

Depression In The Child and Adolescent

The term “depression,” has received much attention in the popular media. Most people have some idea of what it means. Virtually everyone could admit to feeling depressed, or “down” or “blue,” at one time or another. This is a perfectly normal response to the ups and downs of life and it is not a condition that requires medical treatment. When depression persists for more than a short period of time, however, and begins to ruin the quality of someone’s life, it is defined as an illness and can require professional treatment.

Simply put, depression is a continuing, overwhelming feeling of sadness that leaves its victims with a sense of helplessness when they are confronted by the ordinary experiences of life. While many adults can be described as depressed, the condition also affects teenagers and children. According to the American Psychiatric Association, one in ten children age six to twelve suffers from a depressive illness. Likewise, teenage depression is one of the most prevalent emotional disturbances among high school students, and is more common among girls than boys.

Depression, as the term is used medically, is an emotional disturbance that can have serious consequences. In a moderate state, it can interfere with the normal life activities of the depressed person. In its severe form, it can be life threatening in that the afflicted person can choose to end his or her life prematurely by suicide.

The causes of depression in children and adolescents are similar. Both biological and environmental components can produce the condition. In some cases, a biochemical imbalance in the brain can affect behavior and mood and cause depression. In other people, the stress of growing up and going through the trials and tribulations of adolescence can trigger serious depression. Painful life events such as the divorce of parents, the death of a close friend or relative, the breakup of a romantic relationship or problems at school can all push some young people into serious depression.

The signs of depression in children and adolescents can vary with the age of the child and his or her ability to express feelings. Those who do not yet have mature verbal skills will sometimes show their unhappiness by behaving in ways that are not typical, demonstrating aggression or extreme withdrawal, for example. Older adolescents will often state their feelings of hopelessness and sadness explicitly, as they respond to those who ask why they are behaving as they are. Additional signs of depression include unusual physical changes, a lack of interest in appearance, the loss of enthusiasm for activities that were previously enjoyed and the use of alcohol or drugs.

If these signs of depression persist for more than a few weeks, or if the child or adolescent becomes dangerous to him or her self, or others, then it is time to seek a professional evaluation. Simply urging the child or teenager to “Cheer up” or “Snap out of it” is not a helpful suggestion when the depressive behavior has continued for a long period of time. The health risks of depression are serious and children and adolescents often respond well to treatment. (continued)

What can you do if you suspect that a child or adolescent that you care about is depressed? Fortunately, depression is a treatable condition. The first step is to have the young person thoroughly evaluated by a mental health professional. Based on this evaluation, the most appropriate form of treatment can be recommended.

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