Take a look at the lists below and check the things that describe your thoughts, feelings or actions, now or recently.

What is depression?
“I don’t want to go to school or see my friends or anything. I just hate everybody right now. I feel lousy and worthless. My life sucks.”

Everyone has good days and bad days, ups and downs. School, parents and relationships can be confusing and frustrating. Things can be great one minute, awful the next. This can feel overwhelming. Everyday sadness can be caused by a loss or a major life change, such as the death of someone you care about, a break-up of a relationship, or the divorce of your parents. But if this unhappiness lasts for more than two weeks and starts to interfere with your life, it might be something more serious.

When people talk about feeling “depressed,” they might mean they’re having a bad day, or they might be talking about clinical depression. The difference between having a bad day and clinical depression is:

• How intense the mood is: Depression is more intense than a bad mood.
• How long it lasts: A bad mood is usually gone in a few days, but clinical depression lasts two weeks or longer.
• How much it interferes with your life: A bad mood does not keep you from going to school or spending time with friends.

Depression can keep you from doing these things, and may even make it difficult to get out of bed.

What is bipolar disorder?
“Last week I felt on top of the world—like I was indestructible. But today I can’t even get up. I don’t think I’m going to feel like doing anything for a long time.”

People who have bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression, usually experience periods of mania, or intense “highs” of energy, (including any or all of the symptoms in the second list above) followed by periods of depression. Symptoms of bipolar disorder, like symptoms of depression, can be different for different people. It’s important to tell your doctor all of the symptoms you are having, or have experienced in the past, in order for your doctor to make an accurate diagnosis. Often, people with bipolar disorder are misdiagnosed with depression because they don’t report their symptoms of mania. Symptoms of mania can feel really good for a while, especially if they happen right after you’ve been feeling depressed. But they can also lead to serious or even life-threatening problems if they cause you to do things that are reckless or impulsive.

What causes depression and bipolar disorder?
“What is this happening to me? Is it something I did?”

Depression and bipolar disorder are physical illnesses, just like diabetes or asthma. No one would expect to get over diabetes or asthma by “trying harder” or “snapping out of it.” Researchers believe that depression and bipolar disorder are caused by an imbalance in brain chemicals called neurotransmitters. Depression and bipolar disorder can also be brought on by other medical illnesses, medications you may be taking, a change in health habits, stress, hormonal changes, or drug or alcohol use. You can’t catch these illnesses from someone else and they are not caused by being a “bad person” or having a “bad parent.” They do run in families, though, so if someone else in your family has one of these illnesses, you might be more likely to have one, too. Anyone can get depression or bipolar disorder—people of all ages and all races from all walks of life. About one in ten people will experience some form of depression or bipolar disorder between the ages of 13 and 19, so if you have one of these illnesses, you are not alone. It’s smart to seek help as soon as possible, because the earlier you get treatment, the more likely it is that you will be able to successfully manage your depression or bipolar disorder throughout your life.

How can I find help?
“I’m afraid my parents will yell at me and tell me it’s my fault. And no one else knows about this... I don’t want them to think I’m nuts.”

There are a lot of people who can support you in finding help. If your parents ask you what’s wrong, tell them. Often, parents are concerned about you and really want to help. If you don’t feel you can talk to your parents, tell another adult you trust, such as:

• Another family member—an older brother or sister, aunt, uncle, grandparent
• Another trusted adult—a neighbor or a friend’s parent
• A teacher, school counselor or other adult at school
• Your family doctor
• A member of the clergy or another person at your place of worship
• Someone working at a phone crisis line, helpline or neighborhood drop-in center

It’s not shameful to have an illness that affects your thoughts and behaviors. Hiding your symptoms, or ignoring them and hoping they’ll go away, can make things worse. You can get better, but it takes treatment, not just “willpower.”
What’s treatment like?

“I hated medication at first. It didn’t take effect over-night, either. It was more gradual, like one day I was
listening to music and enjoying it, and I realized,
hey, I haven’t had a miserable thought in like, hours,
and I wasn’t even trying not to! I like the way I feel
now much better.”

There are many safe, effective treatments for both
depression and bipolar disorder. People with
these illnesses usually are helped by three things:
mood stabilizers, mood-stabilizing drugs, and therapy.

Although the moral support of friends and family
can be very helpful, talking with them is not
efficient enough to treat depression or bipolar disorder.
It’s important to see a doctor who can make a
diagnosis and put together a treatment plan that’s
good for you. Your doctor may suggest psycho-
thrapy, or “talk therapy,” which can sometimes
treat depression by itself. A good therapist can
help you deal with the feelings you are having and help
you find your way out of depression. Your
doctor may also prescribe medication.

Medications called antidepressants are prescribed for depression and mood stabilizers are used
to treat bipolar disorder. These medications do
not cause “high” or artificial happiness, do not
change your personality, are not habit forming
and don’t “space people out.” They help return
you to a stable, comfortable mood. They help you
be you. Sometimes people have to try more than
one treatment before they find the right one. It
may take a combination of medications to help
you feel better. Don’t get discouraged. You and
your doctor will find the treatment that’s right for
you.

You may see ads on TV, in newspapers or maga-
zines, or on the internet for “natural” or “herbal”
treatments for depression or bipolar disorder. Not
a lot of research has been done on these treat-
ments and unfortunately, natural does not always
mean safe. If you would like to try a natural reme-
edy, talk to your doctor first. It’s very important
not to take any additional pills or supplements,
change your dose, or stop taking your medication
without talking to your doctor about it.

What if I feel like killing myself? What

can I do?

Two years ago I tried to kill myself. My mother
found me and took me to the hospital. At first I was
really mad that she hadn’t let me die, but now that
I’ve been working on getting better for awhile, I’m
really glad to still be here.”

The feelings that cause a person to think about
suicide are caused by the person’s illness. Suicide
is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.
Don’t be afraid to talk about these feelings. They
are real, not a sign of weakness. With the right
help, you can begin to feel better. Some things
you can do if you’re thinking about suicide:

- Tell someone right away.
- Develop a plan to make sure you’re not by
  yourself, with the help of your family and/
or friends.
- Don’t use alcohol and/or drugs.
- Ask your parents to lock up any guns or
  other dangerous items in the house.
- Throw away all medications you are no
  longer taking.
- Depression and bipolar disorder can cause
  your mind to focus only on the bad things.
  Remember that this is part of your illness—
  it’s not who you are and it’s not the way
  things will always be.
- Have regularly scheduled health care ap-
  pointments and keep them.
- Keep pictures of your favorite people with
  you or where you can see them at all times
to remind you they are there for you.
- If you can, get involved in things you like
to do. If you can’t, then just spend time with
  family and friends, even if you are only do-
  ing something quiet like watching TV, going
to a movie or reading with someone else in
the room.
- If you drive, be sure a friend or family mem-
  ber knows to take away your car keys when
  you are feeling suicidal.
- Talk about how you’re feeling. At a DBSA
  support group, you can meet other people
who may have been through some of the
same things you have.

How can I help a family member or
friend?

“My best friend has been acting so bizarre lately.
Now she’s really scaring me because yesterday she said
this world would be better off without her.”

If you think someone you know has symptoms of
depression or bipolar disorder:

- Encourage them to seek help from their
doctor, a school counselor, or another type
of counselor or social worker. You might
want to offer to go with them to their first
appointment.
- Learn all you can about depression and bipo-
lar disorder. You might be that person’s only
source of information about mood disorders.
- Let them know you care. Remind them that
they shouldn’t feel ashamed or guilty. Avoid
telling them things like, “Snap out of it.” Let
them know their feelings are caused by an
illness that can be treated.
- Invite them out. Realize they might not
want to go at first. If they say no, ask them again
later, or offer to stay in and spend time with
them.
- If you are worried they might be suicidal,
ask them, and help them get help. A straight-
forward, caring question about suicide will
not cause someone to start having suicidal
thoughts. If they are thinking of suicide, don’t
promise secrecy. Tell someone you trust
immediately.
- Talk to them about attending a DBSA
support group meeting. It can help them to
learn that they are not alone.
- Make sure they do not have access to things
that can cause injury, like knives, guns,
alcohol or drugs.
- DO NOT take responsibility for making
your friend or family member well. You are
not a therapist.
- If the person is in immediate danger, call
911.

What are support groups like?

“I’m really grateful for my DBSA group. Even
though a lot of people there are older than me, they
actually understand, which is more than I can say
for most of the people at my high school.”

DBSA has over 700 support groups across the
country. Each is a place where people can share
their feelings, ask questions, talk about coping
skills and find strength. By sharing your experi-
ces, you can help others, too. Support group
members are people with mood disorders and
their families. DBSA groups help people remem-
ber they are not alone, and can also help them
stick with their treatment plans. Call (800) 826-
3632 or visit www.DBSAlliance.org/findsupport
to find a support group near you. If there is no
group in your area, we can help you start one.

Never give up hope

If you are having mood swings that worry you,
find out if you have depression or bipolar disor-
der. These illnesses are treatable, and you can feel
better. Your symptoms are nothing to be ashamed
of, and the best thing you can do for yourself is
get help. Always remember that you are not alone,
and by working with your doctor, you can find a

treatment that helps you.

A note to parents:

Watching a child go through an episode of
depression or mania is painful for parents, too.
Often, children will refuse help or insist that par-
ents don’t understand. Parents, too, may be told
their children will “snap out of it” or “need more
discipline.” With a medical illness such as depres-
sion or bipolar disorder, however, treatment—
whether it’s talk therapy, medication, or another
method you and your child’s doctor choose—is
the most important thing. It’s also helpful to get
support for yourself from other parents who can
share their experiences and help you as your fam-
ily journeys through treatment. Attend a DBSA
support group in your area, or see the resources
section for other organizations that can help.

Resources

These well-regarded organizations also offer
information about depression or bipolar
disorder. They are not affiliated with DBSA
and DBSA is not responsible for the content
or accuracy of the material they provide.

American Foundation for Suicide
Prevention www.afsp.org

The Balanced Mind Foundation
www.thebalancedmind.org

Center for Mental Health Services
www.mentalhealth.org

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)
www.nami.org

National Suicide Prevention Helpline
800-273-TALK

National Institute of Mental Health
(NIMH) www.nimh.nih.gov

Mental Health America (MHA) www.mhfa.org

You may also want to check major internet
search engines for groups, clubs or chats
related to young people and depression or
bipolar disorder. Remember that your treat-
ment decisions should be made only by you
and your doctor, and your decisions should
be based on correct information from repre-
table sources such as the ones listed above.

While others’ experiences can provide a lot of
hope and support, everyone is different, and
each person recovers in his or her own way.
“Miracle” or “instant” cures will not take
the place of a good treatment plan.