

Depression

Childhood depression is a real problem that can be seen in children as young as 4 years of age. Depression is a physiologically based illness caused by a chemical imbalance in the neurotransmitter systems (e.g. serotonin and its receptor system functions less effectively). The reasons why youth can become depressed can be a combination of things related to three different areas that can be looked at:

- Biologically there can be a genetic family history, or there may be a medical disorder such as hypothyroidism or mononucleosis. Therefore, a physical exam by a physician would be recommended to rule out any organic problems.
- Psychologically the thought processes need to be examined such as thinking negatively or poor coping skills that minimize positives about the self.
- Sociologically there can be environmental reasons. Stressors may include parental conflict, peer harassment, physical or sexual abuse, or family health problems.

The diagnostic criteria for Major Depression include five of following symptoms, at least one being depressed mood or loss of interest or pleasure. (Adapted from the APA Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV, 1994.)

- Depressed mood (in children and adolescents, can be irritable mood)
- Loss of interest or pleasure
- Significant weight gain or loss (in children may be failure to make expected weight gains)
- Insomnia or hypersomnia nearly every day
- Overall slowness or agitation
- Feelings of worthlessness or inappropriate guilt nearly every day
- Indecisiveness or decreased concentration nearly every day
- Fatigue or loss of energy every day
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide

Symptoms must be present for at least 2 weeks and cause significant distress or functional impairment. Somatic complaints are more frequently expressed than simple presentation of the above criteria, therefore, if no organic cause is found depression should be suspected.

Warning signs of childhood depression may include:

- frequent complaints of headaches, stomachaches, or fatigue
- sudden drop in school performance, school avoidance, or dropping out of school
- lack of interest in play