

students with major depressive disorder

What is major depressive disorder?

Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) is a mental health condition diagnosed when a person experiences at least 5 of the following 9 symptoms daily for 2 weeks or more:

- Depressed or irritable mood most of the day, nearly every day
- Loss of interest or pleasure in most activities
- Noticeable weight change or change in appetite
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Fatigue or low energy
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Repeated thoughts of death or suicide
- Restlessness, agitation, or slowed movement
- Trouble concentrating or making decisions

Students with MDD may show signs of:

- Hopelessness, helplessness, or worthlessness
- Sadness, anxiety, or feeling emotionally “empty”
- Irritability or restlessness
- Suicidal thoughts or attempts
- Non-suicidal self-injury (e.g., cutting)
- Declining grades and difficulty attending school
- Physical complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, or other pain without a medical cause

Treatment

Effective treatments for children with MDD includes psychotherapy (such as cognitive-behavioral therapy or interpersonal therapy) and psychotropic medications, especially antidepressants, which help regulate brain chemicals called neurotransmitters. Antidepressants may take 4–6 weeks to show full effects. Each medication has its own benefits and side effects, and treatment plans should be closely monitored by a healthcare provider.

How can major depressive disorder affect a student at school?

Children may attend school during treatment if medically approved. However, both short- and long-term side effects can impact learning. The most common school-related challenges for students with major depressive disorder include:

- **Academic:** avoidance of learning activities or school attendance, poor concentration and focus, drop in academic performance
- **Social/Emotional:** reduced social interaction, social withdrawal, difficulty with peer relationships, low self-esteem, lack of motivation
- **Physical:** frequent visits to the nurse for physical complaints

How can schools support students with major depressive disorder?

Academic

- Start academic interventions under **Section 504** or **IDEA** (Other Health Impairment).
- Provide **extended school year** services (winter, spring, summer) if needed.
- Allow **extra time** for assignments, projects, quizzes, and tests.
- Assign a **manageable workload** focused on **quality over quantity**.
- If needed, conduct a **psychoeducational evaluation** to identify academic needs and guide accommodations.

Social and Emotional

- Provide **counseling or emotional** support as needed.
- Create opportunities for **academic and social success** and highlight the student's strengths to build confidence.
- Teach and allow the use of **relaxation strategies** to manage anxiety.
- Ensure the student has access to a **trusted adult** for support.

Students with MDD often work with mental health professionals such as therapists, psychologists, or psychiatrists. Collaboration between the school, family, and medical team is essential for the student's success.

More Resources

- **American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry**
aacap.org
- **Anxiety & Depression Association of America**
adaa.org
- **National Institute of Mental Health**
nimh.nih.gov/
- **Nemours Kids Health**
kidshealth.org
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration**
samhsa.gov/

SCHOOL SERVICES

For more information, visit childrens.com/school-services