

# Psych Savvy

ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT

Diane Poage  
Director

Joan Bohmann, Ph.D.  
Editor

Depression in Adolescents  
Mary A. DuHoux, Ph.D., NCSP  
School Psychologist  
October, 2001

Depression is a common and universal part of the human experience. It can occur at any age and have multiple causes and symptoms. The onset of depression can be gradual or sudden, brief or long-term. Recognizing depression can be very difficult in teens because it co-exists with other disorders **such** as anxiety, drug/alcohol abuse or Attention Deficit Disorder and because of the normal mood swings common in adolescence.

There are many types of depression which are usually diagnosed by a psychologist or psychiatrist using criteria from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fourth Edition*. The severity of depression is usually classified as mild, moderate or severe. There are also a number of possible causes suggested for depression. Biological explanations include the roles of heredity, biochemical, hormonal and neurological factors. Psychological explanations have linked depression to loss of loved ones, break-up of relationships, disturbances in family relationships and threats to self-esteem.

## Symptoms of Depression

- \* Feeling sad all the time or anxious/numb
- \* Feeling hopeless about everything
- \* Poor appetite or overeating
- \* Poor concentration or difficulty making decisions
- \* Feeling guilty
- \* Feeling worthless
- \* Having many physical problems (headaches, stomachaches)
- \* Feeling irritable or argumentative
- \* Feeling restless and fidgety
- \* Feeling tired or sleeping all of the time
- \* Thinking about suicide or death a lot
- \* Being less interested in social activities or physical appearance
- \* Becoming involved in high risk activities or engaging in self-abusive behavior

## How It May Affect a Teen's Life:

- \* Decline in grades
- \* Sleeping a lot or having trouble sleeping; a change in activity level
- \* Weight gain/loss
- \* Not spending time with friends anymore, isolating themselves
- \* No interest in favorite activities
- \* Crying for no particular reason
- \* Engages in risky behaviors

### Advice for Parents:

- \* Give frequent and genuine praise.
- \* Help your teen distinguish between events that he/she can control from those that are uncontrollable.
- \* Be aware of your child's moods, feelings and attitudes. Sudden changes may indicate depression.
- \* Don't judge your child. Make time for them and let them know that you will listen.
- \* Let the teen know that you are there as a parent to help them, that you care for them and love them.
- \* Don't minimize or downplay their feelings. It may not just be a "phase" that they're going through.
- \* Don't hesitate to talk to your child about depression and/or suicide. (Talking about depression and suicide does NOT put ideas into their heads.)
- \* Pay attention to verbal and nonverbal cues. Any threats of self-harm or self-abusive behavior should be taken seriously.
- \* Don't hesitate to seek professional assistance.

### What Can Teachers Do to Help?

- \* If you suspect that a student is depressed, talk to the student, their parents and school personnel about your concerns.
- \* Be aware of themes of sadness, violence, anger or death in writing samples, journals and artwork.
- \* Establish clear and consistent classroom rules and consequences.
- \* Be alert to a student's suicidal thoughts and behaviors; take suicidal threats seriously and consult the school crisis team or mental health professionals *immediately*.

### Recovery from depression could include:

- \* Self-care: set small, achievable goals; start a good exercise program; develop a support system
- \* Professional evaluation: obtain an evaluation from a professional such as a psychologist, psychiatrist or counselor
- \* Therapy: seek assistance to help learn new coping skills and regain self-esteem.
- \* Medication: for some people, an antidepressant is helpful and is usually combined with therapy.

### Resources in Anchorage include:

Alaska Psychiatric Institute	269-7100
Anchorage Center for Families	276-4994
SouthCentral Counseling	563-1000
North Star Behavioral Health	258-7575
Providence Hospital-Discovery Program	261-4843
AK Native Medical Health Center-Behavioral Health Center	729-2500
Private therapists	

Adapted from **Helping Children at Home and School: Handouts from Your School Psychologist**, National Association of School Psychologists, **Depression in Children**. D. H. Saklofske, H. L. Janzen, D. K. Hildebrand and L. Kaufmann.