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KNOW WHEN TO SEEK HELP FOR YOUR CHILD: Depressive Behaviours in Children and Adolescents

Source: American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP)

Parents are usually the first to recognize that their child has a problem with emotions or behaviour. Parents' growing concerns, and observations of outside resources such as teachers and family combine to form a process of coming to the realization that a child can benefit from treatment. Parents may also consult with the child and adolescent psychiatrist or other professionals about ways to help their youngster at home. Following are a few signs which may indicate that a child and adolescent psychiatric evaluation will be useful.

Younger children

- Marked fall in school performance
- A lot of worry or anxiety, as shown by regular refusal to go to school, go to sleep, or take part in activities that are normal for the child's age
- Hyperactivity, fidgeting, constant movement beyond regular playing.
- Persistent nightmares
- Persistent disobedience or aggression (longer than 6 months) and provocative opposition to authority figures
- Frequent, unexplainable temper tantrums

Pre-adolescents and adolescents

- Marked change in school performance
- Abuse of alcohol and/or drugs
- Inability to cope with problems and daily activities
- Marked changes in sleeping and/or eating habits
- Many complaints of physical ailments
- Aggressive or non-aggressive consistent violation of rights of others, opposition to authority, truancy, thefts, vandalism
- Intense fear of becoming obese with no relationship to actual body weight
- Depression shown by sustained, prolonged negative mood and attitude, often accompanied by poor appetite, difficulty sleeping, or thoughts of death
- Frequent outbursts of anger

It is sometimes more difficult to diagnose teenagers because:

- Adolescents do not always understand or cannot express feelings very well.
- Symptoms are often dismissed as ‘just a part of growing up’.
- The young person may not be aware of the concept of depression and not report anything is wrong.
- There is a strong tie between ‘getting into trouble’ and feeling depressed. It is difficult to sort out if the teenager is depressed because of being in trouble or in trouble because of being depressed.

Adolescents may attempt to escape loneliness and depression in a number of ways.

Some poor and dysfunctional ways are:

- Hero or heroine worship of celebrities
- Denying a need for relationships
- Denying that loneliness or depression exists
- Gratifications like drugs, alcohol, or other forms of escape

Early diagnosis and medical treatment are essential for depressed children. For help, parents should ask their physicians to refer them to a child and adolescent psychiatrist, who can diagnose and treat depression in children and teenagers.

“There is hope and there is help.”