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Battling the Blues

**The Handbook for Helping
Children and Teens with Depression**

Grades 3-8

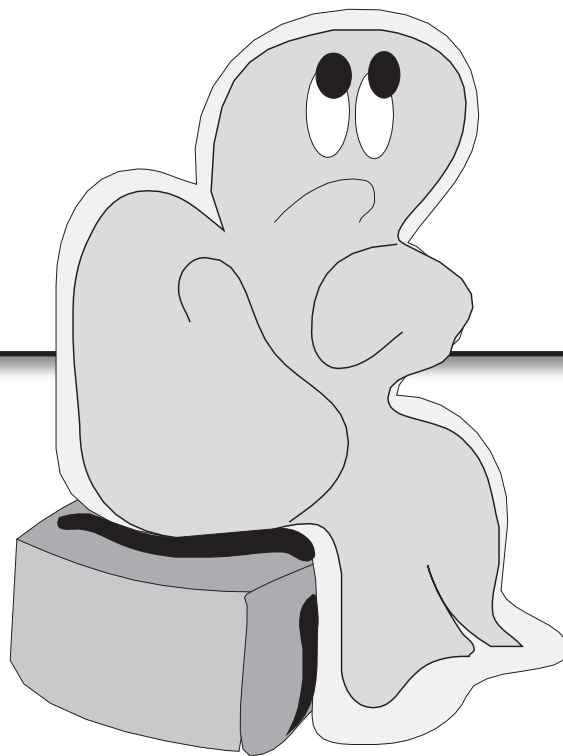
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DEFINITION:

What Exactly Is Depression?

Childhood depression goes beyond the normal “blues” that we all encounter. All children, teens, and adults have “down” feelings from time to time.

Real depression, however, is a persistent condition that interferes with normal functioning.



The Limbic System

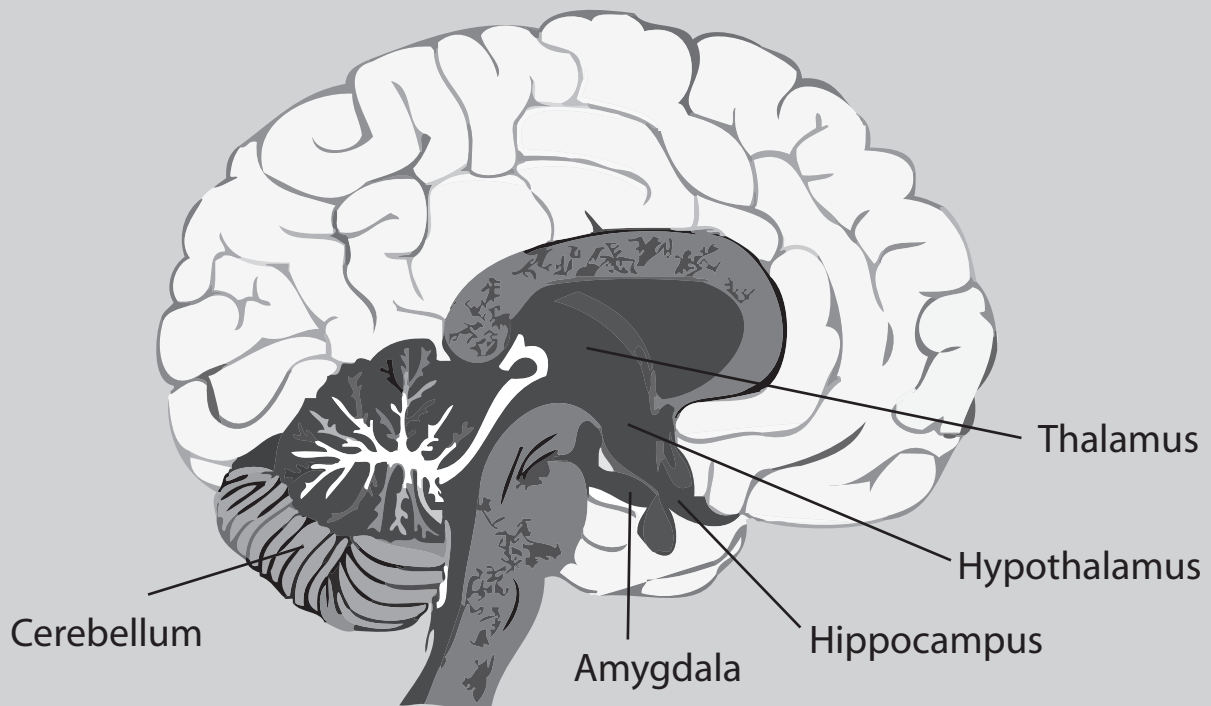
The limbic system is a particular part of the brain that is associated with depression. The limbic system regulates activities such as emotions, physical drives, and responses to stress. Three specific parts of the limbic system that relate to depression are the hypothalamus, the hippocampus, and the amygdala.

The **hypothalamus** helps regulate body temperature, hunger, thirst, and sleep cycles. It also is involved with the regulation of the hormone GmRH that is linked to the control of emotions and sexual activity. The main function of the hypothalamus is homeostasis, or seeking to maintain the body's status quo.

The **hippocampus** plays an important role in motivation and emotional behavior. Buried deep within the forebrain, the hippocampus regulates emotion and memory. Antidepressants such as Prozac impact the neurons in the hippocampus.

The **amygdala** is the part of the brain that is activated in stressful situations. Stress triggers the emotion of fear. The amygdala is, in effect, our body's alarm system. The reasoning or thinking part of the brain is needed to sound the "all clear" when danger or stress has passed. In cases of post-traumatic stress, it is difficult to turn off the activated amygdala. Again, antidepressants may be needed to reduce anxiety and depression after intense or frequent stressful events.

Cross Section of the Brain



HOW SSRI_s WORK

Disorders such as depression and anxiety are caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. These chemicals called neurotransmitters allow nerve cells to communicate. The neurotransmitter called serotonin is of particular importance. Note how SSRIs affect the balance of serotonin in the brain.

- ✱ Serotonin is released from one nerve cell and passed on to the next. In this process, some of the serotonin released is reabsorbed by the first nerve cell.
- ✱ SSRIs block the reabsorption of serotonin into the first cell.
- ✱ By blocking the reabsorption of serotonin, more serotonin is made available to the next nerve cell.
- ✱ As the amount of serotonin is increased in the brain, the correct chemical balance is reached.

In addition to SSRIs, there are two other classes of antidepressants. These are monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs) and tricyclics (TCAs). Each class of antidepressant medications increases certain neurotransmitters in the brain, and each does this in a slightly different part of the brain. Therefore, one person may get relief from one type of medication, while another does not. Each person will be different in their medication needs. **Caution:** MAOIs can cause adverse reactions when combined with certain foods and other medications. Therefore, careful guidance by a physician is especially advised.

Children's Medication Chart

Antidepressant and Antianxiety Medications

Trade Name	Generic Name	Approved Age
Anafranil	clomipramine	10 and older (for OCD)
BuSpar	buspirone	18 and older
Effexor	venlafaxine	18 and older
Luvox (SSRI)	fluvoxamine	8 and older (for OCD)
Paxil (SSRI)	paroxetine	18 and older
Prozac (SSRI)	fluoxetine	18 and older
Serzone (SSRI)	nefazodone	18 and older
Sinequan	doxepin	12 and older
Tofranil	imipramine	6 and older (for bedwetting)
Wellbutrin	bupropion	18 and older
Zoloft (SSRI)	sertraline	6 and older (for OCD)

("Treatment of Children," 2006)

Battling *the* Blues

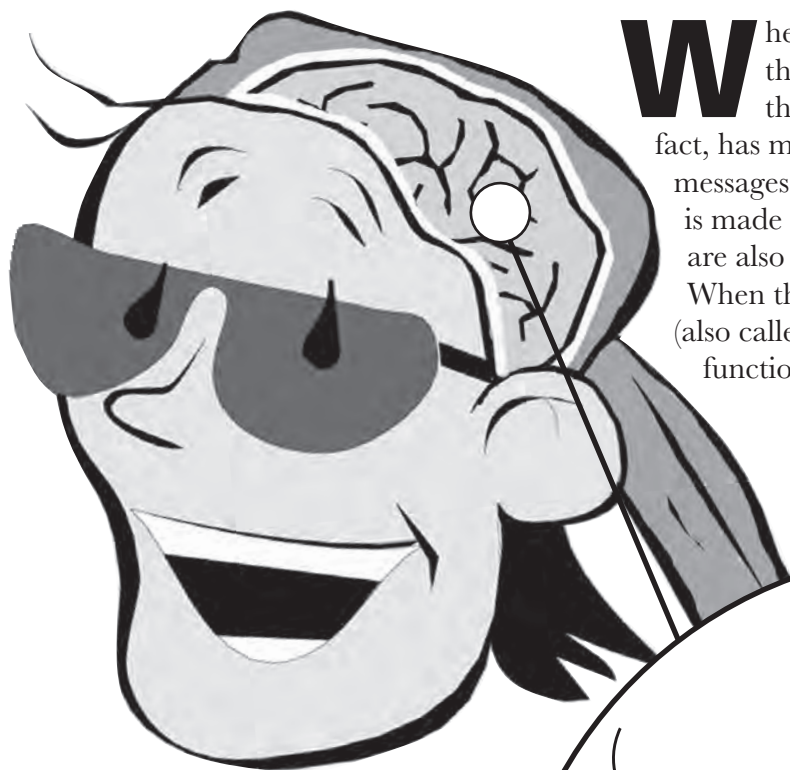
SECTION 2

For Kids and Teens

What You Should Know About Depression

Helping children and teens to understand depression in simple and concrete terms is vital. Kids need words for what is happening to them. Beyond this, coping strategies and skills empower children and teens to courageously move forward in combating depression. This section is dedicated to these purposes. Please teach the following practical ideas to children and teens you know who need encouragement to overcome depressed feelings.

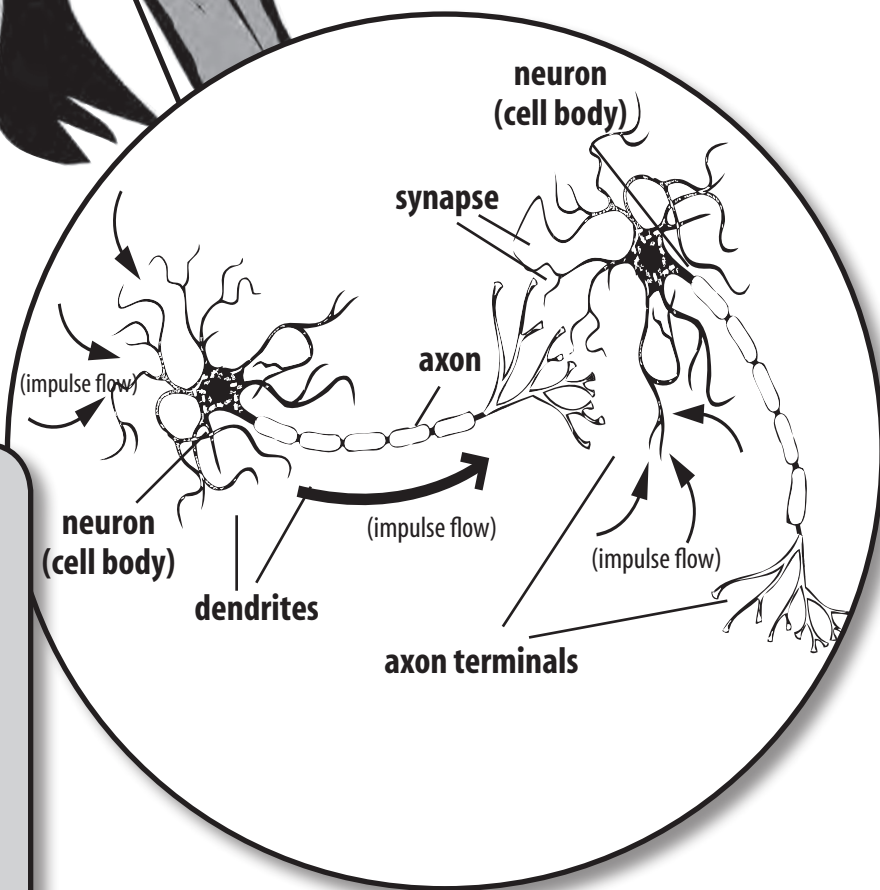
What Is This Thing Called Depression?



When depression occurs, scientists believe that the brain is low in certain chemical substances that need to be strengthened. The brain, in fact, has more than sixty chemicals that pass along messages from one nerve cell to another. The brain is made up of more than 10 billion nerve cells that are also called neurons (“Causes: Biology,” 2006). When there is a shortage of chemical messengers (also called neurotransmitters), the brain does not function as usual. As a result, depression can occur.

Did You Know?

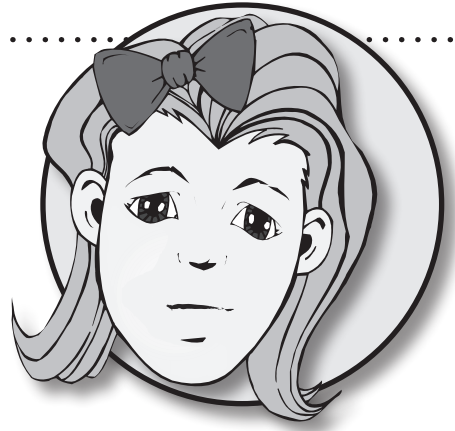
Messages are passed from one nerve cell, also called a **neuron**, to the next. As pictured, there is a tiny space between each nerve cell called the **synapse**. Nerve cells relay messages across the synapse by chemical messengers called **neurotransmitters**.



Activity 1

How Are You Really Doing?

Feeling down or hopeless and just not enjoying life are two key signs of depression.



In the space below, write or draw what life is like for you now.

Write down the name of an adult family member or an adult you trust at school or in the community. ***The person I can talk to is*** _____.

Plan to talk to this person soon.

A Letter to Remember

Sometimes when people are having a bad day and thinking that maybe their lives don't matter much, they take out letters and notes that have been written to them over the years with kind and encouraging words. When they look at these positive messages, they are reminded that their lives are important and they do make a difference. Consider saving the kind words people write to you.

In a similar way, it is important to be a friend to yourself. You need to think positively about yourself and your life. In the space below, write yourself a letter of encouragement. Write about “**TALAC**.” This stands for “**I am Lovable and Capable**.” Write down what makes you an “**TALAC**” person. Then when you have a bad day, read this letter to yourself. You’ll be reminded that you are special and that you are here for a good purpose.

My Letter to Me

Date _____

Dear _____,

[illegible]

Strategy 6

Looking Past Yourself—It's Not About You

One of the best answers for depression is to focus away from your own feelings onto others. The following ideas will show you some good ways to do this.

A. Focusing Outward

Looking beyond yourself is another help in overcoming depression. One of the main characteristics of depression is withdrawing from people and activities. The world can get smaller and smaller when depressed feelings control us. You may not feel like talking to others or participating in activities. Regardless, it is important to challenge yourself to do at least one or two things each day. By stretching yourself a little bit more each day, you can reclaim more of the active life you used to have. Instead of focusing inward on your feelings, focus outward on people and activities. Choose to get involved, if even in a small way. This should jump-start your life again.



B. Have a Purpose Driven Life-The Antidote for Depression



The best-selling book called *The Purpose Driven Life*, by Rick Warren, opens with an interesting sentence. It says, "It's not about me." Getting your thoughts on things beyond yourself gives purpose and a reason to wake up in the morning. You'll find that when you give to a good cause with your time and talent, you'll naturally feel better. There is something self-healing about volunteering at an animal shelter, a hospital, a homeless shelter, a nursing home, etc. Reaching out to younger kids by helping them learn to read, play a sport, etc. is another option, too. There are countless ways to help others that don't take a lot of time. The good part is that you will benefit as much as the people you help. Go for it!

Real depression is not a mood that one can just "snap out of."

It is a serious mental health problem that affects one in thirty-three children and one in eight adolescents. *Battling the Blues* explains in understandable terms what depression is and provides practical coping strategies so that children and teens can gain a greater sense of control in their lives. The good news is that depression is a treatable condition with proper medical and psychological interventions. The ideas in this book represent helpful tools that adults and children can readily employ in the treatment process.

Kim "Tip" Frank is a long-time educator and therapist. He has had the privilege of helping hundreds of kids formerly as a teacher and for the past many years as a counselor/therapist. He works in the public school setting and also maintains a private counseling practice. Tip has authored and coauthored a number of books on topics including ADHD, anxiety disorders, depression, social skills, and grief. He also has opportunities to lecture across the country. Most importantly, Tip is a devoted husband and a father of two teenagers.



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This book is divided into two sections.

SECTION ONE

Primarily written for concerned adults, this section is for parents and professional helpers who are trying to encourage and help children through the cloud of depression. Specific tips are provided in this first section that help adults set a healing environment for kids and teens. In addition, a deeper understanding of depression is developed along with resources that can be accessed to overcome depression.

SECTION TWO

Although mainly for kids and teens, parents and helping professionals can discuss and encourage the use of the strategies provided in this section. The strategies are mainly geared for grades three through eight. They can be easily adapted, however, for younger or older children. The strategies are kid friendly and perhaps a bit off the beaten path, but they have proven to be successful. With regular practice, these strategies and techniques can become automatic and effective. As a backdrop to these coping strategies, a clear explanation is given about depression and how it affects young people. Armed with a good understanding of depression, along with practical coping strategies, one's life can and will improve.

