

Recognizing Signs of Stress and Depression in Your Child

As a parent, you have likely encountered numerous times of stress in your life, perhaps even a time of depression. Although we often think of childhood as a carefree time – without serious worries or responsibilities, children and teens can experience significant stress and serious depression. In fact, most adult mental illness has its beginning in childhood, especially during the teen years.

It is important to realize that both stress and depression commonly occur in childhood and to be alert for these symptoms. It's not always easy to identify stress or depression reactions, given the normal moodiness and sometimes plain "weirdness" of youth.

Your student is studying a unit at school: *Mental Health: Essential to Overall Health*. In this unit stress and depression are discussed. We thought you'd be interested in some of the information we've identified on this important topic, so we are providing a brief overview.

Common Causes of Stress If your son or daughter has experienced any of the following situations be aware they he/she is likely feeling stressed. The greater the number of stressful situations or the greater their intensity, the greater the stress experienced.

Situations in the home

- Parents' separation or divorce
- A new stepparent
- A new brother or sister
- A single parent household
- Little or no emotional support
- Neglect (personal needs not met)
- Abuse (physical or sexual)

Situations at school

- Exams
- Peer pressure
- Extracurricular activities
- Expectations to succeed
- Relationships
- Problems with friends
- Competition
- Popularity
- No support for school work
- Gangs, threats from others, bullies
- Homework, grades, pressures to excel

Situations in Life

- Bodily changes
- Physical appearance
- Moving to new school
- Illness, hospitalization, disability
- Loss of loved one
- Financial changes
- Violence in the neighborhood, community, world
- Natural disasters or other emergencies

Some stress can be good. Stress can actually have a positive effect that actually improves health and performance. For example, appropriate exercise, or muscle stress, builds strength and endurance. Within manageable levels, stress can sharpen our attention and mobilize our bodies to cope with threatening situations.

Your child needs to learn to manage the effect of stress on his /her life – it is likely to follow him/her throughout life. You can help both by example and by teaching stress management techniques (such as relaxation and meditation techniques) encouraging adequate exercise, nutrition, and rest.

At some point, stress reaches maximum effect and begins to have harmful consequences. The stress response becomes problematic when it does not or cannot turn off. When this occurs, significant physical or mental health damage can occur.

Stress and Depression. Unmanaged stress can lead to depression. Unmanaged depression can lead to serious mental and physical health consequences, even suicide.

Depression is a medical condition as much as heart disease or an ulcer is a medical condition. It needs medical assessment and treatment just as heart disease or the ulcer needs medical care in order to restore health. The precise causes of depression are not known, however, research indicates that biological, genetic, and psycho-social situations contribute to depression. Research also informs us that continued distress and distorted, negative thinking patterns also contribute to depression.

Contributing Factors for Depression in Teens

- Stressors such as fear of not meeting expectations of parents, teachers...
- When things go wrong at school or at home teens may feel unsure of abilities or question how they fit in.
- Facing choices about friendship, sex, alcohol, and drugs
- Facing conflicting messages from parents, teachers, friends and society

What to look for:

- An experience of a humiliating or anxiety provoking situation
- More than five major signs of depression appearing for over two weeks
- Actions or words that reveal suicidal thoughts
- Increased risk-taking behavior
- Signs of personality changes
- Seriously neglected self-care

Use this check list to help recognize signs and symptoms of depression in your child.

Does your child:

_____ Feel sad most of the time?

_____ Always feel tired and find it hard to get out of bed?

_____ Feel guilty or hopeless?

_____ Feel anxious or have an empty mood that does not go away?

_____ Have trouble concentrating, remembering or making decisions?

_____ Have little interest in eating or is eating all the time?

_____ Have find little pleasure in activities they enjoyed in the past?

_____ Express thoughts of death, dying or suicide?

_____ Have trouble sleeping, staying asleep or are they sleeping too much?

_____ Seem irritable and mad at everyone and everything?

- _____ Express to you that they do not like talking to people.
- _____ Have low self esteem?
- _____ Complain of stomach problems or have gastro-intestinal problems?
- _____ Suffer from frequent headaches and migraines?
- _____ Suffer regularly from illnesses?
- _____ Use drugs, alcohol or nicotine?
- _____ Demonstrate emotional outbursts?
- _____ Have noticeable or recent problems in school or academics?

How to support students with stress¹.....

- Be on the look-out for sudden, unexplained changes.
- As best you can, keep open lines of communication.
- Take time to learn about your child's interests (i.e., get to know your child's friends; learn about his or her classes, extra-curricular activities, role models, favorite music, etc.).
- Observe your child's attitude or outlook on life. Remember our conceptions color our perceptions.
- Encourage your child to surround him or herself with positive, growth-promoting people.
- Coach your child in learning to minimize stressors with the following techniques:
 - Be sure to schedule "down time" into your schedule!
 - Practice good time management techniques. (e.g., if you have a part-time job, be sure your hours leave time for homework, studying, and FUN!)
 - As stress mounts, increase your relaxation responses too.
 - The three clichés- eat a balance diet, get regular exercise and good night's sleep.
 - Develop good problem solving skills.
 - Be action-oriented when it comes to stress; challenges are opportunities and stressors are temporary problems.

Where to get help –

American Association of Suicidology

- www.suicidology.org/
- 180- 273-TALK

Suicide Prevention Resource Center

- www.sprc.org

National Mental Health Associations

- www.nmha.org

NIMH – National Institute for Mental Health

- www.nimh.nih.gov

Nemour’s Foundation

- www.kidshealth.org

Summary Points:

- Continued stress may lead to depression.
- Continued depression may lead to suicide.
- Managing stress can prevent or reduce depression and suicide.
- It is important to manage both stress and depression.
- Depression is a serious condition that needs medical attention
- Depression can be successfully treated and the emotional pain can be relieved.

ⁱ Delaware Mental Health Association