



SPARX – Information for parents, whānau and caregivers

Everyone feels sad or down from time-to-time but if these feelings go on and on (for weeks or months), or the person loses interest in doing things they used to enjoy, these may be signs of depression.

Other signs of depression include sleeping too much or not enough, changes in appetite and sleep, poor concentration, feeling tired or low in energy, and feeling guilty, worthless or hopeless about the future. Depression is different from everyday ups and downs – it means feeling down, depressed, sad or irritable most of the day, almost every day for two weeks or more. Many young people who are depressed come across as irritable, angry or cranky rather than sad.

Depression is common, one in every five young people will feel like this by the time they are 18. Depression in young people is often not picked up. Instead, it is put down to 'normal teenage moodiness' and many youth do not receive treatment. It is important not to ignore the signs of depression as it can lead to problems at school or work, difficulties in relationships, and it increases the risk of other problems like drug and alcohol use and suicide. However, there are effective treatments which can help young people (and adults) recover from depression. SPARX is one such treatment option.

What is SPARX?

SPARX is one way of helping young people who are feeling down or depressed. SPARX is a computerised self-help program designed for young people aged 12 to 19 with mild to moderate depression. SPARX was designed by mental health experts with the input of young New Zealanders. Experts conducted research with young people who used SPARX. They found SPARX helped young people who were feeling down, depressed or anxious to feel better. Young people reported they found SPARX to be very helpful, and they learnt self-help skills they could apply in order to feel better.

SPARX is unique as it incorporates a virtual fantasy setting with the use of graphics. Young people are also able to customise their virtual character. They then use this character to complete seven modules where they learn Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) skills, such as how to relax, talk to people about their feelings and how to solve problems. CBT skills are about learning how to identify negative thoughts and to then replace these with more helpful thoughts. CBT is one of the recommended treatments for young people (and adults) with depression. There is a lot of research that shows CBT is an effective treatment for depression (as well as for treating many other mental health problems).

Researchers found that SPARX was able to teach young people skills to manage their low mood. Young people also reported they enjoyed using SPARX. Some young people said that they were able to teach their families / caregivers about some of the CBT skills they learnt from SPARX. Young people can use SPARX anytime, anywhere; all they need is a computer with access to the internet.

How can my child register to use SPARX?

Young people can access SPARX by visiting www.sparx.org.nz and registering to use the program on the site. It's free to use and completely confidential.

Getting other help

In addition to SPARX, there are many other things you can do to recover from depression. These include getting help from a psychologist (or other therapist) or medication. Lifestyle changes can also be really important. See the section "Supporting young people using SPARX" (below) for some ideas of lifestyle changes your teenager can make. They might need your support to make these changes. What works best for your child depends on their needs, preferences and what is available in your area. To work out options other than SPARX, make an appointment for your teenager to see their family doctor.

Suicidal thoughts are common when people feel depressed (or very angry). Asking your teenager about suicide will not increase their risk of suicide.

If your teenager is thinking of hurting or killing themselves, reach out and talk to someone who's trained to help right now.

Free phone **0508 4 SPARX (0508 477 279)**

Free text **3110**

Call 111 if they might be unsafe right now.

If your teenager is safe there are many others who might help too:

a health service (family doctor/GP, youth health service, school health service)

a counselor, a therapist, Youthline or Lifeline

If you are unsure about safety, please do reach out now.

Supporting young people using SPARX

Here are some ideas for how can support your child using SPARX:

- Praise them for starting SPARX. Asking for help is often the hardest part of dealing with

depression

- Register for SPARX and try it out yourself, so you know what it is all about
- Ask your teenager how they are getting on with SPARX, what they've learned so far or if they would like any support practicing the skills
- Have fun: plan positive time / activities with your teenager
- Help them to complete tasks that give them a sense of achievement and praise them when they do things! E.g. their homework, jobs around the house
- Tell them you are there to listen if they want to talk; balance asking questions / being interested with giving them space if they want it
- Try not to fight with your teenager; they may be feeling more cranky than usual, and you may need to be more patient than usual.

Looking after yourself

Parents, family and caregivers are really important to the wellbeing of young people. The support they give to young people is essential. For example, parents can provide invaluable support in helping their teenager feel better, but it is also really important that parents, family and caregivers look after themselves and get extra support if they need it.

If you are suffering from depression or are in need of extra support, it is important that you receive appropriate treatment or help. It's normal to be affected by your teenager's difficulties and you'll be much better able to help them if you are well yourself. Being well yourself can have a very positive impact on your teenager's health.

Looking after a young person with depression can be really difficult for adults. Talk to your partner, friends, a doctor, Youthline or Lifeline for ways to make supporting your child easier. In order to look after your teenager, you need to look after yourself as well.

If you would like to find out more about depression in adults or get help for yourself, check out www.depression.org which offers a free online program for New Zealanders.

Finally, if your teenager has low mood which lasts more than a few weeks, and especially if they have any of the other signs of depression, then get help. SPARX is a great start to getting better. With the help of this and other forms of treatment, if they are necessary, you and your teenager can look forward to some better times. Don't hesitate to ask for help at any time. You and your teenager can also get help from these free and confidential helplines:

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Free text **3110**