



# Hawthorn Counseling Group

977 Lakeview Parkway, Suite 102, Vernon Hills, IL 60061

(847) 680-0755

fax: (847) 573-1617

www.hawthorncounseling.com

## Is My Kid Depressed? An Overview of Signs, Symptoms & Treatment of Depression in Adolescence

John Jochem, Psy.D.  
Licensed Clinical Psychologist

Thank you for joining us for this discussion of adolescent depression. We'll be covering a number of the points below during the presentation and we welcome your participation—feel free to share your own thoughts about the information presented and to ask any questions about the items listed below, or other related issues.

- In general terms, what is adolescent depression?
  - Adolescent depression is a disorder occurring during the teenage years marked by persistent sadness, discouragement, loss of self-worth, and loss of interest in usual activities.
  
- How common is depression among adolescents?
  - Population studies show that at any one time between 10-15 percent of the child/adolescent population has *some* symptoms of depression and, like adults, it is estimated that 15-20% of adolescents will someday experience a depressive episode.
  - Estimates of 1-year prevalence rates of full-fledged major depressive episode symptoms range widely among researchers, from .4% to 8.3%. For comparison purposes, the generally-accepted 1-year prevalence rates for adults is about 5.3%.
  - As is the case with adults, depression appears to be nearly twice as common among girls than among boys.
  
- Signs & symptoms of depression in adolescents
  - Depressed or irritable mood
  - Irritability, short temper, agitation
  - Loss of interest in activities, apathy
  - Reduced pleasure in daily activities
  - Inability to enjoy activities which used to be sources of pleasure
  - Change in appetite, usually a loss of appetite but sometimes an increase
  - Change in weight (unintentional weight loss or unintentional weight gain)
  - Persistent difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep (insomnia)
  - Excessive daytime sleepiness
  - Fatigue
  - Difficulty concentrating
  - Difficulty making decisions
  - Memory loss (amnesia) episodes
  - Preoccupation with self
  - Feelings of worthlessness, sadness, or self-hatred
  - Excessive or inappropriate feelings of guilt
  - Acting-out behavior (missing curfews, unusual defiance)
  - Thoughts about suicide or obsessive fears or worries about death
  - Plans to commit suicide or actual suicide attempt
  - Excessively irresponsible behavior pattern

□ Associated disorders

- Depression is a *disorder of mood* and there is some overlap of signs, symptoms and treatment strategies with other associated conditions. It is estimated that nearly two-thirds of adolescents suffering from depression also struggle with other disorders such as dysthymic disorder, anxiety, substance abuse or a disruptive behavior problem.
  - Dysthymic disorder
    - ◆ A mood disorder like major depression, but with fewer symptoms which are less debilitating. Dysthymia is known to be less episodic in nature—periods of dysthymia may be much longer-lasting. It is estimated that 70% of children and adolescents struggling with dysthymia eventually experience a major depressive episode.
  - Bipolar disorder
    - ◆ A mood disorder in which episodes of mania alternate with episodes of depression. Often, the first manifestation of bipolar illness is a depressive episode. The clinical presentation of a manic phase of bipolar disorder are quite different from features of a depressive episode.
  - Eating disorders, particularly bulimia

□ Causes of depression

- Theories of the underlying causes of depression tend to emphasize the following themes and concepts:
  - Depression can be a transient response to many situations and stresses. In adolescents, depressed mood is common because of the normal maturation process, the stress associated with it and independence conflicts with parents.
  - Depression may also be a reaction to a disturbing event, such as the death of a friend or relative, a breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend, or failure at school. Adolescents who have low self-esteem, are highly self-critical, and who feel little sense of control over negative events are particularly at risk to become depressed when they experience stressful events.
  - Some researches have sought to account for the disparity between boys and girls—girls experience depression with twice the frequency of boys—by proposing a greater vulnerability to social stressors among girls due to a greater focus upon relationships and peer groups.
  - Biological factors have been implicated in developing an understanding of adult depression, primarily based split-twin studies conducted abroad. It is difficult to tease out genetic vs. environmental factors, but it is known that 20-50% of depressed children/adolescents have a family history of depression. Also, children of depressed parents are more than 3x more likely than children of nondepressed parents to experience a depressive disorder.
  - Cognitive factors—changes in how one views oneself, the world and the future—are always suspected when trying to understand the nature of depression. Of course, adolescence is a period when significant developmental events in cognitive functioning are already occurring, specifically the cognitive achievement of *formal operations* occurs (to use a term from renowned French psychologist, Jean Piaget) enabling abstract reasoning at a much deeper level. Many of the mood and behavioral changes associated with adolescence can be linked to the onset of formal operations. When a child is struggling with mood, self-esteem or loss issues at the outset of adolescence the onset of formal operations can sometimes seem to exacerbate the degree of distress experienced.
  - The developmental tasks of adolescence can be overwhelming for some teenagers. The developmental goals or tasks of adolescence are culturally specific and will vary across cultures. In our society, however, the tasks of adolescence are generally viewed as including:
    - ◆ The development of the capacity for lasting, committed relationships.
    - ◆ The development of a lasting sexual orientation/identity.
    - ◆ The development of career/vocational goals.
    - ◆ The completion of training or preparation for one's career/vocational goals.
    - ◆ The development of improved frustration tolerance and impulse control.

- ◆ The development of more lasting values and belief systems. This would include the development of a sense of social responsibility.
- ◆ Achieving separation from one's family of origin and then returning as a fellow grown-up.

Associated risk factors

- Suicide is a real public health threat for adolescents. Psychological autopsies of teenagers who died by suicide have indicated that greater than 90% were struggling with a psychiatric illness at the time of their death, most often a mood disorder with a co-existing substance use disorder.
- Teenagers suffering from depression are at greater risk for developing a substance use disorder.

Treatment of depression among teenagers

- The first step in obtaining treatment is to have your adolescent evaluated by your family physician or a mental health professional.
- The good news is that depression is a very treatable condition, with good response usually occurring from a combination of counseling and, when indicated, medication.
  - Cognitive-behavioral therapy is often utilized in providing counseling to both adults and adolescents and has received considerable research support of its effectiveness.
  - Family therapy is often part of the plan of care for teenagers struggling with a mood disorder.

Resources

- National Alliance for the Mentally Ill: <http://www.nami.org>
- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: <http://aacap.org>
- National Institutes of Health: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001518.htm>

*Dr. John Jochem is a clinical psychologist with many years experience working with adults, adolescents, couples and families. Should you have any questions about this presentation, or wish to learn more about the range of services available through Dr. Jochem's practice, Hawthorn Counseling Group, feel free to call Dr. Jochem at (847) 680-0755 or contact him via email at [jjochem@aol.com](mailto:jjochem@aol.com) .*