



Work Smart Live Smart

Identifying Depression In Children

By
Beverly Beuermann-King,
CSP, Stress and Wellness Specialist

Clinical Depression is more than just the 'blues'. According to the DSM-IV, the standard reference on mental illness, it is a "biochemical disorder where a person feels very sad for an extended period of time and where this state interferes with their everyday life." Clinical Depression affects about 3% of children, 8% of adolescents and 10% of adults.

There seems to be a genetic factor in Depression, and a child, whose parent has had Depression, has a 25% chance of developing Depression. Along with this biochemical and genetic link, it has been found that stress acts as a 'trigger' for Depression. Stress makes the body less efficient and can change the chemical responses within our brains.

Since there is at present, no blood test or scan that can be undertaken to diagnose this biochemical disorder, assessment is based on recognizing the symptoms that a person is experiencing. Detecting Depression in children can be very difficult.

If a student becomes depressed, he/she is unlikely to talk about it. Very likely, a depressed child will think that no one else feels the same way and that no one will understand their problems. Often a depressed child will feel that they are disliked. The pressures of school and growing up can be very hard for some children and it can be difficult for adults to understand how troublesome children's problems can be.

It is important that we remind ourselves, that while their problems may seem unimportant to us, they can be overwhelming to them. Your first warning signs will probably be changes in behaviour that may suggest a troubled and unhappy state of mind. These low moods may be visible in the expression of music, art and letters. One may also witness these symptoms as school truancy, antisocial behaviour, isolation, school failure, substance abuse and eating disorders.

10 Signs and Symptoms of Clinical Depression:

1. Sadness/irritability
2. Changes in weight/appetite
3. Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness and guilt
4. Difficulty concentrating, deciding and remembering
5. Fatigue/loss of energy
6. Loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed
7. Sleep disturbances
8. Restlessness or decreased activity
9. Physical aches or pains with no medical cause
10. Thoughts of suicide or death

In a child, low mood may present itself through:

- Changes in feelings – being unhappy, worried, guilty, angry, fearful, helpless, hopeless, lonely or rejected
- Physical changes – headaches, lack of energy, sleeping or eating problems, or feeling tired all of the time
- Changes in thinking – low self-esteem, self-dislike, or self-blame, difficulty concentrating or experiencing negative thoughts
- Changes in behaviour – withdrawn, irritability, boredom, crying spells, over-reacting

Fortunately, treatment for Clinical Depression is relatively effective. Unfortunately, only one out of every three adults seeks help. These rates are lower in children as it is difficult to differentiate Clinical Depression in children from normal developmental stages and children are less likely to identify that something medical is happening. For example, teenagers can be quite moody, difficult to interact with and lethargic. These behaviours may mask the symptoms of Depression and contribute to the poor recognition of this illness in this age group.

There are several treatment options available to someone dealing with Clinical Depression. Anti-depressant medications are quite effective in treating the symptoms of this illness, however, finding the right medication and the right dosage specific to the age of the child, can be a relatively difficult process. Children's brain chemistry is somewhat different from adults and the medications do not necessarily work in a child as they would in an adult.

Psychotherapy, counselling, and support groups help to address the stresses in one's life that may be acting as a 'trigger' for the depressive episodes. It is important to find groups or therapists that specialize in dealing with children and their issues. The support of peers and family can also have a very significant impact on the outcome of this illness. It is important to treat Depression as an illness, not as a personal choice or weakness.

By recognizing the symptoms and supporting the child early in this process, studies have found that outcomes are more successful. Early recognition could save years of hopelessness, guilt, turmoil and even their life.

Snapshot

Practical steps you can take...

- Listen
- Recognize the signs and symptoms of Depression
- Seek medical attention – A family doctor will rule out other causes that may have similar symptoms and will be able to refer to a specialist if necessary
- Provide support and understanding
- Help the child to develop strong coping mechanisms
- Assist them in removing unnecessary stresses in their life
- Be aware of the signs of suicidal thoughts – Suicide is one of the top killers of our youth
- Educate, educate, educate...treatment success is affected by the amount of knowledge one has

Stress and wellness specialist, **Beverly Beuermann-King** translates current research and best practices information into a realistic, accessible and practical approach through her dynamic stress and wellness workshops, on-line articles, e-newsletters and media interviews and through a collaboration called *Awakening The Workplace*. Visit www.WorkSmartLiveSmart.com for more on Beverly and her wellness work.

©Articles available for reprint – please include source as
Beverly Beuermann-King, www.WorkSmartLiveSmart.com

**Bring one of these related workshops to your team -
Combating Depression or
Understanding Mental Illness**

Call Beverly at 705-786-0437 or
Visit **Presentations & Keynotes** at www.WorkSmartLiveSmart.com
for presentation descriptions and outlines.