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Occasionally feeling sad or down in the dumps is a normal part of day-to-day life. But feeling depressed for extended periods of time can indicate something more serious. Depression has become such a common complaint that the Journal of the American Medical Association estimates it costs employers upwards of \$44 billion per year in lost productivity.

Many workers miss work because of depression-related illnesses that do not respond to traditional treatment, such as headaches, fatigue, and general malaise. Depression affects a person's health both physically and emotionally. It leaves individuals more vulnerable to the effects of stress, which is linked to diseases such as heart disease and cancer.

It also has a direct effect on emotional well-being, including effectiveness at work, satisfaction levels, and dedication to the tasks at hand. When you are plagued by depression, not only do you not feel like doing much, you are often unable to complete your normal duties. Depression can diminish your quality of life; some people describe it as a "dark curtain" or "cloud" over their life.

Warning Signs

Because depression is so common, it is important to be aware of the warning signs. Depression can take many forms, but the National Institute of Mental Health identifies the following symptoms as the most common indicators of depression.

- Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" mood.
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions.
- Restlessness and irritability.
- Feelings of hopelessness and pessimism.
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed.

Simply experiencing one or two of these symptoms does not mean you are depressed. The key to diagnosing depression is the time involved. If symptoms last for more than two weeks at a time, then it is likely that depression is the cause.

Talk to your doctor or another health professional if you are feeling depressed. This is particularly important when life events make you more likely to suffer from depression--for instance a death in the family, the loss of a job, or the birth of a baby (which can trigger a type of depression in late pregnancy or after the baby's birth.)

Often your blues may be temporary, or dysthymia, which is a mild form of depression. Although mild, dysthymia still affects people in significant ways, particularly where work is concerned.

Managing Mild Depression in Childcare

Of all the nasty effects depression can have on an individual, perhaps the worst for a childcare provider is the sense of lethargy. Lack of motivation or interest in events around you can affect the quality of care you provide to children. This is a particular challenge for individual family childcare providers who may not have additional staff to

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rely on. The following suggestions for handling depression in childcare can be implemented regardless of the type of facility you work in.

Take A Break

Whenever possible, allow yourself 5-10 minutes of solitude to relax, meditate, or gather your thoughts. Although this might not seem useful at first, the long-term effects can be substantial. Simply taking several deep breaths throughout the day also can be effective, especially if you do not have other staff to help you out. If possible, step outside and breathe fresh air. Like deep breathing, fresh air helps to restore oxygen levels in your body, giving you more energy and promoting mental alertness. And try to get plenty of sleep each night.

Get Active

Physical movement releases adrenaline into your bloodstream and promotes the production of serotonin in the brain (a chemical which many suspect plays a role in mood stabilization). Go outside as the children in your care also will benefit from outdoor exposure and might be more cooperative after releasing some energy of their own, something that will serve you well when nap time rolls around!

Diet

Certain foods and caffeinated drinks are known to affect mood levels and may cause irritability. Consider avoiding these items for a few weeks to see if doing so help stabilize your mood. A well-balanced diet is essential in combating stress or depression.

Be Realistic

Give yourself time to feel better. To prevent yourself from being overwhelmed, the National Institute of Mental Health recommends breaking large tasks into small ones, setting some initial priorities, and doing what you can as you are able.

If exercise, meditation, a strong support system, and dietary changes do not alleviate your depressive symptoms, professional help may be in order. In some cases, medications may be recommended. Be sure to tell your doctor that you are a child caregiver and your profession requires you to be fully alert, energetic, and interactive. Some antidepressants may make you drowsy or irritable. Your doctor should be able to help you find a medication or dosage that meets your needs without affecting your work.

Diona Reeves

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Resources

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), Public Information and Communications Branch, 6001 Executive Blvd, Rm 8184, MSC 9663, Bethesda, MD 20892-9663; 866-615-6464; www.nimh.nih.gov

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