

## Managing childcare during depression

During depression it's hard enough to care for yourself. Caring for children can be doubly difficult. Consequently, there is one core principle on raising children when you are depressed: Don't do it alone. Here are some suggestions:

- **Don't be alone with the children all day.** Caring for children at home can be a risk factor for depression, most likely due to isolation from other adults. It's said that it takes a village to raise a child. One reason for this is that it takes a village to keep the parent sane. If you are raising a child at home, ensure that you have contact with other adults each day. Attend parents' and children's drop-ins, play groups, or community events. Make dates with other stay-at-home parents to get together to socialize, shop for groceries, exercise, or prepare food.
- **Ensure that you still have time to yourself.** Develop a system that allows you to have some time away from your children to regenerate – preferably in small chunks each day rather than in large gaps once a month. If you have a partner, arrange for him or her to take the children off your hands for part of the day. Make this a family custom, not an occasional treat that you have to ask for each time. If you don't feel you need your time off one day, *take it anyway* – avoid disrupting a valuable tradition. If you do not have a partner, see if another family member or a neighboring parent can help you out, perhaps by trading childcare duties.
- **Trade other favors for help with childcare.** If you want regular help with your children, avoid relying exclusively on the other person's good will. See if there's anything you can do in exchange. Payment is an obvious possibility, but isn't an option for most single parents. Cooking, laundry, ironing, or bartering for your professional skills are often more practical avenues.

When a parent is depressed, it's also hard on the child. There are ways of reducing this impact, however:

- **Ensure that children don't blame themselves for the depression.** Children naturally see themselves as the center of their own worlds. When a parent is depressed, they often assume that it has something to do with their own actions, and they may blame themselves. *"Mom's sad because I'm not good enough."* It's a good idea for a parent or a family friend to ask the child what they think about the depression. If they blame themselves, the adult can gently correct them in words that the child can understand – perhaps by drawing an analogy with other illnesses or conditions. *"It's kind of like that time your dad had those problems with his gall bladder. You didn't have anything to do with that either, right?"*

- **Ensure that children carry on with their own lives.** Part of a child's sense of security comes from having a routine. Depression runs the risk of disrupting that routine. Try to keep as much of a child's normal life intact as possible during a parent's depression. If Thursday has been Family Pizza Night, keep the tradition as much as possible. Also ensure that the child's outside activities do not suffer too much. If dad used to take the kids to the ball game Saturdays but just can't face the task, perhaps someone else can take them. The goal is to keep children involved in their own lives and to maintain as near-normal a routine as possible.
- **Ensure that children have someone to talk to.** Children often don't have adult confidantes that they can talk to about issues that confuse them. When a parent is depressed, they need one. Try to enlist the help of another trustworthy adult who can listen to the child's concerns, and perhaps help maintain the child's regular activities. In a pinch a therapist or other professional can play this role, but a friendly relative is often even better.
- **Watch for marked behavior changes.** Children can't easily put their concerns into words. Instead, problems are expressed in their behavior: aggression, inattentiveness, anxiety, or poor school performance. Regression to behavior from an earlier point in childhood (a reappearance of bedwetting or excessive clinginess, for example) is also a common response to distress. Any of these may be a reaction to a parent's depression. If the problem raises concern, seek help.
- **Consider taking an effective parenting course.** Raising children isn't easy, and most of us have no formal training in it. Most community centers or night school programs have courses on effective parenting skills, and almost every parent can learn a few tips that will help. There are also parenting support groups. If your local community center doesn't offer such programs, ask for suggestions as to who might. If your mood problem makes it difficult to contemplate taking such a course or attending yet another support group, put it on your list as something to consider when your mood improves.

If you are raising children, has your mood problem had any impact on your ability to parent? How so?

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What's one positive, concrete step that you could take to deal with these concerns?

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For more ideas, consult *Parenting Well When You're Depressed* (Nicholson et al., 2001).