

# Knock, Knock Who's There?

## Read and Discuss:

“Hi, honey. How was your day?” That was the way his mother had always greeted him when he came home from school. Sure she worked, but she arranged her hours so she was always there when he got home. But things had been different lately.

For the past few weeks she hadn't been herself at all. Sometimes she didn't even go to work. On those days she barely did anything except lie in bed and sleep most of the time. He hoped today wouldn't be one of those days. He'd walk through the door and after she asked him about his day he'd tell her a knock-knock joke to cheer her up. Then she'd tell him his favorite joke. “Knock-knock. Who's there? Lena. Lena who? Lena little closer. I want to tell you a secret.” And when he did she would give him a kiss.

David nervously put his key in the apartment door and opened it. The sickly smell of sour milk and cereal turned to mush greeted him as he walked into the apartment, not a pleasant greeting from his mom. He saw that the breakfast dishes were still on the table. David sighed as he cleared the table and threw the cereal into the sink.

“David, is that you?” He heard a faint voice from the bedroom. Suddenly dealing with the cereal didn't seem so bad after all. Now he would have to go into her room and see her lying in that unmade bed. He wanted to cheer her up, make her feel better. But the truth was he dreaded going into the room, it scared him so much. He'd have to tell her about his day while she said nothing, pretend that things were great, when the truth was that sometimes he worried so much at school he couldn't concentrate.

What, he wondered, if the same thing happened to him some day? Nobody told him what was wrong with her, but he thought he knew anyway. Depression. He'd learned that much from watching Oprah. That's when people slept all the time and couldn't get out of bed in the morning and talked about killing themselves. What if it was catching, like the flu, or the cold you knew you'd got 'cause someone sneezed on you? What if some day he became a blob just like she was, a mound lying in bed so hidden you couldn't even tell if there was a real person under all those covers? “Knock-knock. Who's there? Nobody.”

Worse yet. What if he'd caused her depression? He had to admit he wasn't perfect. Sometimes she yelled at him for not doing things, like leaving his bedroom a mess or forgetting to pick something up at the grocery store. She'd been on his case a lot lately, especially during the past few weeks.

Why did things have to change? She'd always been so proud of him. He was a really good student, especially in math and science. Figuring out how things worked was his specialty, and his teachers were always asking him for help when anything broke down in the classroom. In fact, his fifth grade teacher, Mr. Byrnes, told him he should become an engineer when he grew up. Yes, that's what he would do, become an engineer. Why didn't his mom notice the good things he did anymore, just the bad?

He tried not to think of it as he sighed again and headed for the door. Just then the phone rang. Saved, a momentary reprieve, before he had to walk into the darkened room and carry on a one way conversation with someone who seemed like an alien from another planet, not his real, fun-loving mom.

It was his Aunt Sarah. “Hi, honey, how's mom and how are you?” Should he tell her? Should he tell her he hated to see his mother like this and how angry he was, yes angry, that his real mother had disappeared somewhere in those bed sheets?

“Fine,” he said, “Just fine.”

## Discussion Questions

1. **How does David feel about the change in his mother? Role play the phone call between David and his Aunt. What if David were willing to share his feelings? How would you feel if you were David? What other situations might turn things upside down in a family?**

**Points to make:**

Mental illness and other illnesses as well as divorce, unemployment, and death in the family are all crisis situations in a family. It can be especially hard to deal with if you don't understand what's wrong and are afraid to talk about it. All feelings—anger, confusion, guilt, sadness, fear—are normal responses to difficult situations. Talking about the problem and sharing your feelings is important. Supports are available in school (coaches, teachers, social workers, etc.), in the family (immediate family, relatives), and in the community (friends, mental health professionals, support groups, churches).

2. **What personality changes does David see in his Mom? How could she get better and become her old self again?**

**Points to make:**

We all have days when we feel a little bit down, but when that feeling goes on for a long time and interferes with normal activities then it's time to get help. For many people depression is cyclic and sometimes seasonal. Treatment is available through medication, individual therapy, and group support. It is very likely that with treatment David's Mom will return to her old self, although depression may recur in the future.

3. **Can David “catch” his Mom’s depression like the flu?**

**Points to make:**

You cannot catch depression from someone else any more than you can catch a broken leg! Some people may be more likely to develop depression if there is a family history of the illness. But no matter what, depression is treatable at any age. It is, however, difficult and often confusing to be close to someone struggling with depression. For this reason it is important that family members, like David, get support too.

4. **Is David responsible for making his Mom feel so bad? Can he fix it?**

**Points to make:**

Children often feel responsible when something goes wrong in the family. Depression may be triggered by a painful life event such as a death or divorce, but it may also be purely biological. What ever the root cause no one is ever responsible for causing the illness. On the contrary, the loving support and concern of family can speed up the process of recovery with treatment.

5. **What personal strengths does David have to help him cope? What other supports are available to him?**

**Points to make:**

This story illustrates RESILIENCY BUILDERS identified by Nan Henderson, M.S.W. in her work on resiliency, published in Resiliency in Action: Practical Ideas for Overcoming Risks and Building Strengths in Youth, Families, and Communities. They are listed below. Discuss how they help David deal with his problem in the context of the story.

### PERSONAL RESILIENCY

- Inner Direction
- Love of Learning
- Humor
- Flexibility
- Perceptiveness
- Self-motivation
- Self-Worth
- Positive View of Future
- Competence
- Perseverance

### ENVIRONMENTAL RESILIENCY

- Promotes close bonds
- Encourages supportive relationships
- Expresses high, realistic expectations of success for future

More information on resiliency is available at [www.resiliency.com](http://www.resiliency.com)