

Down's syndrome and Complex Needs

Mental Health - Depression

April 2023

What is depression?

A low mood which lasts longer than a few days and effects a person's ability to engage with their daily life. It is a real condition with symptoms that require support and possibly treatment.

What are the symptoms?

There are several symptoms that may indicate someone is depressed, these may range from mild to severe. Some common symptoms are:

- loss of interest or pleasure in activities
- change in sleep patterns
- feeling tired
- lack of appetite
- aches and pains

It is important to rule out physical causes for these symptoms.

Causes of depression

Depression has many possible causes; these include:

- stressful life events
- physical health problems
- low self-esteem
- lifestyle factors

It is more likely to occur when there is a history of depression in the family.

Depression and people who have Down's syndrome

Depression is at least as common in children and adults who have Down's syndrome as it is in the general population. It may affect them in the same way but it can look a little different.

Depression may appear relatively quickly, or it may have developed gradually over many months.

It is important to rule out the following for the reason someone may have a low mood:

- Hypothyroidism
- Sleep apnoea
- Coeliac disease
- Urinary tract infection (UTI)
- Chronic constipation
- Hearing and Vision
- Vitamin B12 deficiency

The table below is a list of possible warning signs that someone may be depressed.

Feeling sad, unhappy and or crying	Weight loss
Not smiling or laughing, avoiding eye contact	Decreased appetite
Irritability or anger	Loss of confidence and self-esteem
Anxiety/restlessness	Feelings of helplessness
Loss of energy, fatigue, slowing down	Feeling shame
Not enjoying/avoiding usual activities	Injuring self, others or property
Problems falling asleep, waking often, getting up early	Decline in self-care skills
Apathy	Constipation
Withdrawal from family and friends	Changes in communication/interaction

Self absorbed	Obsessions/compulsions
Less concentration, not completing tasks or activities and inattentive	Complaints of pain and other physical symptoms

In addition, McGuire & Chicoine include these other symptoms of depression in people who have Down's syndrome:

- features of psychosis such as hallucinatory self-talk
- inappropriate fears or avoidances of people/things
- a strong reluctance to leave the home.

Factors which contribute to depression

As in the general population, there are some issues that can contribute to depression.

Here are some examples of stresses that may lead to depression:

- a friend, supporter or relative moving away
- the loss of a loved one
- environmental stress such as a problem at college that a person finds stressful
- change in care provider
- communication difficulties
- lack of choice and control

What to do next

If you have observed some of the changes listed here in the person you support, speak to a health professional such as a paediatrician or GP.

Depression would usually be diagnosed through the person reporting their own symptoms. This may be more complicated for people who have Down's syndrome, and it will probably require greater reliance on evidence from family and supporters. It might be useful to make a record of your concerns.

Alzheimer's and depression

In the early stages of dementia, it is frequently the case that individuals experience depression, as they recognise that they are losing skills or finding tasks more difficult (people who have Down's syndrome being no different from other people in this regard).

Appropriate support and interventions should be provided to help the person develop suitable coping strategies and have opportunities to talk about their feelings.

If you think this might be an issue for the person you support, please see separate DSA resource about Alzheimer's at: [Dementia - Alzheimer's disease \(Health series\)](#)

Resources

Banks, R., Curran J., & Hollins S. (2011). Ron's Feeling Blue. 2nd Ed. Books Beyond Words. Available to purchase at: booksbeyondwords.co.uk

Banks, R., & Hollins, S. (2011). Sonia's Feeling Sad. Books Beyond Words. Available to purchase at: booksbeyondwords.co.uk

Chicoine, B., & McGuire, D. (2nd edition, 2021, Woodbine House). Mental Wellness in Adults with Down Syndrome is available as a free PDF at Mental Wellness in Adults with Down Syndrome: A Guide to Emotional and Behavioral Strengths and Challenges (2nd Edition) | Adult Down Syndrome Center (advocatehealth.com)

Chicoine, B., & McGuire, D. (2010). The Guide to Good Health For Teens & Adults with Down Syndrome. Woodbine House. pp51-64

Munir, K. (2010). Mental Health Issues And Down Syndrome. National Down Syndrome Society, USA. Free download at: ndss.org/resources/mental-healthissues-syndrome



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