



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