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PIONEERS & PLANTERS

CHURCH PLANTING THEN AND NOW

The Significance of Planting Churches on New Ground

How Pentecost Came to Anegada

Together We Can Do Great Things for God: Church Planting in Germany

Depression is a common and serious medical illness. It is real, it happens, and it is treatable. Society has put a stigma on mental illness, and as the salt and light of the world we must put an end to that stigma. It is normal for children to feel sad, irritated, and have bad mood swings, but when those negative feelings linger it is possible that the child is struggling with depression.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) outlines the following criterion to make a diagnosis of depression:

The individual must experience 5 or more symptoms during the same 2-week period: feeling sad or irritable, loss of interest or pleasure in almost all activities, decrease in weight, insomnia or hypersomnia, psychomotor agitation, fatigue, or loss of energy, decreased ability to think, concentrate, and make choices, recurrent thoughts of death and/or suicidal ideation, and feelings of worthlessness or excessive, inappropriate guilt.[1]

On occasion this condition goes undiagnosed and untreated because the symptoms are passed off as normal emotional changes. However, as noted in the criterion for the diagnosis, not only do we need the symptoms to be present, but for 5 or more to be present during the same time period. On occasion, the child can present a few of the symptoms, but not all together or during the 2-week period. This is why it can be confusing to recognize when help is needed.

During our recent pandemic, the percentage of children diagnosed with depression has grown. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that from April to October 2020, hospitals across the United States saw a 24 percent increase in the proportion of mental health emergency visits in children ages 5 to 11 and a 31 percent increase for children ages 12 to 17.2 This is not only an issue in the United States. A World Health Organization survey of more than 130 countries found that more than 60 percent reported disruptions to mental health services for vulnerable people, including children and teens. For children, school closures have disrupted their routines, and many are carrying new burdens they are not equipped to handle. As adults, we can lessen their troubles and help them.

If you think your child or a child from your church might be depressed or have problems with their mood, there are a few things you can do:

- Talk about depression. Children might not know how they feel, but talk to them anyway. Listen to their challenges and offer a helping hand.
- Schedule a visit with your child's doctor. They will do a complete exam, evaluation, and refer you to a specialist, if needed.
- Be sure the child is eating nutritious food, getting enough sleep, and getting daily physical activity (preferably outside).
- Most importantly, be patient and kind. Try to be understanding and cultivate a positive relationship with them.

When speaking to a child in your ministry or home who is struggling with depression, it is important to be mindful of the words you use as you talk, pray, or instruct them.

Never say the following:

- "With God's help you don't need your medicine," or "You need to get right with God." Sometimes we mistake depression as a spiritual problem and not a medical condition. While unconfessed sin, guilt, and shame can cause us to be depressed, we would never want a child to believe that their feelings result from a broken relationship with God.

CARING FOR KIDS IN CRISIS

Children and Depression

ELIETTE VRENELLI GARCÍA | CAROLINA, PUERTO RICO

- "We can keep this a secret." While a child may desire to keep confidence with you concerning their thoughts, sometimes it is necessary to involve others, especially if depression leads to suicidal thought, self-harm, or potential destruction. Never leave a child alone in their suffering. If others must be involved, make sure the child knows you are only trying to serve his/her best interests.

- "Just stop thinking negative thoughts." For some people, it's not possible to automatically think positive thoughts. Sadly, worry, anxiety, and fear are emotions that children struggle with, and they can be hard to overcome. Try to help the child develop strategies, pray with them, and share truth from God's Word.

The following are some things to say:

- "Sometimes I get sad. Jesus got sad too." Children need to know that their emotions and struggles are normal to everyone. By testifying of emotional struggles you have had, you can share solutions that have worked for you. Matthew 26:36–38 tells us that Jesus was once sad too!

- "How can you make this situation better?" Don't ignore negative comments. Ask the child to think of positive ways they can process their emotions or change their negative situations.

- "God loves you and so do I." When we are depressed, we sometimes forget that people really do care about us. The same is true for children. They need to know that we love them and their heavenly Father is present in their situation.

Scriptural Helps

Psalm 42:5
Psalm 146
Isaiah 40:31
Lamentations 3:19–26
Romans 8:37–39
2 Corinthians 1:8–11
Philippians 4:6
Philippians 4:8
Hebrews 12:12, 13
1 John 4:18a

References

1. American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.).

2. Leeb R.T., Bitsko R.H., Radhakrishnan L., Martinez P., Njai R., Holland K.M. Mental Health-Related Emergency Department Visits Among Children Aged <18 Years During the COVID-19 Pandemic–United States, January 1–October 17, 2020. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2020 http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6945a3

"Caring for Kids in Crisis" is a four-part series from International Children's Ministries. Read Part Three, "Children and Divorce," in the October issue of the *White Wing Messenger*. For training on helping children cope with crisis, visit cgpkids.teachable.com for our online course "Ministry to children in Crisis."