


What is

Depression in Childhood and Adolescence


Depression in childhood and adolescence

is a mood of severe and continuing unhappiness. Many young people experience the 'blues' or feel 'down' for a short period. When this feeling persists for more than a couple of weeks, it's important to get help. Few young people seek help on their own - they need encouragement from families, friends or other concerned adults.

 *Helping a young person who is depressed: Understand the signs of depression so you don't see the young person as just 'being difficult'.*

What causes it?

There is no exact cause of depression. It is thought that people may be predisposed to depression through their genetic or biological 'make-up' and that depression may be triggered by a stressful event or events. These might include events such as parental separation, loss of relationship, violence, abuse, body changes, dealing with sexual feelings/sexual identity, conflict between family cultural or religious values, school problems, put-downs, misuse of alcohol and other drugs. Often a number of these factors are present. Sometimes depression seems to have no apparent trigger.

 *MYTH: A depressed person can just 'snap out of it'.*
FACT: Depression involves chemical changes in the brain and makes many normal activities seem like an enormous effort.

What are the signs of depression?

Recognising depression can be difficult, as many of its signs can be confused with those of 'growing up'. With depression there is a change in mood or behaviour that disrupts the young person's ability to take part in their usual activities. If any or a number of the following signs have persisted for more than two weeks they may indicate depression:

- sadness or irritability
- crying easily and often
- problems with concentration, loss of interest or deterioration in school work
- lack of interest in usual activities
- withdrawing from social contact
- lack of energy, motivation
- anger or aggression
- problems with eating or sleeping - either too much or too little
- being restless or agitated
- feeling guilty or worthless
- suicidal thoughts or actions

Who gets depression?

Depression is often hidden so it is difficult to estimate how many young people experience it. It has been estimated that around 1 in 5 young people experience depression at some time. In the western world, major depression rates are increasing and depression is occurring at earlier ages. There is a strong association between depression and suicide, so it's crucial that depression is recognised and help sought.

What is the difference between childhood/adolescent depression and depression in adults?

While the signs of depression are similar, depressed children and adolescents may show more anger and irritation than adults do. They may also have more mood changes, seeming quite happy one day and really 'down in the dumps' the next. Young people do not always understand or express their feelings appropriately. When asked, they may deny that something is wrong, or express their feelings through hostile, aggressive or risk-taking behaviour. Younger children may have a tendency to isolate themselves and may appear quiet and shy when they are actually depressed.



It's important to get help as soon as possible.

A period of depression in childhood or adolescence may cut short the development of life skills and leave long-lasting scars on a young person's beliefs about themselves and the world. The first point of contact for help is usually the GP who should conduct a physical examination to rule out possibilities other than depression.

How is depression treated?

Treatment of depression involves a number of components. Most commonly it will involve counselling or therapies (e.g. cognitive behavioural therapy) where young people talk about their problems and learn techniques for solving them. Depending on the age and circumstances of the young person, treatment may involve whanau/family or group therapy and medications. The sooner depression is recognised and treated, the greater the chances of full recovery.

Where can I get more information?

Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand

for resources, videos, books and further information.

81 New North Road, Eden Terrace, Auckland

Phone: (09) 300 7030, Fax: (09) 300 7020

Email: resource@mentalhealth.org.nz

Website: www.mentalhealth.org.nz

(see 'Information' for a full description of depression in childhood & adolescence)

