

**Just
the facts.**

ANSWERS
TO YOUR
QUESTIONS ABOUT
PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH

Depression in Children: How Psychologists Can Help

How can I tell if my child is depressed?

Children and adolescents can suffer from depression just as adults do. They may show symptoms of crying, depressed mood, sleep or appetite disturbances (too little or too much) or even thoughts of suicide. Because many young people are not able to articulate their feelings or understand them, they may show symptoms of depression through their behavior only. In addition to persistent sadness, children and adolescents may show irritability, problems getting along with peers or family, or school failure. Some turn to illegal drugs or alcohol in an attempt to "self-medicate" their feelings of depression. Young people may show signs of low self-esteem through frequent verbal self put-downs or behaving in ways that let others take advantage of them. Frequent physical complaints such as headaches and stomachaches can also be signs of depression, as well as school avoidance. Shunning activities or friends the child usually enjoys can also be cause for concern.

What causes depression in children?

A variety of factors can contribute to a child being at risk for depression. Life events such as experiencing a major loss or trauma, or having to cope with overwhelming stress (either acute or chronic), abuse or neglect often lead to depressive symptoms. Likewise, children who have chronic medical conditions such as diabetes or cancer are at increased risk for mood disturbances. Certain medications have a side effect of depressing mood, as do withdrawal from drugs like cocaine or steroids. It has also been firmly established that depression can run in families - children are thus at increased risk if a first degree biological relative has struggled with depression.

Why is it important to seek treatment for depression?

Depression is one of the most debilitating of all psychological disorders. Its physical effects can include sleep deprivation, weight loss, chronic fatigue and increased susceptibility to infections and disease. Depression impairs a child's ability to concentrate, remember and make decisions, and erodes his motivation - thus school performance is likely to suffer. Relationships with peers and family decline as the child withdraws or strikes out in anger. Self-doubts and guilt feelings eat away at a child's self-esteem. At its worst, depression may elicit suicidal thoughts or attempts. If left untreated, depression can be fatal.

What is effective treatment?

Treatment involves an evaluation by a psychologist or other qualified mental health professional, which will include talking with the child or adolescent in play or talk therapy, sessions with the parents, or family therapy. For the child with anxiety symptoms, relaxation and coping skills can be taught. Children and teens can also respond well to medication when appropriate. Recovery rates appear to be better when medication is combined with psychotherapy.

Are there benefits to treatment?

Absolutely. A preponderance of research has established that certain types of psychotherapy are very successful in treating depression. Effective treatment improves mood, concentration and memory, re-establishes healthy sleep, appetite and energy levels, reduces anger and irritability, and strengthens a child's confidence and self-esteem.

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