

FAMOUS PEOPLE AND THEIR MENTAL HEALTH



Kirsten Dunst

The actress entered rehab for help with depression when she was in her 20s.



Defining Depression

A local expert shares wisdom about defining depression in kids and teens and explains how it affects their behavior. *By Stacey Wincone*

More than 3% of children ages 3-17 have been diagnosed with depression, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That's roughly 1.9 million kids — and that doesn't account for the children who have yet to be diagnosed. Depression is a major issue, notes Laura Hutchison, a fully licensed psychologist of more than 20 years and the owner of Hutchison & Associates in Farmington Hills, one of various locations throughout southeast Michigan.

"I would say depression and anxiety is very prevalent in youth and teens," she says, and it has increased over time. "I can say we can't keep up with the amount of referrals we are getting," Hutchison adds.

Between the COVID pandemic and the fact that local children are still reeling from the Oxford school shooting that happened at the end of 2021, in addition to other factors, she notes, children are feeling depressed.

"As much as COVID is an epidemic, we are now handling an epidemic of these kids with depression and anxiety," she says.

When it comes to depression, what signs should parents keep an eye out for, and what can they do to help their child? Here, Hutchison offers advice.

Sadness or something more?

Everyone feels sad sometimes, but sadness that is happening daily or lasting for weeks at a time could be depression. Like with many things, there's no one-size-fits-all when it comes to symptoms of depression.

"I think one thing that can happen, es-

pecially with kids, is you know depression doesn't always have to mean you're crying all the time and you're sad," Hutchison says. "It can also mean you get angry really easily."

Younger children tend to show anger through temper tantrums, she notes. For kids who withdraw, many times their parents — who are busy and stressed out — don't notice because their kid is just doing their own thing. Kids will say everything is fine, but ask yourself the following questions: Are they engaging with you as much? Has their interest in activities changed? What are their actual facial and body expressions?

When it comes to teens, pay attention to whether or not they are withdrawing, if their mood is sad or they are having crying spells. It's more likely for teens to react this way than to have outbursts like younger children.

According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), other signs of depression in kids and adolescents include:

- Spending less time with friends or in after-school activities
- Changes in appetite and/or weight
- Sleeping more or less than usual
- Feeling tired or having less energy
- Feeling like everything is their fault or they are not good at anything
- Having more trouble concentrating
- Caring less about school or not doing as well in school
- Having thoughts of suicide or wanting to die

"Children also may have more physical

complaints, such as frequent headaches or stomach aches. Depressed adolescents may use alcohol or other drugs as a way of trying to feel better," AACAP notes.

Overcoming depression

While depression is common, it is something that people of all ages can work through — and the work starts early.

"I think from a super early age, even day one, start talking about feelings," Hutchison says. "Start labeling feelings, talking about feelings, talking about your own feelings."

For example, tell your child, "I'm feeling sad today, maybe I should go outside. Maybe I should call a friend." If you start having those conversations about your feelings and how you work on them, it's normalizing and allows children to understand what they are experiencing so they can tell you, "I'm feeling really sad right now. I need a hug."

Provide them with a feelings vocabulary and then as parents, listen to your child when he or she expresses those feelings.

Make sure you regularly check in with your kids and ask how they are doing and how their friends are doing. During car rides is a great time to have those conversations, Hutchison says. Ask specific questions too, she adds, such as, "who did you sit with for lunch today?" and then let the conversation flow.

If your child is making any comments about self-harm or not wanting to be alive, talk to a professional immediately, Hutchison says. Professionals can help talk kids and families through these tough times.

DECIPHERING DEPRESSION

It's not uncommon to feel sad, especially with so much going on in the world around us. But if you find that the sadness your child is feeling lasts for weeks at a time, they could be suffering from depression. If they're no longer interested in playing soccer or piano, or spending time with friends, these could be signs of depression.

Take a closer look at your child's behavior and check in to see if they're struggling. In this installment of *Opening Minds, Ending Stigma*, a local expert offers more signs to look out for, in addition to insight and advice on helping kids overcome depression. We hope you'll share this information with fellow parents and help the next generation feel hopeful in overcoming depression.



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