

Supporting a child with low mood – some tips

What is low mood and depression?



Sometimes we can feel sad, tearful or emotional for no apparent reason. Please don't worry, we can all have these ups and downs, and you might find that they just come and go. Sometimes, we might feel really sad because of certain things going on in our lives, such as loss and grief, feeling lonely or bored, discrimination, or previous bad experiences. Some young people feel sad, lonely, down, anxious or stressed for longer periods of time, to the extent that it can affect everyday life, and this can prevent them from doing things they would normally do. This is known as low mood or if it becomes severe, it can be called depression.

What might we notice if our child has low mood?



The main clue to recognising if your child has a low mood is a **change** in their behaviour. You might notice that they have lost some of their confidence and self-esteem, you might see a change in appetite (either eating more or less than usual), a change in sleep patterns (either sleeping more or less), they might lose interest in activities they used to enjoy, might be unusually worried or stressed. They might have less energy, be more forgetful, more tearful, sad or angry than usual. They might be less enthusiastic about their future and feel helpless. You might also notice an increase in behaviour that is a bit risky, or self-harm. Now, just something to bear in mind – your teenager will also be going through some major hormonal changes, which can cause very similar symptoms to these. These Top Tips to support your child can hopefully be helpful whether these behaviour changes are due to hormones or mental health (or both).

Back to basics?



It is easy to forget how effective some of the basics can be; drinking lots of water and eating a healthy diet (with lots of fruit and vegetables, beans, eggs etc.) are really good mood remedies. Cutting down on eating food with high sugar and high fat content will help reduce those mood dips.

Exercise and fresh air



When we are feeling low, we often lack the motivation to get our coat on and go for a walk, but if we manage to push ourselves into getting regular fresh air and exercise it can really lift our mood. Try encouraging your child to take the dog for a walk with you or go to the park. Research shows that being close to nature, such as a park, water or trees is really good for positive mental health. When you are outside in nature, try to help your child notice the things around them – the smell of the grass, the noise of the leaves on the trees or the sound of the water. Noticing our environment helps us stay in the present and can be really beneficial for our mental health.

Stay connected



When we are feeling low, we might be tempted to withdraw from those around us. Encourage your child to keep socially connected with friends either through social media or face to face. You might find your teenager will prefer their own company rather than spending time with family, so try to grab the small windows of opportunity for social connection where you can - a small compliment, a hug or watching TV together are all good ways to stay connected. If you are away at work all day, try to have a regular time to eat or have a snack together. Having a laugh can often be a great medicine for low mood, so try to create some family fun time together where you can.

One step at a time



Your child might lack energy and be struggling to be motivated. When we feel tired and unmotivated, we might be tempted to stay under the duvet, which can often breed increased lethargy and lack of motivation. Try and agree with your child that PJ days and TV binge watching days are best reserved as 'one offs' (and can be more enjoyable when we only do them every now and again), and encourage a daily routine of getting out of bed, getting dressed etc. You could try supporting your child to set small daily tasks and goals. Achieving these goals can give a sense of achievement and help build confidence and self-esteem, which can then increase motivation and energy levels.

Confidence building



Your child may feel they have grown out of activities that they previously enjoyed but not feel confident in trying anything new. They might feel intimidated by peers, feel that everyone else is having a great time except them (which can often be the message portrayed on social media), have increasing self-doubt and feel self-conscious. Often negative self-talk (where we tell ourselves that we aren't very good) creeps in and adds to low mood even more. You could encourage your child to combat this by suggesting they try positive self-talk or affirmations, such as telling themselves that they can do this, they are great, they are confident etc. Try and find opportunities where your child can feel a sense of achievement and help them celebrate their successes (no matter how small). Finding a sense of purpose can be very useful in challenging feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Feeling valued and feeling like they add value is a great way to improve your child's confidence and self-esteem. Is there anything they enjoy that they could take responsibility for? Can they do voluntary work or be part of a community project or team?

Cup half full or half empty?



You might find that your child has a negative perspective of the world where they only notice the negative things in their life and don't see the positive things they have. Try not to dismiss their 'cup half empty' perspective but you could try and pepper this perspective with some 'cup half full' thoughts. For example, you could suggest your child writes a gratitude diary every day where they identify 3 good things that have happened that day. Another way to introduce positive thinking is to gently highlight the positives, encourage your child to put positivity glasses on and use language that is hopeful.

And relax...



There's a difference between feeling unmotivated and relaxing – relaxing is a positive action that needs a bit of planning and preparation. Together you could think about what helps your child feel relaxed or comforted – it might be looking at family photos, listening to music, drawing, meditation or mindfulness, having a pamper night, talking to friends, being creative or doing an activity that keeps the brain ticking over, like a puzzle, reading a book or writing a journal.

And finally



You might become increasingly concerned about your child's low mood - maybe they are deliberately hurting themselves (have you seen any recent scars or marks?), or they are engaging in activities that are risky (maybe involving alcohol or drugs). Maybe they are having thoughts about seriously harming themselves, or their low mood is getting more severe. If so, now is the time to reach out and access more support. You can go to your GP, speak to your child's school, or contact your local CAMHS service. If you think your child is in any immediate danger you can go to your local A+E. There is help and support available, don't be afraid to use it.

