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Children and Depression

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Is it possible that a child can suffer from depression?

Yes. Childhood depression differs from the normal “blues” and everyday emotions that occur as a child develops. When a child seems sad, it doesn’t mean he or she has significant depression. However, when sadness becomes disruptive enough to interfere with a child’s normal social activities, interests, schoolwork, or family life, it may indicate depression. Keep in mind, however, that while depression *can be* a serious illness, it is a very treatable one.



How can I tell if my child is depressed?

The primary symptoms of depression usually revolve around sadness, a feeling of hopelessness, and severe mood swings and changes. While symptoms of depression in children may vary greatly and even be overlooked, emotional and psychological swings of growth and puberty may mask what is really depression. Children may complain of feeling sick, refuse to go to school, cling to a parent or caregiver, or worry excessively that a parent may die. Older children and teens may sulk, get

into trouble at school, be negative or grouchy, or feel misunderstood. Earlier medical studies of depression in children focused on “masked” depression, usually evidenced by acting out and angry behavior. While this does occur, many children display sadness or a low mood similar to that of adults suffering from depression.

Signs of depression in children can be one of, or include many of the symptoms listed below.



- Irritability or anger over and above the norm



- Continuous feelings of sadness and hopelessness



- Social withdrawal
- Increased sensitivity to rejection
- Increased or decreased appetite
- Sleeplessness or excessive sleep



- Vocal outbursts or crying
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fatigue and low energy



- Physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches) that don’t respond to treatment



- Reduced ability to function during events and activities at home or with friends, in school, extracurricular activities, and in other hobbies or interests
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Impaired thinking or concentration
- Thoughts of or talks about death or suicide



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Not all children will present all of these symptoms. Most display different symptoms at different times in different settings. Although some children function reasonably well in structured environments, most children with significant depression suffer noticeable changes in social activities, loss of interest in school and poor academic performance, or a change in appearance. Children, especially those over the age of 12, may also begin experimenting with drugs or alcohol.

Although relatively rare in youths under 12, young children have been known to attempt suicide – and may do so impulsively when upset or angry. Girls are more likely to attempt suicide, but boys are more likely to succeed. Children with a family history of violence, alcoholism, or physical and/or sexual abuse are at a greater risk for suicide, as are those with severely depressive symptoms.

What are the statistics of childhood depression?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in an 2018-2019 study, 15.1% of adolescents between the ages of 12-17 years had experienced a major depressive episode, 36.7% reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, and 18.8% seriously considered attempting suicide over the previous year. 4.4% of children aged 3-17 years have been formally diagnosed with depression, and depression often co-occurs with other cognitive, developmental, and mental health disorders such as anxiety, ADHD, behavioral disorders, or autism. There is also significant recent research regarding the correlation between heavy social media use and depression: among teens who use social media the most (more than five hours a day), one study showed a 50% increase in depressive symptoms among girls (35% among boys) when their symptoms were compared with those who only use social media for 1-3 hours per day.

Though mental health disorders continue to increase in children and adolescents, awareness of the need for help (and in many cases, access to pediatric mental health services) has also increased over the years.



What should I do if I suspect my child may be depressed?

If your child presents any of the symptoms listed in this handout, please contact your child's physician.

You may also want to involve your elementary school's guidance counselor. The elementary years are a time when children begin developing their academic self-concept, feelings of competence and confidence, decision-making, communication and life skills, as well as character values. Your school counselor can offer help and support to your child during a time when he or she is developing and acquiring attitudes toward self, peers, social groups, school, and family.

Your child may also benefit from outpatient psychological counseling, play therapy, or family or group counseling. A licensed professional counselor (psychologist or psychiatrist), play therapist (RPT), or clinical social worker (LCSW) will provide those services. If your child is in crisis or you suspect he may harm himself or others, seek immediate emergency care. You can read more about finding mental health care for your child by following the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) link, below.

Resources:

National Institute of Mental Health. Depression in Children and Adolescents. Retrieved July, 2013 from <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression-in-children-and-adolescents/index.shtml>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022). Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health. Retrieved May, 2022 from <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html>

National Alliance on Mental Illness. (2022). Finding Mental Health Care for Your Child. Retrieved May, 2022 from <https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Kids-Teens-and-Young-Adults/Kids/Finding-Mental-Health-Care-for-Your-Child>

PSYCOM. (2022) Social Media and Depression: Research Links the Problems, Especially in Teens. Retrieved May, 2022 from <https://www.psycom.net/social-media-depression-teens#:~:text=The%20association%20between%20social%20media%20use%20and%20depressive%20symptoms%20is,those%20who%20only%20use%20social>

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