**Supporting Children with Depression**

**For Parents and Caregivers**

Depression in children can be challenging to recognise and manage, but with the right support and understanding, your child can recover and thrive. This fact sheet provides essential information to help you navigate this journey.

**What is Depression in Children?**

Depression is more than just sadness; it is a persistent feeling of sadness or loss of interest that affects a child’s ability to function in daily life. It’s important to understand that depression is not a weakness or a phase—it’s a medical condition that requires care and support.

**Signs and Symptoms of Depression in Children**

Children may show different symptoms than adults. Look for:

* **Emotional Signs**:
	+ Persistent sadness or hopelessness
	+ Irritability or anger
	+ Feeling worthless, unloved, or guilty
	+ Loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed
* **Physical Signs**:
	+ Fatigue or low energy
	+ Changes in sleep patterns (too much or too little)
	+ Changes in appetite or weight
	+ Physical complaints like headaches or stomach-aches with no medical cause
* **Behavioural Signs**:
	+ Withdrawal from friends and family
	+ Poor school performance or lack of concentration
	+ Increased sensitivity to rejection or failure
	+ Talking about death or self-harm

**How to Support Your Child**

1. **Listen Without Judgement**:
	* Encourage them to share their feelings. Avoid dismissing their emotions by saying things like "cheer up" or "it’s not that bad."
2. **Validate Their Feelings**:
	* Let them know their feelings are valid and important. Say things like, “I understand you’re feeling sad, and I’m here to help.”
3. **Create a Safe Environment**:
	* Ensure they feel loved, accepted, and safe at home. Minimise stressors and establish a consistent routine.
4. **Encourage Healthy Habits**:
	* Promote a balanced diet, regular exercise, and a consistent sleep schedule. These can significantly improve mood.
5. **Monitor for Warning Signs**:
	* If your child talks about self-harm or suicide, seek immediate help from a mental health professional or a crisis hotline.

**Counselling and Professional Support**

1. **Therapy Options**:
	* **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)**: Helps children identify and change negative thought patterns.
	* **Play Therapy**: Allows younger children to express emotions through play.
	* **Family Counselling**: Helps improve family communication and support.
2. **Finding a Counsellor**:
	* Seek a licensed child psychologist or registered counsellor who specialises in depression. Your GP can provide referrals.

**Medication**

* **When is Medication Needed:**
	+ In some cases, a healthcare provider may recommend antidepressants alongside therapy, especially for moderate to severe depression.
* **Monitoring is Crucial**:
	+ Medications require careful monitoring for side effects, especially in children and adolescents. Always follow your doctor’s advice and check in regularly about how your child is responding.

**Support for Parents and Caregivers**

Caring for a child with depression can be emotionally taxing. Make sure you take care of yourself too:

1. **Seek Your Own Support**:
	* Join a support group for parents of children with mental health conditions.
	* Speak with a counsellor or therapist to process your own feelings.
2. **Educate Yourself**:
	* Learn about depression and effective ways to support your child. The more you know, the more confident you’ll feel.
3. **Communicate with Schools**:
	* Work with your child’s teachers and school counsellors to create a supportive learning environment.

**When to Seek Immediate Help**

If your child is:

* Talking about death or suicide
* Showing signs of self-harm
* Engaging in risky behaviours

Call emergency services or a mental health crisis hotline immediately.

**Crisis Resources**

* **Lifeline Australia**: 13 11 14
* **Kids Helpline**: 1800 55 1800
* **Beyond Blue**: 1300 22 4636
* **Emergency Services**: 000 (if your child is in immediate danger)

**Final Thoughts**

Supporting a child with depression requires patience, understanding, and teamwork. Remember, seeking help is a sign of strength, not failure. With proper care, your child can recover and lead a fulfilling life.

For further resources, consult your GP, local mental health services, or school counsellor. Together, you can create a brighter future for your child.