



EU funds
for Malta
2014-2020

Helping young people
successfully manage their

DEPRESSION

An introductory information booklet
about depression in young people
for parents and guardians

ankrayouth.org



What is Depression?

Depression is among the most common of all mental health conditions, with more than one in every five youths in Malta aged between 18 and 24 at risk.

This means Malta has the third-highest rate of depression in youths in Europe; 75% of the 150,000 people who face mental health problems at some point in their lives have experienced their first symptoms before the age of 25 (*Aġenzija Żgħażaġh, 2020*).

Depression is more than just a day or two of feeling down. Depression is the intense feeling of sadness, hopelessness, or irritability that is ongoing – lasting weeks, months or even years. The symptoms of depression can have a big impact on our daily life, long term physical and mental health, work, and relationships. However, depression is treatable, and help is available to recognise the signs, and address it.

When does depression become an illness?

Depression becomes an illness (i.e. a 'depressive disorder') when feelings of sadness last longer than normal and stop the person from enjoying things he/she used to like, or from taking part in usual activities. When this happens, symptoms other than sadness also develop, such as feeling worthless. The person may find it harder than usual to focus at school or to perform well at work and may have problems getting along with family and friends. Depression in young people is also often associated with other mental health problems, including anxiety, and drug or alcohol problems. Two thirds of adolescents with depression are thought to have at least one co-morbid psychiatric condition, most commonly the range of anxiety disorders, disruptive behavioural disorders and substance misuse problems.

Different people will experience depression in different ways, and as such treatment for depression will vary from person to person.



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What causes depression?

People often think depression is caused by something that has gone wrong, for example, a bad break-up, falling out with friends or failing an exam. While the exact cause of depression isn't known, a number of things can be associated with its development.

Generally, depression does not result from a single event, but from a combination of recent events and other longer-term or personal factors.

Negative environments or experiences

Cumulative adverse experiences, including negative life events and early childhood adversity, together with parental depression and/or non-supportive school or familial environments, place young people at risk for developing depression.

Young people can face many difficulties they're ill-equipped to handle emotionally: divorce, learning disabilities, and abuse and neglect, to name a few. By nature, they feel powerless against these situations, and the effects can remain with them well into adulthood. In this respect, many different factors and life circumstances can contribute to depression and anxiety in young people. These can include:

- fights with family or friends
- changing schools or starting secondary school
- being bullied
- experiencing a relationship break-up, recent death, abuse or neglect.

Genetics

Even a teen who doesn't face any of the challenges just mentioned can

be depressed, since an inherited tendency toward depression also can cause the problem.

Family history is a well established risk factor and children born to depressed parents face three to four times increased rates of depression. It is thought that both genetic and environmental factors contribute to this risk.

Other factors

Depression runs in families, but not everyone with a depressed family member becomes depressed. People with no family history of depression also can have depression. Besides life events and family history, other factors that play a role in causing depression include social environment, medical conditions, and negative thought patterns.

For teens, a stressful home environment or neighborhood poverty and violence can lead to depression. Other possible triggers for teen depression include learning disabilities that make academic success difficult, hormonal changes affecting mood, and physical illness. Drug and alcohol abuse also can affect mood and lead to depression, and many teens turn to these substances to medicate their emotions.

Recognising depression

The mental wellbeing of a child or adolescent is just as important as their physical health and often, young people who suffer from mental health issues such as depression and anxiety do not get the help they need.

One reason for this could be that young people will try and hide their feelings, thus signs can be subtle. If your child is showing any of the behaviours listed below, they may require further support for their mental health.

Most people have their first experience of depression during adolescence or young adulthood. Sometimes there are no obvious symptoms of depression, but parents may notice behavioural changes in their children that suggest depression and should not be ignored. These include:

- Refusing to go to school and decline in academic performance
- An increase of medically unexplained symptoms such as stomach aches, headaches or chest pains
- Low mood which has been consistent for more than 2 weeks
- Poor sleep, feeling tired all the time or poor concentration
- Change in appetite leading to rapid weight loss or weight gain
- Social isolation and giving up hobbies
- Poor self-care
- Presenting as hopeless about their future
- Talking negatively about themselves
- An increase in irritability, recklessness or aggression
- Looking sad or worried all the time, or showing a lack of expression

- Engaging in substance and alcohol abuse
- Engaging in risk-taking behaviour (for example reckless driving, inappropriate sexual involvements).

While anyone with depression can experience any symptom, men and women tend to experience and report symptoms differently. Men are more likely to talk about the physical symptoms of depression such as feeling tired, irritable or angry, rather than saying they feel low.



How depression manifests itself

Symptoms of depression affect the way a person feels, thinks and behaves.

Depression is estimated to occur among 1.1% of adolescents aged 10–14 years, and 2.8% of 15–19-year-olds (*WHO, Adolescent Mental Health, 2021*).

Like everyone, young people can have occasional mood swings, feel irritable sometimes and be particularly sensitive to rejection and criticism. But if these moods have lasted for two weeks or more, the young person could have depression.

Symptoms that may indicate depression include:

- feeling irritable or grumpy
- feeling tired
- feeling worthless or guilty most of the time
- having thoughts of death or suicide
- having trouble sleeping – either falling asleep or staying asleep
- lacking motivation and feeling everything is too hard
- losing interest in food or eating too much
- losing weight or gaining weight
- using cigarettes, alcohol or illegal drugs.

People with depression may have recurring negative thoughts, such as:

- 'I'm no good!'
- 'It's all my fault!'
- 'Life's not worth living!'
- 'People would be better off without me!'



How can I help my child?

It is crucial to address the needs of young people with mental health conditions. Seeking help early could avoid future institutionalization and over-medicalization, prioritizing non-pharmacological approaches such as psychological interventions and strategies.

Adolescence is a crucial period for developing social and emotional habits important for mental well-being. These include adopting healthy sleep patterns; exercising regularly; developing coping, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills; and learning to manage emotions. Protective and supportive environments in the family, at school and in the wider community are important (*WHO Nov, 2021*).

Encourage them to seek help – have the conversation

Are you worried about a young person and not sure what to say? Do you worry that you might make things worse? You want to help them, but not sure how? It all starts with a conversation.

Even if you aren't sure quite what to say, the important thing is that you say something. Let them know that you are concerned and why. By starting a conversation and showing your concern and willingness to support them, you're giving them an opportunity to share what they are going through. This can make all the difference in ensuring they get any support they might need.

Since depression often starts before the age of 25, it makes most sense to provide treatment when it first develops; that is, during adolescence and emerging adulthood. It is important that young people who are experiencing depression get help as early as possible. If depression is left untreated, young people are at risk of struggling in their studies or work, having difficulties in their relationships with family or friends, abusing alcohol, taking drugs or self-harming. If depression becomes severe, people may feel hopeless and begin to have thoughts of hurting themselves, or of ending their lives.

When you talk to your child, be specific about what you've noticed and why it's worrying you. For example, you might say: *'You haven't been playing basketball recently. Is everything okay?'* Or: *'I've noticed that you've been sleeping in longer than normal recently. Is there anything you want to chat about?'*

Ask them if anything is going on for them that they'd like to talk about. Your child might not open up right away, but you'll be planting the seed for them to talk about it, and this will be important when they're ready to open up. At first, they may say that nothing is wrong. Young people often don't connect their feelings and behaviours with experiencing depression.



Listen openly

Don't overwhelm your child with questions. Try to avoid lecturing them or giving them an ultimatum. The important thing is to get your child talking about what they're going through, and letting them know you are there to listen. Talking about depression can be hard for anyone, so if your child shuts you out at first, respect that they might not be ready to talk.

Validate their feelings

This isn't your experience, so even if your child's thoughts and feelings seem silly or irrational to you, it's important not to downplay them. Acknowledge what your child is describing, to ensure that they feel comfortable opening up to you.

Offer your support

Let your child know that you're there to support them, no matter what. Listen to and work with them to figure out the support that's best for them.

Sometimes your child may not want to seek help. In this case it's best to explain that you are concerned and perhaps also provide them with some information to read about depression. It's important for them to know that depression is a common problem and that there are people who can help.

Look after yourself

It's heartbreaking to see your child struggling. You may feel powerless if they don't want to talk to you about what is happening to them. Your support is vital, but you may not be



able to directly influence their mood. This doesn't mean that you're a bad parent! In these circumstances, your own mental health is particularly important and it may be helpful to talk to a professional about what is going on for you and ways to look after yourself, so that you're in the best place to support your child.

It might help you to think of depression as being like a broken arm: your child has a broken arm; they are not a broken arm. Likewise, your child has depression; they are not depression. Just as you wouldn't hesitate to seek help for your child's broken arm, confident that they will heal, having the same attitude

towards depression will help your child realise that there is no need to feel ashamed, afraid or embarrassed. Stigma and misunderstanding about depression can stop people from getting the help they need – imagine not getting help for a broken arm! Be positive and optimistic that you will find the help your child needs for depression. Be prepared that it might take some time, but feel confident that you will both get to a place where your child can be well again.

Finally, to look after others you need to also look after yourself – try to get enough sleep, keep fit and healthy, and seek your own support from friends or professionals.

What forms of depressive conditions are there?

There are several types of depression, and while they are all characterised by intense low mood, there are also important differences.

Major depression is also known as major depressive disorder. The most recognised symptom is low mood and loss of interest in activities that were once considered pleasurable. These symptoms can be mild, moderate or severe, but will probably interfere with daily life and relationships. The low mood will persist for at least 2 weeks, and will be experienced on most days. Sub-types of major depression include:

Melancholic Depression

A severe form of depression that includes physical as well as emotional symptoms.

Psychotic Depression

Includes hallucinations (hearing or seeing people or things that aren't there); delusions (false beliefs that other people don't experience or agree with); or paranoia (feeling suspicious of other people or feeling that everyone is against them).

Bipolar Disorder

Characterised by extreme mood changes that disrupt daily life. Symptoms of manic episodes include showing extremely high energy in speech and activity, agitation and a reduced need for sleep.



What sort of treatments are available?

It is important to know that there are treatments that work for depression in young people.

Firstly, encourage your child to talk about how they feel with someone they know and trust, such as yourself, a teacher, a school counsellor, family member or friend. An important next step is for your child to visit their doctor to learn whether they have depression and what can be done to treat it. There are three main approaches to treating depression:

1: Lifestyle changes

This involves reducing substance use and improving sleep and exercise.

2: Psychological treatments

'Talking therapies' such as CBT, DBT, mindfulness and other emotional regulation techniques and online therapies focus on building skills to deal with life stresses and to change negative thinking patterns.

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)

involves working with a professional (therapist) to identify thought and behaviour patterns that are either making your child more likely to become depressed, or stopping them from getting better when they're experiencing depression.

It works to change their thoughts and behaviour by teaching them to think rationally about common difficulties, helping them to shift negative or unhelpful thought patterns and reactions to a more realistic, positive and problem-solving approach.

Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT) is a structured, skills-based

therapy that helps people live "a life worth living" A trained DBT therapist teaches skills to:

1. Navigate up-and-down emotions
2. Manage relationships appropriately
3. Tolerate difficult emotions safely and reduce suffering through reality acceptance
4. Increase their awareness and focus in the present moment
5. Finding balance between two extremes

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) teaches your child to focus on the present moment – just noticing whatever they're experiencing, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant – without trying to change it.

MBCT can help to stop their mind wandering off into thoughts about the future or the past, and avoid unpleasant thoughts and feelings. This is thought to be helpful in preventing depression from returning because it encourages them to notice feelings of sadness and negative thinking patterns early on, before they become fixed. As a result, they're able to deal with warning signs earlier and more effectively.

3: Physical therapies (including medication)

The doctor may also add antidepressant medication to the treatment plan, though this should be a last resort. It can take up to six weeks for your child to feel better, but most young people will notice an improvement. Often all these treatments are used in combination.

Can depression be prevented?

There is plenty your child can do to keep symptoms away, even if they are quite vulnerable to depression.

Making healthy choices

When not feeling well, it is easy to let the basics such as eating, sleeping and keeping active slip. Having a healthy lifestyle helps to improve your child's overall sense of wellbeing.

Healthy diet

What we eat not only affects our physical health; it affects our energy levels and the way we think and feel about ourselves. Help your child to eat regular, healthy meals, avoid snacking on junk food, and drink lots of water.

Keeping active

Being physically active improves your child's strength, fitness and confidence. It can also help your child to sleep better while also improving their ability to manage intense emotions, like anger or fear.

Reduce stress

Your child can learn to cope better with stress by:

- putting off making big decisions while stressed until they are feeling better and thinking more clearly;
- connecting with people to create a sense of belonging;
- talking openly with friends and family about feelings and problems;
- identifying what helps them relax, such as listening to music or going for a run;
- getting organised.

Avoiding or limiting drug and alcohol use

Drug use has negative effects on how your child feels and thinks – even if the short-term effects are appealing.

Developing a regular sleeping pattern

A regular sleeping pattern is important for our bodies to recover and recharge. Without it, your child can find it hard to concentrate and remember things.

Hobbies, work, school and university

Having things to do that are both interesting and rewarding can significantly improve your child's mood as it provides them with a sense of purpose and confidence.

Strengthening relationships

Relationships are a great source of fun and support but they can also be stressful at times. Support your child to think about the relationships in their life, and to consider:

- talking about any relationship difficulties with you or a friend they trust;
- the fact that all relationships have ups and downs, so to try not to let difficult times get to them;
- thinking about who they want to spend time with.

Be part of reducing the stigma towards mental health.

A key element in reducing stigma related to mental health is for everyone within the community to have a good understanding of it – that is, improving our mental health literacy.

There are three key elements to mental health literacy:

- **knowledge of signs and symptoms of poor mental health**
- **knowledge of prevention and management techniques**
- **knowledge of how to support others**

It is important that we all play our part in challenging any misconceptions around anxiety with the intention to bring perceptions in line with reality.

Useful support:

www.oli.chat

Richmond's free, 24/7 webchat offering emotional support and practical guidance.

kellimni.com

A free, 24/7 support service managed by SOS Malta.

Aġenzija Żgħażaġh

Provides youths with a safe space to express views, needs and concerns.

Youth in Focus Service

Provides social work intervention to adolescents and young persons.

ANKRA is a project set up by Richmond for young people affected by mental health problems in Malta.

We are here to provide help, information and support.

Helpline: **1770**

Helpchat: **www.oli.chat**

info@ankrayouth.org

ankrayouth.org



**SUPPORTING
MENTAL WELLBEING
IN YOUTHS**



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