

## **Introduction**

This leaflet is part of a series that has been written by the Child and Family Psychology Service. Many parents and carers experience some concerns about their children and at times look outside of their family for extra advice or suggestions. We hope this leaflet helps you to understand your child's feelings of sadness and low mood, with some ideas for how to support them.

## **Sadness and Low Mood**

It is common for all children and young people to experience times they feel sad, low in mood or "feeling down". Things often improve when they are supported to talk about what is "on their mind" by parents and/or other trusted adults. Low mood will often lift when they feel that parents or other trusted adults are alongside them, being present with them through the challenges they are facing and offering emotional support. There is undoubtedly wisdom in the saying "a problem shared is a problem halved".

## **Is it "normal" for children and young people to experience low mood?**

Feeling sad is a part of life – everyone feels upset, sad or disheartened from time to time. Learning to cope with different emotions is part of growing up and feeling sad can be a natural and appropriate response to what is happening in our lives. It can be particularly common after distressing events or big changes, but sometimes low mood can seem to happen for no immediately obvious reason or a series of smaller changes. Mostly, the passing of time, life changes and the support of those around them will help these feelings resolve.

## **Possible factors leading to low mood**

Children and young people have a lot to juggle and manage in their lives, working out their place in their family relationships and friendships; working out how they feel about themselves, what they are good at, what they like or dislike and what they stand for; navigating school and work demands and all whilst they are developing

emotionally, physically and cognitively. Add in the ups and downs of life, any particular challenges they face individually and the challenges to those around them (parents, teachers, friends, society etc.) and it is no wonder emotions fluctuate and can feel overwhelming at times.

Changes, even those that appear positive can bring sadness and loss to everyone and some feel this more than others. It could be a helpful starting point to think to yourself about what changes (positive and negative) and other challenges your child/ young person may be facing to help understand their sadness. Some like to write their thoughts on a timeline (you could start from whatever age you want or look more recently and closely at the last year, months and weeks). Asking your child if they think anything has changed or if they have an idea where the sadness comes from could be an option and they may be able to work with you on a timeline. They will have knowledge of situations which you may not share, particularly if they are older (e.g., with friendships whereby upset to friends may be upsetting to them).

The following is a list of just some of the factors that can contribute to children and young people feeling distressed and experiencing low mood:

- friendship problems
- feeling rejected or left out
- being bullied
- effects of social media
- the death of someone close to them
- physical illness in themselves or a family member/ loved one
- issues relating to sexual identity or gender
- family conflicts
- divorce or separation
- stress of school work or the culture at school or exam pressure
- changing school or moving home
- abuse (including racial abuse)
- poverty or financial stresses for the family (which can lead to insecure housing or worries about access to food, transport etc.)
- outside events (e.g., health pandemics, war or other world events)

The impact of some of these situations can seem more immediate and easier to 'see' but we know that children and young people (as do all of us) react to their circumstances so thinking broadly is helpful to get a full picture.

## **Signs of distress and low**

Some children and young people are able to talk about their emotions so can clearly communicate any distress, sadness and low mood they are experiencing. Other children are not so able to communicate their distress using words so are likely to show how they feel through behaviour. Some possible signs of distress and low mood include:

- anger or frustration
- low self-esteem (being negative about themselves)
- tearfulness
- worrying
- feeling anxious
- problems at school
- feeling tired and lacking energy
- sleep problems
- changes in eating habits
- withdrawing from friends or family
- losing interest in hobbies
- substance misuse
- self-harm
- changes in behaviour or so called 'inappropriate' behaviour

Please note, it is common for children and young people to show a range of different emotions and behaviours when distressed and whilst this guide is written around the theme of sadness and low mood, in reality a lot of these things can surface together. The ideas below can be applied in general and/or you may find some of the other leaflets written by our department (based on some of the above themes) useful as a reference too.

## **What to do**

### Validate their feelings

It is important that your child recognises that it is ok, even if it feels uncomfortable and unwanted, to feel sad. It is important that children and young people know that you understand that sadness is a natural emotion and you are there to try to help them feel comforted in this. Validating their feelings which means showing them that whatever they are feeling, it is accepted and understood by you, is often the first and most important step – we call this “being with” a child/ young person in their emotional experience.

Of course it is tempting to come up with ways to “jolly” them out of their sadness/ a period of low mood because you so want to make them feel happier but it is important to resist this impulse at least initially because it sends the wrong message, that it is not ok for them to feel sad. Finding the right time to let them know you’ve noticed they seem sad (if they are not coming to you to say so) is the place to begin.

### Show that you’re in this together

Talk with your child about the signs that you’ve noticed and let them know that you care about them very much and you will be available for them throughout. Tell them that you will willingly hear what they are going through, “that a problem shared is a problem halved” and that even if you cannot come up with any immediate solutions between you, they will not be alone in this. It might be better not to come up with too many questions because young people might find this disconcerting. Just listen and empathise, which means showing them you get why they are upset and you feel their distress e.g., “I can see how hard this is” “I’m not surprised you’re feeling upset” – or whatever words you would normally use in this way.

### Persist

If your child is not willing to discuss things with you when you first broach the subject, then don’t be put off. It can help to anticipate some rejection as this is very common in the first instance (it can feel scary to open up) and not something to be taken personally (although of course it can feel that way). Try again another day, gently remind them that you are there for them, say something like “when you’re ready... you talk, I’ll listen”.

### Be Appreciative

It is important that young people feel appreciated for who they are. Make sure that you use opportunities to delight in them regularly. Your positive and appreciative feedback should not be dependent on their successes and achievements but simply be about who they are. That way you will help develop their self-worth. It is also useful to notice some of the everyday positive things your child does, things that might generally take for granted. In this way you can constantly be developing a positive story for your child about themselves. This is important especially when times are difficult because your child may feel more comfortable talking about things that bother them if they are reassured by also having less ‘intense’ conversations, where they are reminded of the things you like about them.

## Mood Diary

Some children and young people like to write things down, to help them make sense of their emotions, in which case a 'mood diary' can be useful. This could be done at a set time once a day or as something they complete when they feel a particular emotion, in this case sadness or conversely, when they don't feel so sad and want to understand why. Examples of a mood diary for young children and for older children are attached at the end of this leaflet. The aim is to better understand the situations causing distress and this may be a starting point to supporting changes that could help them.

## Maintain Connections

Low mood can lead children to withdraw from friends and activities they enjoy, but this can make things worse. Help your child to connect by making opportunities for seeing friends and family members that they get on well with, and activities you know they enjoy, even if it's just for a short time at first.

## Involve them in Activities

Do activities such as days out together, go for a walk, run or others sports activities. Play board games as a family and do craft activities together, play music, sing, dance together. Be prepared to join them in their world, e.g., by playing video games together and then gently encouraging them out from there. Try to get them involved in trying something new. As with talking to them, anticipating some rejection with these attempts can help you as a parent to persist in continuing to offer these opportunities.

## Activity Diary

If your child is someone who likes to write things down then an Activity Diary can help you and them to understand the links between activities they do and their mood. There are examples at the end of this leaflet for both younger and older children.

Doing an activity diary can help you and your child plan activities that may improve mood. If they've been feeling low for a while, it's useful to try activities even when they don't feel like it - it can take a while for their feelings to catch up to the point they can feel motivated and excited before an activity.

## Back To Basics

Where possible encourage the child/ young person to get into good habits around sleep, nutrition and exercise.

## Social Media and Reality

Children and young people (as with us all) can compare themselves and their lives to those portrayed on social media. It is important to talk with your children about how the images they see on social media are not reality because they are likely to be edited and enhanced to look a certain way. Also, the fact that people often only select and show their best and happiest moment to show on social media gives very unrealistic impressions of other people's lives. Conversely, some people may choose to share their difficulties in excess which can also give an unrealistic impression of life.

In broaching this topic, it's important to acknowledge that there are likely to be positive effects of social media for your child so taking a balanced approach rather than necessarily assuming social media is a source of distress is helpful (this is direct advice from young people we have worked with). In the same vein, taking time to understand what, if anything, is unhelpfully contributing to distress, before taking action is useful to have the best impact (e.g., whilst tempting, a blanket ban on social media may not be the most effective way to manage difficulties).

## Further help?

Some children and young people like to talk about how they feel with parents and are comfortable to do this, others less so. You and/or others who are close to your children (the people they tend to talk to e.g., an older brother or sister, a teacher or family member) will know best what works for your child. You could mention other people who might be available to them such as other family members, friends, a friend's parent/s, a teacher (or other supportive person in school e.g., wellbeing leads or a school counsellor), a youth worker, advice services, your family GP and/or helplines (some are listed in the further help section).

If you are worried about your child being low in mood for a long period, despite your best efforts to support them, then seeking the advice and support of others is crucial even if your child may not like this as an idea.

It's also worth considering whether it would be helpful for you yourself to talk with other people, particularly those who know your child. This could include family members, friends and the school. People will often rally round and help if they know you have some worries. It can also help you to feel less alone at a time when you may be feeling stressed, and this in turn can help you feel more in able to help your child.

## Social Support and Social Action

We listed some of the experiences that can cause distress to children and young people, and it is clear some situations may be outside of yours or your child's immediate control. For example, access to finances varies between families and this can have a big impact on the opportunities and levels of stress a family experiences. It can feel extremely disheartening and hard to recognise some of these factors and sometimes feeling powerless and helpless to change these things drives sadness. Whilst this is difficult, it's also very important to recognise because this acknowledgement helps to avoid thinking there is something wrong with you or your child for how they are feeling. Other wider political and economic decisions can again feel 'distant' or harder to see but can have a big impact on wellbeing.

In building a support network around you and your child, it can help to connect with people who are affected by similar situations, this is likely to help you and your child see you are not alone in the impact on your wellbeing. Seeking support in this way will also be a powerful lesson to teach your child how to respond to these situations.

It's also "ok" not to do anything more at this time - the following ideas, as with all in this leaflet, aren't meant to be instructions (the last thing that can help is pressure to "do more"!), just ideas you can choose to follow up or not.

For yourself or for your child (especially if they are older), joining a group locally in your community or getting some friends or others who are in a similar situation to start to meet can be a starting point. This could be just socially or you may begin to develop ideas about the changes you think may help you - something referred to as "social action". Some examples might be a group of people in a shared situation:

- writing to school or other organisations to ask for help with a group concern or a project idea
- making contact with your assembly minister about the impacts of some of the life situations you are in and asking for support
- starting an after school group (if for younger children, then perhaps with a rota for shared childcare)
- finding other groups in the community that may support you in the above.

For young people, finding out about their local youth forums or joining the school wellbeing committee or other pupil forums can be a useful

way to express their concerns. By taking action with others, it can develop a sense of control and power, something which can combat feeling helpless and low.

There are some websites which may be useful if you like these ideas in the 'Further help' section of this leaflet, as well as guides for youth social action.

## **Further help & resources**

You may also find the following sources of information useful.

For tips on talking with younger children:

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/talking-to-children-about-feelings/](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/talking-to-children-about-feelings/)

For tips on talking with teenagers:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/talking-to-your-teenager/>

Health Care Professionals (Health Visitor, School Health Nurse, General Practitioner, Clinical Psychologist) – can help you and your child to talk through problems you are having.

Bibliotherapy Scheme – is a scheme that runs throughout Gwent. It is a scheme through which health care professionals, can recommend books to parents which may help them with the difficulties they face. Parents take a written recommendation to any library in Gwent and in return are given the recommended book. You do not have to be a member of the library and you do not have to pay for the recommendation.

## Books and literature

Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids (and Their Parents), Eline Snel

20 great literature quotes about sadness:

<https://literatipulp.com/2016/12/01/20-great-literature-quotes-about-sadness/>



Parentline offers help and advice to parents on bringing up children and teenagers

Call 01702 559900      [www.parentline.co.uk](http://www.parentline.co.uk)

Childline is a counselling service for children and young people up to their 19th birthday in the United Kingdom provided by the NSPCC.

Call 0800 1111      [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

Samaritans provide emotional support to anyone in emotional distress.

Call 116 123      [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

The Youth Wellbeing Directory provides a list of local and national organisations for anyone up to the age of 25, along with important information you may find helpful.

[www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing/](http://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing/)

Youth Access can help you find free and confidential counselling, advice and information services for young people in your local area.

[www.youthaccess.org.uk](http://www.youthaccess.org.uk)

Papyrus provide confidential support and advice to young people struggling with thoughts of suicide, and anyone worried about a young person through their helpline, HOPELINEUK.

Call 0800 068 41 41      [www.papyrus-uk.org/](http://www.papyrus-uk.org/)

[Social action resources and how to develop support networks](#)

For young people – What is Youth Social Action?:

<https://www.iwill.org.uk/about-us/youth-social-action>

For information on voluntary groups and networks:

<https://wcva.cymru/>

Information on becoming an 'active citizen' including facilitator resources:

<https://active-citizens.britishcouncil.org/about>



**The Worst  
It Could Be**






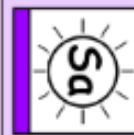



- 1
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- 10

**The Best  
It Could Be**



## What I do in the week

day	what I did		
	breakfast	lunch	dinner
			
			
			
			
			
			
			

Some people like to use a rating scale to help notice the links between feelings and activities - you could use a scale like the one on the page before or something similar to:



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

## Activity Diary

Write briefly in each box: **what you did**, one word that describes your **mood**, and a **number** to show how strong that feeling was (0-100%). For example: Sitting in English lesson, sad 50%, and anxious 80%.

Some people like to rate how strongly the activity helped them feel they'd **achieved** something (0-10); how strongly they felt **close** (and connected) to others (0-10), and how much they **enjoyed** the activity (0-10). This is because we know these things link to mood. If you wanted to add this, you could write a letter and a rating e.g., A=3, C=0, E=0.

Day →							
Time ↓							
6 - 8am							
8 - 10am							
10am - 12noon							
12 - 2pm							
2 - 4pm							
4 - 6pm							
6 - 8pm							
8 - 10pm							
10pm - 12mn							

After completing the diary, you might notice some patters in how your feelings and mood change over the day or week, and how particular activities affect your mood. It can help to look at this with someone you trust who cares about you (e.g., a parent/ carer, sibling, friend, teacher or other) to help notice patterns and perhaps plan a range of activities which give you a sense of Achievement, Enjoyment and Closeness (using another blank form).

## Mood Diary

<b>Day &amp; Time</b>	<b>Mood / Feelings / Emotions</b>  <i>How strong was the emotion? (0-100)</i>	<b>Comments</b>  <i>(What were you doing before and after, who with? Any thoughts or images you imagined, anything that you or others did that helped at all?)</i>
<b>Example:</b>  10am, Tuesday	Sad (40%), worried/anxious (80%)	Sat in English class, teacher talking about GCSE's - thinking "I'm never going to get this". After class, Sophie made me laugh about something and said she felt the same

It can help to look at this with someone you trust who cares about you (e.g., a parent/ carer, sibling, friend, teacher or other) to begin to understand links between the situation you're in, your thoughts, actions (of you or others) and how you feel.

## **Feedback**

We hope that you have found some ideas in this booklet that you would like to try out. In our experience, change can be a difficult process for everyone in the family, and things can get worse before they get better. It can be hard to keep going, but many families tell us that it is worth persevering.

*Please let us know what you think about this booklet*

1. How easy is this booklet to understand?

<b>Not at all easy</b>	1	2	3	4	5	<b>Very easy</b>

2. How helpful are the ideas in this booklet?

<b>Not at all helpful</b>	1	2	3	4	5	<b>Very helpful</b>

3. Please tick the box and give us your address if you would like to receive another booklet from our range.

Sadness and Low mood	
Adversity	
Anger	
Anxiety	
Behavioural Difficulties	
Bereavement	
Separation and Divorce	
Siblings - Helping your children to live with and learn from each other	
Sleep Problems	
Sleeping walking, nightmares and night terrors	
Soiling	
Trauma	

4. Do you have any other ideas for booklets?

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5. Your name and address

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Thank you for taking the time to give us your comments. Please return this slip to us directly or by giving it to the person who passed the booklet on to you.

Please return to:

*Child and Family Psychology and Therapies Service*

*Llwyn Onn*

*Grounds of St Cadoc's Hospital*

*Lodge Road, Caerleon, Newport NP18 3XQ*