



Fact Sheet

Depression

What is Depression?

Depression is a common mental disorder in children and adolescents that can present with many different symptoms including:

- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities
- Sleep problems (having trouble sleeping or sleeping too much)
- Appetite changes (either eating too much or too little)
- Energy loss and fatigue
- Sadness
- Irritability or anger
- Problems concentrating
- Feelings of guilt

Normal teenage mood swings usually last at most a few days and do not involve change in functioning (e.g., change in grades). Depression involves symptoms that last weeks and cause difficulty in daily activities. Younger children may pretend to be sick, refuse to go to school and be clingy to parents. Adolescents with depression will more commonly exhibit irritability or anger. Students who are depressed often have difficulty sustaining attention and effort. In the classroom students with depression may be viewed as lazy and unmotivated. They often are unresponsive to suspensions or penalties. Children with depression also tend to have feelings of worthlessness that can affect self-confidence and lead to poor self-esteem. Decreased self-esteem can result in poor academic performance and decreased interest in extracurricular activities.

To make the diagnosis, symptoms must last for at least 2 weeks and impair daily functioning.

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Which Children Develop Depression?

Any child or adolescent can develop symptoms of depression. Approximately 1-2% of children have depression, and 3-8% of teenagers have depression. In childhood, depression rates are relatively equal between boys and girls. In teenagers, girls are twice as likely to be depressed as boys.

How Can You Screen for Mental Health Concerns in Students?

Employing a set of questions about emotions may provide a useful approach to screening youth for mental health issues. The following questions from the American Medical Association Guidelines for Adolescent Preventive Services (AMA GAPS) Questionnaire screen for depression and related mental health issues:

- Have you done something fun over the past few weeks?
- When you get angry, do you do violent things?
- During the past few weeks, have you felt sad or down as though you have nothing to look forward to?
- Have you ever seriously thought about suicide, made a plan, or tried to kill yourself?
- Have you ever been physically, emotionally, or sexually abused?
- Is there something you worry about or fear?
- Would you like to get counseling about something that is bothering you?

A child who answers “yes” to any of these questions should be referred for a formal mental health evaluation. In addition, any child who expresses thoughts of wanting to hurt themselves should not be left alone until medical evaluation is obtained. Teachers should contact a school counselor or psychologist, as well as the parents, immediately.

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What Do I Do When I Feel a Student Needs Help Because They Are depressed?

Students who are depressed are often looking for someone who will listen. Remember that students are not choosing to be depressed and often lack the personal resources to do their best. Provide your best to give them extra support and help. Seek help from other school resources such as the school psychologist, counselor or social worker. It also is important to make parents or caregivers aware that you are concerned about the student's mental health and encourage families to seek a medical or mental health evaluation for their child.

How Can I Help Students with Depression Receiving Mental Health Care?

In the classroom, consider making adjustments and accommodations on tasks. For example, help them to create a study schedule so they can create a stepwise approach to their organization and do not become overwhelmed with large projects. Provide opportunity for the student to engage in positive social interactions, consider pairing them with another student to work together on a school assignment. It is very important that the student feel accepted within their school environment.

When untreated, depression can have a devastating effect on that child, their family and the school community. Depression correlates with lower academic performance and increased risk of suicide. Depression is an illness and does not get better quickly or with time alone, but needs proper mental health and medical care. Provide youth with supportive and reinforcing encouragement regarding their ongoing participation in counseling and medical care.

How Do I Know If a Depressed Student May Be Suicidal?

Children with depression are at high risk for suicide. Behaviors that may be concerning in children and teens include self-destructive thoughts or giving away possessions. In younger children some signs of suicidal thinking include drawing

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pictures that are death-themed or using death as a theme during play. Also reading books that are death-themed or listening to music that focuses on death can be sign of suicidal thinking. A recent suicide in the environment puts children at higher risk for suicide. Children who talk about hurting themselves or committing suicide should always be taken seriously. Do not be afraid to ask a student if he or she wants to hurt himself. Any child that has a plan to commit suicide or threatens suicide needs immediate medical evaluation. The student should remain with a trusted adult until professional help can be obtained.

Where Can I Find More Information?

Guidelines for Adolescent Preventive Services (GAPS). American Medical Association, 1997. www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/physician-resources/public-health/promoting-healthy-lifestyles/adolescent-health/guidelines-adolescent-preventive-services.page?

American Psychiatric Association
www.healthyminds.org/Main-Topic/Depression.aspx

National Alliance on Mental Health
http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=By_Illness&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=17623

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
<http://www.aacap.org/page.ww?section=Facts+for+Families&name=Facts+for+Families> ♦