



# MIAMI UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR SCHOOL-BASED  
MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS

## School Mental Health Communities of Practice

*Micro-Skills to Support K-12 Students with  
Sadness, Depression, and Mood Regulation Problems*

### Signs and Symptoms of Sadness, Depression, and Mood Regulation Problems:

Feeling sad, hopeless, or irritable a lot of the time	Feelings of extreme guilt or shame	Lack of energy or motivation
Having a hard time paying attention or inability to concentrate	Writing, drawing, or listening to music with themes of hopelessness	Loss of interest in activities usually enjoyed (including school activities)
Showing changes in eating patterns such as eating a lot more/less than usual	Showing changes in sleep patterns such as sleeping a lot more/less than usual	Showing changes in energy such as being more tired, sluggish, tense, or restless
Feelings of worthlessness or uselessness	Showing self-injurious or self-destructive behavior	Temper outbursts or violent episodes
Anxiety	Easily irritated	Poor memory
Little or no appetite or no desire to eat	Withdrawal from friends and family	Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or drugs
Feelings of fear (even if there is no conscious reason)	Not wanting to do things/not enjoying activities	Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness about a situation or the future
Self-critical remarks	Skipping school or classes	Worsening grades
Feelings that things will never get better	Comments about death or dying	Threatening suicide (even in a joking manner)
Complaints of pain	Apathy	Difficulty making decisions
Somatic complaints, like headaches and stomachaches	Irresponsible behavior, like forgetting obligations, being late, skipping school	Staying awake all night or sleeping throughout the day
Fixation on past failures or exaggerated self-blame	Crying spells, for no apparent reason	Frustration or feelings of anger over small matters
Low self-esteem	Extreme sensitivity	Social isolation



## Action Steps (Micro-Skills) When You Recognize the Signs and Symptoms:

- **Educate students about how to recognize signs and symptoms in themselves and how to ask for help when they experience sadness, depression, or mood regulation problems:** It is important for students to understand the signs and symptoms of sadness, depression, and mood regulation problems so that they can accurately identify these concerns when they experience them. It is also important for students who experience sadness, depression, and mood regulation problems to know how to reach out for help.
  - Use universal education approaches (e.g., Tier 1) to educate groups of students about the general signs and symptoms of sadness, depression, and mood regulation problems. These general approaches, which should be developmentally appropriate to the age/grade of the students, can occur in a general education class setting (typically facilitated by a teacher or co-facilitated by a teacher and school-based mental health professional) or in specialized social-emotional-learning sessions (typically facilitated by a school-based mental health professional). Students should be given general information about who to go to and how to receive help, should they need it.
  - Use targeted education approaches (e.g., Tier 2) to educate students at risk of experiencing sadness, depression, and mood regulation problems. Typically, this would entail small group sessions led by a school-based mental health professional and would include more detailed information about signs and symptoms, along with specific coping strategies that students could use to prevent and/or reduce concerns. Students should be given specific information about who to go to and how to receive help, should they need it.
  - Use individualized education approaches (e.g., Tier 3) to educate students who are known to be experiencing sadness, depression, and mood regulation problems. Typically, this would occur through individual counseling sessions provided by a school-based mental health professional and would include student-specific information about signs and symptoms, along with student-specific strategies to mitigate those concerns. Students should be given information about additional sources of help (e.g., crisis lines, community-based providers) in case they need support at a time that their school-based mental health professional is not available. Teachers and school-based mental health professionals should regularly consult about how to best support students with sadness, depression, or mood regulation problems during school.
- **Promote healthy choices among your students:** By encouraging them to make healthy choices in their lives, you can help your students prevent and/or reduce symptoms of sadness, depression, and mood regulation problems.
  - *Healthy diet:* Educate your students about the importance of eating a healthy diet rich in antioxidants (e.g., apricots, broccoli, cantaloupe, carrots, berries, peaches, pumpkin, and tomatoes), vitamin B (e.g., leafy greens, salmon, liver, eggs, and milk), vitamin C (e.g., sweet peppers, parsley, citrus, and Brussel sprouts), magnesium (e.g., nuts, seeds, dark chocolate, black beans, edamame, quinoa, and yogurt), choline (e.g., turkey, tuna, and chicken), and potassium (e.g., bananas, white beans, potatoes, avocados, sweet potatoes, beets, parsnips, spinach, Swiss chard, tomato sauce, and orange juice) that can help improve their brain and body health.



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- *Proper sleep*: Educate your students about the importance of getting adequate sleep each night and maintaining a regular sleep-wake cycle in order to help prevent and/or reduce their symptoms of sadness, depression, or mood regulation problems.
- *Exercise*: Educate your students about the importance of getting regular exercise in order to release their 'feel-good' endorphins and other brain chemicals that enhance their overall sense of well-being.
- *Positive social interactions*: Encourage your students to interact with family, friends, and peers who are a positive influence in their lives.
- *Fun activities*: Encourage your students to engage in extra-curricular and/or social activities that they find enjoyable.
- **Help students find coping strategies for their sadness, depression, or mood regulation problems**: Students who experience sadness, depression, or mood regulation problems can benefit from using coping strategies to help stabilize their mood and be able to cope better during school.
  - Teach students who are experiencing sadness, depression, or mood regulation problems how to use relaxation techniques to reduce the intensity of the feelings and emotions they are experiencing. Relaxation techniques include strategies like deep breathing (taking three deep, slow breaths while breathing in for a count of three and out for a count of three); muscle relaxation (squeezing a muscle tightly for a count of three, then releasing all the tension and focusing on the sense of relief/calm); and the mindfulness grounding exercise (name 5 things you see, 4 things you feel, 3 things you hear, 2 things you smell, and 1 thing you taste).
  - Help students create their own mood regulation/coping toolbox. Items that might be helpful in a mood regulation/coping toolbox include a journal with prompts that focus on positive self-affirmations, positive self-statement cards, stress balls, kaleidoscope, piece of tactile fabric, smooth stone, scented play dough, chewing gum, bottle of bubbles, MP3 player loaded with relaxing music, photo of a loved one/message from a loved one, or relaxation prompt cards. It is important to include things that are meaningful and helpful for that specific student, as not all of these items will be helpful for all students.
  - Teach students to use distraction techniques when they notice signs and symptoms in order to move their attention away from that uncomfortable experience. Distraction techniques include strategies like thinking of their favorite things (e.g., being with their pet, walking on a beach, eating their favorite food, listening to birds sing), squeezing something (e.g., stress ball), counting (e.g., counting to 100 slowly, counting backwards, counting your breaths, counting your steps), or doing something else (e.g., exercising, yoga, reading, playing a game, doing a puzzle, taking a walk, talking to a friend).
- **Provide a safe place for students to talk about their sadness, depression, or mood regulation problems**: Students who are sad, depressed, or having mood regulation problems may need adults at school who can support them through this overwhelming, intense, and difficult time.
  - It is important to establish, maintain, and sustain positive relationships with students so they know that someone at school is available to them when they may need support. The Search Institute's *Developmental Relationships Framework* provides a strong foundation for building relationships with students: <https://www.search->



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[institute.org/developmental-relationships/developmental-relationships-framework/](https://www.institute.org/developmental-relationships/developmental-relationships-framework/)

- It can be helpful for students to talk about their sadness, depression, or mood regulation problems. School professionals can encourage students to talk about their concerns when they feel ready, while being careful not to force the conversation if students are not ready to talk.
- Sometimes students who experience sadness, depression, or mood regulation problems are unable to talk about their concerns, but still need a supportive adult in their lives. In this case, it is important to understand that just sitting with students quietly (or checking in with them using technology if you are in remote learning) can let them know you care about them, provide a safe place for them, and communicate that you are available for them should they need you.
- **Use micro-skills daily during class to support students who have experienced sadness, depression, or mood regulation problems:** Students who experience sadness, depression, and dysregulation can benefit from being in a supportive class environment.
  - Reduce class pressures by breaking assignments and tasks into smaller parts to keep students from feeling overwhelmed.
  - Provide step-by-step instructions and be flexible/realistic with your expectations.
  - Help students use positive statements about their performance.
  - Encourage realistic goal-setting.
  - For students who are socially isolated, encourage gradual social interaction and ask students who are more social to help bring that student back into group discussions.
  - Ask parents what would be helpful in class to reduce pressure or motivate their child.
  - Whenever possible, encourage physical activity throughout the school day in order to assist students in getting daily exercise (and increase their 'feel-good' brain chemicals).
  - Never dismiss students' feelings by saying "you will get over it" or "it's just a part of growing up".
  - When students approach you about their depression, ask questions to help understand how they feel and what they are experiencing.
  - Include information on depression in your teaching and show students that there have been many famous and successful people who have had depression and overcame it.
  - Provide students with choices for assignments, which can help them feel like they have some control over their environment.
  - Ensure that students write down assignment instructions correctly so they have a thorough understanding of what is expected of them.
  - Post the class schedule daily so students can know what to expect and to ensure that there are no surprises in their daily routine.
  - Encourage involvement in extra-curricular activities to help alleviate sadness, depression, or dysregulation through exercise or a sense of belonging in a social group.
  - During class, model positive self-talk and problem-solving for your students.
- **Advocate for students to visit a mental health professional, if needed:** If symptoms become overwhelming, it may be important for students to visit a mental health professional to help alleviate their symptoms and identify coping strategies that work for them. School professionals can share referral information with students and their families about options for mental health treatment at school or in the local community.