

Depression in Children

Adults often view childhood as a stage of life without many cares or responsibilities. For years, many therapists shared this view, feeling that children were too emotionally undeveloped to suffer some psychiatric illnesses. Today, we understand that children, like adults, can experience even severe depression. In fact, 5 percent of young children and adolescents suffer from depression at any given point in time.

Symptoms of Depression in Children

Recognizing the symptoms of childhood depression can be difficult. Parents expect a certain amount of turmoil in their children's lives as they develop. They may be uncertain whether their child's behavior is normal sadness or a sign of something more serious. Professionals are reluctant to make the diagnosis of clinical depression for fear that the child may feel stigmatized by such a label.

Some children display the classic symptoms of depression, such as sadness, hopelessness, anxiety, restlessness, eating disorders and sleeping problems. Other children's depression manifests through physical problems, such as stomachaches and headaches, for which there are no medical explanations. Still others hide their feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness under a cover of irritability, aggression, hyperactivity and misbehavior.

Complicating the recognition of depression is the progression of developmental stages through which children pass on the way to adulthood. Negativism, clinginess or rebellion may be normal and temporary expressions of a particular stage, and not necessarily signs of depression. In addition, children go through temporary depressed moods just as adults do. Careful observation lasting several weeks may be required to determine if a child is genuinely depressed.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, symptoms of a child who is depressed may include:

- › Persistent sad or irritable mood
- › Loss of interest in activities once enjoyed
- › Significant change in appetite or body weight
- › Difficulty sleeping or oversleeping
- › Psychomotor agitation or impairment (nervous energy or lethargy)
- › Loss of energy
- › Feelings of worthlessness or inappropriate guilt
- › Difficulty concentrating
- › Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide

Other signs that your child may be depressed include:

- › Frequent vague, non-specific physical complaints, such as headaches, muscle aches, stomachaches or tiredness
- › Frequent absences from school or poor performance in school
- › Talk of or efforts to run away from home
- › Outbursts of shouting, complaining, unexplained irritability or crying
- › Being bored
- › Lack of interest in playing with friends
- › Alcohol or substance abuse
- › Social isolation or poor communication
- › Fear of death
- › Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure
- › Increased irritability, anger or hostility
- › Reckless behavior
- › Difficulty with relationships

When symptoms of depression seem severe, continue for more than a few weeks, or interfere with your child's school or play, your pediatrician should evaluate your child to rule out physical illness. Once the doctor rules out physical explanations, an evaluation by a mental health professional experienced in treating children is in order.

Like adult depression, childhood depression can be treated very successfully with a combination of traditional psychotherapy, play therapy and medication. If left untreated, childhood depression can have devastating consequences,

Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.

including failure in school, difficulties in family and peer relationships, and even suicide.

Risk Factors for Depression in Children

Statistically, depression affects boys and girls with the same frequency. As adolescence approaches, the incidence for girls increases so that twice as many girls as boys potentially are depressed. There is a higher incidence of depression among children who have a depressed parent. Poverty and frequent change of residences or schools (often the result of poverty) are thought to put children at risk for depression. Other risk factors include:

Stress

- › Cigarette smoking
- › Loss of a parent or loved one
- › Break-up of an adolescent romantic relationship
- › Conduct or learning disorders, including attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- › Chronic illnesses, such as diabetes
- › Abuse or neglect
- › Other trauma, including natural disasters

Bipolar Disorder in Children

Although rare, therapists now recognize that bipolar disorder can occur in children. With bipolar disorder, sufferers cycle between euphoric or manic highs and depressive lows. There is a greater frequency of bipolar disorder in children whose parents have the illness. Children with bipolar disorder frequently have other psychiatric disorders, such as ADHD or conduct disorders. Parents who suspect their children may have bipolar disorder should immediately seek psychiatric help, as this condition can be very severe in children.

Treatment Options

Therapy with a skilled and experienced counselor can be very effective for treating depressed children. A recent study showed that cognitive-behavioral (CBT) therapy was more effective than supportive or family therapy. CBT teaches children to change the way they think about themselves and their world. Techniques like positive self-talk can help a child's thinking move from, "No one cares about me and I am a loser," to, "I am a strong person, and people like me."

Because antidepressant medications have been tested primarily on and prescribed for adults, doctors are reluctant to prescribe them for depressed children. Recently, studies have proved the safety and short-term effectiveness of some of the newer antidepressants. Medication usually is prescribed only for children with severe depression who do not show improvement with psychotherapy. Medication is used more frequently with teens than with young children.

If you have a new health insurance plan or insurance policy beginning on or after Sept. 23, 2010, depression screenings for adolescents must be covered under the Affordable Care Act, without your having to pay a co-payment or co-insurance or meet your deductible. This applies only when these services are delivered by a network provider, and some other restrictions may apply.

Resources

For more information on depression in children, contact these resources:

- › American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: www.aacap.org
- › American Psychiatric Association: www.psych.org
- › American Psychological Association: www.apa.org
- › Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance: www.dbsalliance.org
- › HealthCare.gov: www.healthcare.gov
- › Mental Health America: www.nmha.org
- › National Alliance on Mental Illness: www.nami.org
- › National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov
- › National Institutes of Health: www.nih.gov



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