

PARENTING WHILE DEPRESSED

Millions of moms and dads are struggling to manage their mood, which can make the work of parenting feel impossible and have lasting effects on kids. But there's consensus from both mental-health experts and parents who have raised their children amid feelings of hopelessness and despair: Help is out there, and the sooner you access it, the better life will be for you and your family.

by **LESLIE GOLDMAN** / illustrations by **REYNA NORIEGA**

WHEN MADDIE was single and in her early 20s, she began experiencing intense fatigue and lack of motivation, “a quiet undercurrent of sadness that was never so debilitating that I couldn't get out of bed but that would flare up for months at a time.” (Along with the other parents quoted in this article, her name has been changed due to the sensitivity of the subject.) Negative thoughts with themes of insecurity and fear of

abandonment played on a loop in her mind. Upon seeing an Instagram pic of friends enjoying a night out, for instance, she'd hear a voice in her head, taunting, “Of course they didn't invite you; you're boring and annoying.”

When the Seattle-based teacher was 29 and her elder daughter was 2 years old, the thoughts returned. Except now, they accused her of being a horrible mother. “I'd be bathing my daughter and worrying

about when she'd stop loving me, or lying in bed next to my husband, thinking, ‘When will he figure out what a fraud I am and leave?’ The kids were at a hard age, motherhood still felt new, and I was overwhelmed with working and parenting, feeling like I was doing everything poorly,” Maddie says. “I'd get them to bed and sit on the stairs and cry, thinking, ‘They deserve better than me,’ but I had nothing left to give.”



Although Maddie felt alone, her experience was far from uncommon. About 20 percent of U.S. adults will be diagnosed with clinical depression at some point, and “women are at highest risk during the parenting years,” says Megan Smith, Dr.P.H., M.P.H., associate professor of psychiatry and child study at the Yale School of Medicine and an expert in maternal mental-health research. Anxiety disorders with symptoms including persistent worrying and rumination (from “Why isn’t my toddler talking more?” to “Will my kids die in a car crash today?”), nervousness, and sleep issues are also rampant among parents.

A 2009 study found that more than 15 million children lived with a parent who was severely depressed, a figure that’s likely higher today—especially given the life-upending events of the past year. During the pandemic, 49 percent of women with children under age 18 and 40 percent of dads with children of the same age have reported that their mental health has suffered due to coronavirus-related stress, according to research from the Kaiser Family Foundation. In addition, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says rates of depression in adults are up fourfold since 2019.

Long-simmering issues of racism, social unrest, and political turmoil also reached a boiling point in 2020, fueling a spike in mental-health conditions among people of color. “We were already dealing with virtual learning, the stress of making sure my kids always have their masks on, they need to eat 90 times a day, and then I had to talk with my 12-year-old about why people were protesting,” says Catina Smith, 35, a Black Air Force veteran, private chef, and mom of three in Baltimore.

But even in these challenging times, and even if feelings of fear, sadness, and worthlessness seem insurmountable, there is still hope. We live in a golden age of mental-health treatment, and there are numerous forms of therapy, dozens of medication options, and much less of a stigma associated with mental-health problems. Once, these disorders were considered shameful secrets; now public conversations about parental mental

health occur regularly. Actor Kristen Bell, *Untamed* author Glennon Doyle, and Olympian Michael Phelps have all spoken publicly about the challenges of parenting with anxiety and depression. Perhaps most notably, Meghan Markle revealed in March that she had suffered from depression and suicidal thoughts during her first pregnancy.

In other words, there has never been a more accepting atmosphere for those who find it difficult to manage their mood. If you’re among them, health experts want you to know this: Help is available, and it can make a difference in your life and that of your family.

●

FAMILY HOLIDAY CARDS NEVER SHOW PICTURES OF A MOTHER WITH DEPRESSION SOBBIING IN THE BATHROOM WHILE HER KIDS BUILD A CUSHION FORT.

What Depression Is and Isn’t

Of course, it’s hard to seek treatment if you’re not sure what it is that you’re experiencing. Both depression and anxiety—which may occur in tandem—can show up as irritability, forgetfulness, and anger. And although rage has long been ascribed to men, it can signal that a mom feels unheard and overburdened, her needs are not being fulfilled, and an underlying mood disorder may be brewing, says Sarah Oreck, M.D., a reproductive psychiatrist and mom in Los Angeles.

The National Institute of Mental Health uses the terms *clinical depression* and *major depressive disorder* interchangeably to refer to a severely low mood that persists for an extended period. (If the depression is chronic, it’s referred to as *persistent*

depressive disorder, or *dysthymia*.) These disorders go beyond feeling overwhelmed or having “the blues,” causing what experts term *functional impairment*, meaning a person is unable to parent, work, or go about the day as they once did. This impairment can arise when certain risk factors—genetic predisposition, personality, brain chemistry, a history of mental-health issues, or adverse life events—converge, explains Dr. Smith. In the case of postpartum depression, which afflicts roughly one in four new moms in the three years after they give birth, it can erupt from “hormonal changes, sleep deprivation, and the burden of caring for a baby’s every need,” Dr. Oreck says.

It’s imperative that parents who suffer from depression and anxiety seek help for managing their symptoms. Emma, 39, a mom of one in New Jersey, has been in treatment for several years. First diagnosed with depression in college, she suffered from suicidal thoughts in her early 30s. Now she combines weekly therapy with mood-stabilizing medications and says she can’t imagine parenting without them. “Depression can make minor setbacks feel like all is lost,” says Emma, “and that’s a real problem, since parenthood is full of minor setbacks.”

Under Pressure

In terms of stressful jobs, parenting has being a neurosurgeon or an airline pilot beat. “You’re a full-time caregiver, not only providing material comforts like food and clothing but also being responsible for nurturing and creating strong emotional bonds with your child,” says Dr. Smith, mom of two kids, ages 9 and 12.

While research has found that parents typically report feeling a greater sense of purpose, raising kids can certainly involve more stress, anxiety, and other negative emotions than nonparents experience. Yet family holiday cards never show pictures of a mother sobbing in the bathroom while her kids build a cushion fort. The “triple threat of guilt, perfectionism, and martyr mode” causes millions of depressed parents to feel weak and isolated when, in fact, they are in good company, says Pooja Lakshmin, M.D., clinical assistant professor of

psychiatry at The George Washington University School of Medicine & Health Sciences and founder of GEMMA, a women’s mental-health digital education platform.

Although research has found that women are about twice as likely to develop depression as men, fathers are far from immune. Andy, a stay-at-home dad of 6-year-old twins in Boston, has felt loneliness and isolation, which he says have been compounded by being a gay parent in a mostly straight area. Early on, the former college counselor thought, “Is this going to be my life for the next 18 years?” When his twins were around 2, Andy found himself yelling more than he would’ve liked, which made him “feel guilt, shame, and anger toward myself.” He suspected that he was suffering from depression.

Feelings of being perpetually overwhelmed, physically and mentally exhausted, mired in cynicism, or plagued with the belief that you’re an incompetent parent are signs of parental burnout, says Dr. Oreck. Emotional detachment from one’s child is another. Untreated, burnout can progress to depression or anxiety.

Other parents at risk of depression and anxiety include single or younger mothers; those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds; and those parenting kids with special needs, who “are often seen as superheroes, but who need help juggling fear, sadness, and isolation with managing multiple medical issues and arranging for academic accommodations,” says Eliana Tardio, a mother of two children with Down syndrome and a Latinx inclusion activist in Fort Myers, Florida.

The Effects on Children

For parents with depression, there are the obvious detrimental symptoms—emotional pain, lack of motivation, loss of joy in once-joyful activities—and even physical troubles such as gastrointestinal distress and reduced immunity. But research has found that children of depressed parents are about three times as likely to suffer from major depression, anxiety disorders, or substance abuse as children whose parents hadn’t been depressed. All kids have developmental needs that include

6 WAYS TO COPE IN THE MOMENT

Strategies from mental-health experts for handling negative thoughts, even when kids are around

1

When depressive symptoms spiral or if you’re stuck in an anxious thought, **take off your shoes and walk barefoot outside.** Or splash cold water on your face. Or squeeze your daughter’s stuffed narwhal. These sensory activities “take you out of your thoughts and bring you back into your body,” Dr. Pooja Lakshmin says.

2

Ask yourself: **Would I let someone treat my kids the way I’m treating myself?** Imagine the mama-bear roar you’d let out if someone told your son he was stupid or called your daughter a loser. Try to show yourself the same consideration, says therapist Kristen Granchalek. “It helps build self-compassion, and then we start to act with that compassion in mind.”

3

Remind yourself that it’s okay to want a break from your child or look forward to their bedtime or miss your old life. It doesn’t mean you love them any less. Baby-step toward healing by **normalizing thoughts like these.** “The reduction of guilt you’ll feel can be life-altering,” says Dr. Sarah Oreck.

4

Phone a friend. Chances are, you know someone who has felt what you’re feeling now. Ask them to share a strategy that worked for them, or just vent. (Texting works too.)

5

Find a peaceful spot, or create one. Anxiety is stimulating; add the cacophony of noise that comes with children and it can feel overwhelming. Vanna Winters, 36, of Naples, Florida, wears AirPods when the volume generated by her three kids threatens to flare up her anxiety or depression symptoms. “My kids understand the benefit to them; a chill mom is better to hang out with than a freaking-out mom.” Other ideas: a meditation app or five minutes of reading, even if you need to hide in the laundry room to do it.

6

Take ten deep breaths. You hear this one a lot for a reason—it really does help. **Slow, deep breaths with exhalations that are twice as long as the inhalations calm the nervous system,** bring your heart rate down, and ease muscle tension. Exhaling (not inhaling) through a straw can help. Dr. Lakshmin notes that if these techniques don’t work, it may be time to seek help.



If you’re having thoughts of hurting yourself or others, go to the emergency room or try the following numbers:

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (open 24/7): 800-273-TALK (8255). You can also chat online (suicidpreventionlifeline.org), where there are resources tailored for LGBTQ+ and Spanish-speaking communities.
- Samaritans 24/7 Helpline (open 24/7, call or text): 877-870-4673.

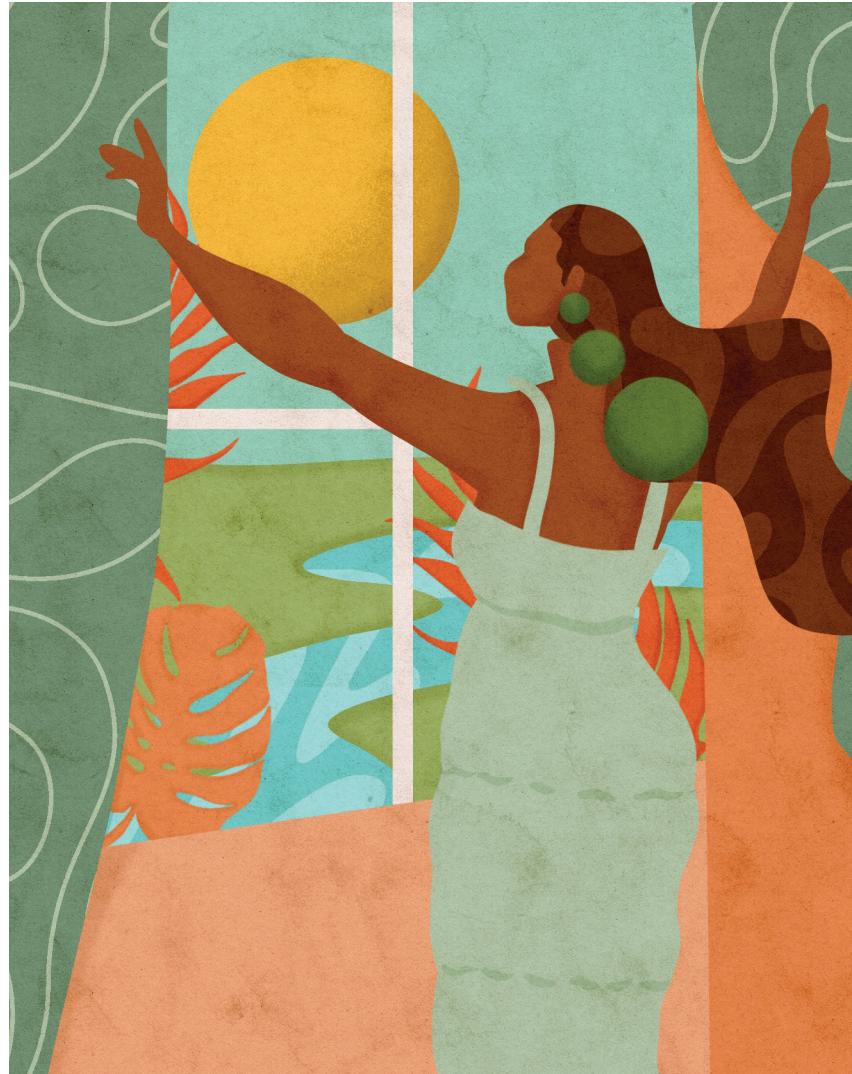
feeling securely attached to a safe, caring adult and having a caregiver who is both physically and emotionally present and can model adequate coping mechanisms, says LaToya Gaines, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist and former school psychologist in New York City. Untreated mental-health concerns can threaten a parent’s ability to fulfill these needs. “When we’re depressed, we have difficulty connecting,” says Kristen Granchalek, LCSW, a Chicago-based therapist specializing in women’s issues, anxiety, and emotional reactivity. “Our faces don’t respond in a way that mirrors our children’s emotions, which they need for healthy development and to feel cared for.” With anxiety, kids can absorb their parent’s chronic worrying and, says Granchalek, “internalize the belief that the world is not okay.”

Emma, the mom in New Jersey, says it’s the fear of this very dynamic that frightens her most. For instance, whereas a nondepressed parent might be annoyed at their toddler’s disinterest in potty training, Emma considers it a failure on her part and silently ruminates over her son’s doomed future, including worries that he’ll get kicked out of preschool for being the only 3-year-old still in diapers. “My husband will assure me that our son will get it eventually; meanwhile, I’m pasting on a smile and suppressing a volcano of panic.”

Life-Changing Treatment

The potential effects of a parent’s depression on their child make treatment imperative—and extensive research shows that clinical depression is highly responsive to treatment. But in the best-case scenario, only about half of depressed adults receive proper care, says Dr. Smith, and “rates for mothers may be even lower.” Part of the issue is what Granchalek says is a deep societal discomfort around mothers admitting they need help with anything: “We spend a lot of emotional labor convincing ourselves that ‘I’m lazy and I should be doing a better job,’ or we blame our partner or children, thinking that if they were more helpful or better behaved, we wouldn’t be struggling so much.”

This kind of thinking weighs heavily on Black mothers, Dr. Gaines says, “who



are taught to think about everyone else first, going back to when we were enslaved and had to take care of our family as well as other peoples’ families. Many Black women feel we have to be on it all day, every day, because if we don’t do it, who will?”

And for all depressed parents, there are the twin barriers of little time and low energy. It can feel impossible to carve out an hour a week for therapy when there’s barely time to shower, and when parenting and depression are both known to cause exhaustion.

The first step in recovery is believing that mental illness is a health concern like any other—there’s no shame in having anxiety or depression, just as there’s no shame in having lupus or the flu, Dr. Gaines says. Next, it’s helpful to

have an honest conversation to assess whether your daily battles are more than just a rough patch or stress. An objective, empathetic partner, friend, or relative can serve as a sounding board, as can a primary-care physician, who can help plan next steps, including making a referral to a mental-health expert.

Therapy is a safe space for venting and helps address damaging beliefs, like “I’m worthless” or “My kids would be better off without me,” says Dr. Gaines. Talk therapy, specifically cognitive behavioral therapy or an offshoot called acceptance and commitment therapy, can challenge such thoughts and reframe them as “It’s a pandemic, and I’m doing the best I can.”

Therapy has been transformative for Andy, who says that treating his

depression with the help of a therapist who had walked in his shoes (in his case, another gay father) has helped him “unpack what is normal parenting angst versus what might be something more serious.” At first, he says, therapy almost felt selfish, with so much laundry to be folded and dinner to be made. “I had to have a heart-to-heart with myself, saying, ‘This isn’t like getting a facial; this will help you and help the kids so you’re not taking your anxiety out on them.’”

For many, medication is also helpful. And given how many kinds are now available, those seeking care can be assured that if one doesn’t help or causes unpleasant side effects, there are other doses and drugs to try. The most common class of medications, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, or SSRIs (Prozac and Lexapro are examples), also treat anxiety, and an internist or an ob-gyn as well as a psychiatrist can prescribe them. Some people worry that taking an antidepressant will change their personality, but it actually makes the patient feel more like themselves. Medication won’t eliminate all negative thoughts, but it will likely make a person’s mood more stable, lifting their outlook out of despair and nudging it closer to neutral. “A psychiatrist prescribed Prozac for my depression, and a few weeks later I was walking the dog, and I saw the sun setting and thought, ‘That’s pretty,’” says Danielle, a 41-year-old mom of two in Illinois. Her desire to read and bake with her girls—activities she adored before her depression set in—also returned. Both were encouraging signs that her depression was finally lifting.

Protecting Your Child

Dr. Smith says it’s important to realize that having depression or anxiety does not mean your children will too. Talking to them about feelings from a young age will make them more likely to ask for help if they need it. A big step in mitigating the genetic and environmental risk factors involves sharing struggles with your kids in an age-appropriate way so they learn that all emotions are normal, there are constructive ways to deal with yucky-feeling ones, and it’s okay to ask for help.

MAKING THERAPY WORK FOR YOU



One silver lining of the pandemic is that therapy is more widely available than ever. “We all thought it had to be in-person 50-minute sessions,” says Kristen Granchalek, “but then we had to move to telehealth overnight, and therapists like me evolved our idea of what ‘good therapy’ looks like.” Now you can sneak in a Zoom session while the kids are in math class, watching StoryBots, or doing FaceTime with Grandma.

For the first time, restrictions on interstate sessions have been eased, and that time-zone difference can work in your favor. In addition, the ability to see someone located elsewhere is a boon for those in communities without many mental-health professionals.

There are also digital therapy options like Talkspace or BetterHelp, which can pair you with a provider and offer secure video and chat sessions. In 2020, Maddie saw that the strategies she’d used to manage symptoms before becoming a mom—such as getting exercise and eating less sugar—were no longer working. She used a digital therapy app, exchanging daily audio and video messages with a therapist as well as occasional video chats.

Good therapy, Granchalek says, “is about connecting with someone you trust.” Word-of-mouth referrals are priceless; if you’re comfortable doing so, ask a friend, colleague, or doctor. PsychologyToday.com’s Find a Therapist tool lets you search by city, zip code, or name. “You might feel drawn to a therapist’s biography or even their photo, which can lead to a good partnership,” Granchalek says.

It’s customary to request a free 15-minute consultation, during which you outline concerns, ask about their approach, and see if you vibrate well. Don’t be afraid to call multiple therapists until you find the right fit.

Dr. Gaines suggests saying, “Mommy feels sad today, and that’s okay. We all have sad days. But I know some things I can do to make myself feel better.” This chat works with frustration, anxiety, and anger, too, and makes the most sense to have with kids around age 4. If their children are closer to elementary-school age, parents can introduce more advanced concepts like depression and medication: “Everyone has sad days, but sometimes I feel sad for a longer period of time. Just like when I have a cold, I need to take good care of myself, and that means sleep and maybe medicine.”

Underscore that your kids are not the cause, because it can be easy for them to blame themselves for Mom or Dad not wanting to play. That internalization (“It’s my fault that Mommy is sad”) can increase their own risk of developing depression or anxiety, according to a new study in the *Journal of Family Psychology*. Parents can also mention that they often talk with a “feelings doctor,” which kids may recognize from their school social worker. Doing so normalizes getting help.

If depression or anxiety makes it difficult for a parent to effectively connect with their child, it’s important that the child can consistently interact with another adult caregiver, such as a grandparent, a trusted teacher, or a family friend. “It’s a huge protective buffer,” Dr. Smith says, and strengthens a child’s resiliency muscles.

Even if you don’t have depression or an anxiety disorder, there’s no doubt that times are extraordinarily tough for all of us right now, Dr. Gaines notes, and being a “good enough” mom or dad is, in fact, enough. Giving your child just 15 minutes of undivided attention makes a huge difference to them, says Dr. Smith. It doesn’t take much: Sink into an easy yoga pose while the kids have a snack; join them for one page of coloring; brush your teeth together.

“My therapist is constantly reminding me that when I’m sure I’m ‘failing’ my child, he likely doesn’t even notice,” Emma says. “If I’m struggling and I tell my son I can play in a little while, it won’t scar him for life. All he’ll remember is the part where his mom had fun with him.”