

Parenting Through Depression

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How to take care of yourself and your family

Writer: [Tonya Russell](#)

Clinical Expert: [Cara L. Macari, LCSW](#)

Most parents wonder at one time or another whether or not they're doing a good enough job. But for parents dealing with depression, these thoughts can feel overwhelming. Because depression affects self-esteem and makes it hard to stay engaged with daily life, parenting with depression might make showing up for your kids feel impossible.

If you're a parent dealing with depression, you're not alone. The latest research shows that 8.4 percent of adults in the U.S. — or 21 million people — have had at least one *major depressive episode*.

And [some research indicates](#) that the risk of developing depression may be higher for parents of children with intellectual and *developmental* disabilities. Here's how to tell if you might be experiencing depression, and how to care for your kids (and yourself!) if you are. Depression is treatable, and with support, parents experiencing it can thrive.

What is it like to parent with depression?

There are different degrees of depression, and it can look different from person to person. Some parents experience depression [around the birth of a child](#), while others might develop it much later. Still others may have been dealing with depression throughout their lives and find that parenting intensifies or changes the experience of coping with it. And depression can affect parents of any gender. You can [learn more here](#) about common kinds of depression and their symptoms.

Cara Macari, LCSW, a clinical social worker at the Child Mind Institute explains that depression often affects a parent's motivation. "With depression come strong urges to sort of hunker down and isolate oneself," she says. "That makes it difficult to engage in activities, and could even make it difficult to engage with kids."

This was the case for Jazmine Cruz, 34, of New Jersey. The mother of two and elementary school teacher has battled depression since her grandfather's death when she was in middle school. Both of her births came around the same time as the deaths of close family members, which caused a spiral each time. "You're supposed to be overjoyed for your first child, but I didn't have that," recalls Cruz. "Everything that should have been joyful about motherhood was impacted by depression." Cruz struggled to pull herself out of that feeling, sometimes to the point of her children's milestones not seeming significant. She'd grown accustomed to feeling unmotivated and down, but once she had kids, those symptoms became even more distressing.

Macari adds that some parents with depression may find spending time with their children to be less enjoyable, and they may develop a monotone or flat affect. "This can make you appear or feel less warm to your kids and others around you." And the effects of depression on parenting can also impact the parent's self-esteem. "When you're feeling a spiral, you might skip going to the park, for example," says Macari. "What comes along with that is, 'I let my kids down, I'm a failure, I'm a terrible parent.'" And after having

that thought, you have more sadness, and more depression. And when you have more sadness, and more depression, you continue to have decreased motivation.”

It’s important to remember that [depression](#) goes beyond ordinary parenting stress. All parents have rough days, and it’s normal to feel overwhelmed sometimes. The difference is that depression symptoms persist on good days, too, though they may be exacerbated by stressful ones. For example, dreading a busy day from time to time is a normal part of parenting. But frequently feeling so down that you can’t get out of bed is a sign of depression.

How a parent’s depression can impact children

Macari notes that parenting with depression can make it difficult to help kids deal with their own big emotions. “If you have a very young child who’s having a lot of tantrums or behavior problems,” she explains, “it’s harder for a parent to regulate their own emotions and help the child regulate theirs.” Without stable emotional role models, young children might have a harder time learning appropriate reactions to upsetting or frustrating situations.

For older kids, a parent’s depression can lead to a sense of responsibility that goes beyond what’s appropriate for their age. Macari notes that they may step into a parentified role, taking on decision-making and household duties when their parents are down.

For instance, if a depressed parent struggles with things like hygiene and housekeeping, or even caring for younger siblings, the child in the parent role may not have the support they need and miss out on age-appropriate activities like spending time on schoolwork and with friends.

Despite the challenges, it’s not a given that parental depression will impact kids negatively, especially when the parent gets treatment. There are strategies and supports you can use to make parenting with depression more manageable and make sure your kids’ needs are met.

Discussing your depression with your children

When a parent is struggling, it’s often helpful for a child to have an age-appropriate explanation.

Even young children can tell when a grown up is dealing with depression, even if they don’t understand it or have the words to describe it. Cruz describes her daughter’s experience: “Once she got to six or seven, she’d begin to notice my energy shift. She’d realize something was wrong because I’d gravitate towards my room.”

New York City-based therapist Jor-El Caraballo, LMHC, points out, “It’s critical to remember that children are incredibly perceptive, and talking comfortably is essential.” He recommends having age-appropriate conversations. “The conversations should largely depend on the kid and developmental level. For instance, it might be appropriate for younger children to just share that the parent isn’t feeling well and has a condition that affects their mind and makes them more tired than they might look.” It’s also important to emphasize that the parent’s feelings aren’t the child’s fault, since young children in particular tend to blame themselves for problems around them.

For Cruz, part of dealing with depression is being honest with her daughter about what she is experiencing. They have mental health check-ins twice a week, and her daughter participates, expressing her own concerns when she has them. They both try to be as descriptive as possible. When Cruz’s son is old enough to understand and articulate his feelings, she intends to bring him into the conversations as well.

For older children, Caraballo recommends naming depression and identifying specific symptoms. You can also tell kids a little about how you're taking care of yourself and getting support — for example, “I have hard days, but my doctor is helping me find ways to make things easier.”

Clinical psychologist Gillian Woldorf, PhD, uses this direct approach for her 13-year-old. Their conversations include calling Dr. Woldorf's condition by name and describing how she's treated it through therapy and medication. “I think it's as important for my kid to know about the family history of depression and anxiety as it is for her to know about the family history of allergies and asthma,” she says. “I want her to know what to be alert to in her teen years and beyond, so that if she does start to experience anything similar, she won't feel as blindsided and alone as I did.”

Dr. Woldorf's approach includes honest conversations about topics ranging from [suicidal ideation](#) to [self-harm](#), and she encourages her daughter to let her know if she or any of her friends are struggling with their mental health. She's found in her practice treating children and teenagers that kids can handle tough conversations, and that parents who are hesitant to have these conversations may be battling their own sense of stigma. “Today's kids and teens are growing up in a society that's much more open about mental health issues than the society of the '80s and '90s,” she says.

Getting treatment and seeking support

Macari notes that getting treatment for your depression is the best way to protect the mental health of your children. “The good thing is that there are a lot of interventions for parents with depression,” Macari says. [Effective treatments](#) for depression often include both therapy and medication, and support groups (either online or in person) can also help. Additionally, Macari notes that *family therapy*

can be a way to help kids and adults build communication and coping skills together.

It's also important to enlist other adults (including your child's other parent, if they're involved) in supporting you and your family while you're dealing with depression. For instance, you might have a couple of friends and family members on call to step in when you're not feeling up to daily tasks. Setting up this support on days when you're feeling better means that your whole family will be under less stress during harder times. Cruz says that, even when she's spiraling, having a support system has been crucial, and that network includes therapy, her mother, and her pastor. When she's down, she's grateful for the support of loved ones who are able to pitch in.

Depression comes with an increased risk of thinking about and attempting suicide, so be sure to reach out for help if you're having thoughts of suicide. [The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) (1-800-273-8255) offers free, 24/7 support across the United States.

Finally, remember that experiencing depression does not mean that you're an inadequate parent. Both Cruz and Dr. Woldorf show that one can still care for their children even when battling depression. Being open about their struggles with their daughters has helped both their mental health and their children's.

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