



## **MOOD DISORDERS ASSOCIATION OF MANITOBA INC.**

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### **Child And Adolescent Depression**

For many years it was understood that children and adolescents were incapable of suffering from depressive disorders. Instead, depressive symptoms were often dismissed as signs of adolescent or teenage behaviors. However, advances in current medical knowledge have confirmed that children, even as young as age six, can be subject to these disorders. It is currently estimated that approximately 5% of all children throughout Canada are suffering from depression at any given time.

Indeed, during the teenage years, there is substantial evidence that the rate of depressive disorders in children is approximately twice as high as that of adults. Children under stress, who experience loss, or who have learning, attention or conduct disorders are at high risk for depression. Additionally, there is clear evidence that depression may be an inherited genetic disorder.

While there are many similarities in the symptoms of adult and child depression, they are manifested differently. Adolescent and child depression is usually accompanied by the following behaviors:

- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Appetite changes, particularly increases
- Restlessness, agitated
- Hyper-sensitivity to rejection
- Irritability, petulant, peevish
- Negative or antisocial behaviour
- Sulky, sullen, surly behaviour
- An inability to enjoy previously favorite activities
- Uncooperative towards others
- Doing poorly in studies and difficulties in getting along with others
- Frequent complaints of headaches, stomachaches or other physical illnesses
- Sliding personal appearance
- Feeling misunderstood / disapproved of
- Excessive sleeping
- Persistent boredom, low energy, poor concentration

A young child who used to play often with friends may now spend most of the time alone and without interests. Activities that were once considered 'fun' are no longer enjoyed. Children

and adolescents may talk about death and suicide. The depressed teenager may spend large amounts of time alone in their room and may abuse drugs or alcohol as a way to feel better.

Often a young child or adolescent will not be able to realize they are depressed. They may describe their feelings as 'being bored' or just 'sad'. At times they are unable to put their feelings into words, other than to say they feel 'lousy' or 'not right'. Parents and teachers may also have a difficult time recognizing depression as the child does not always seem sad. Frequently the difficult behaviour being exhibited is the focus of concern and the possible underlying cause of depression is not considered.

### **Causes of childhood depression**

Certain children have risk factors in their lives, which could predispose them to depression or could *trigger* depression. Among these are a family history of mental illness or suicide, bullying and abuse (physical or sexual), chronic illness and the loss of a parent at an early age to death, divorce or abandonment. However, some infants exhibit depressive symptoms at an early age before most of these factors come into play, so there is an argument to be made for depression being wholly chemical in some children. Each child's depression is individual, and causes will be different to each one. The depression could be chemical, due to psychological factors, or a combination of the two. More important than the cause is identifying the illness and treating it.

### **How to help a depressed child**

- Talk to your child. Try to encourage as much open and honest communication as possible. Reassure the child that you love them and care for them. If you have noticed any of the signs discussed, do your best to encourage your child to talk to you about how they are feeling and what is bothering them.
- Check with your family doctor to find out if there could be a physical cause for your child's feelings of fatigue, aches and pains, and low moods. In approximately 10% of cases, depressive symptoms can be the advance symptoms of other illnesses, such as diabetes or thyroid gland disorders.
- Once a child has been diagnosed, psychotherapy, medication and lifestyle changes are useful options. More and more, doctors are realizing that chemical imbalances often account for mental illness. Consequently, medications are used to replace or supplement the body's own chemistry.
- Psychotherapy is also extremely useful. If a child's depression has been caused wholly or in part by psychological factors, medication may relieve the depression, but the underlying cause will not be helped by medication alone. A combination of medication and supportive therapy has been found to be the best overall treatment for depression.

If you suspect that your child is suffering from depression, contact your doctor at once. Depression is a very treatable disorder, with an extremely high rate of success.

***“Treat it ... defeat it.”***