

Handling Childhood Depression & Anxiety



Understanding the Issues

Depression has been shown to occur in children as young as middle school and elementary aged, and are diagnosed differently than adults due to their developmental level. In children, *Major Depressive Episodes* (MDE) are cases of depression that last longer than two weeks, with loss of appetite (or increase in appetite, such as binge eating), loss of sleep and experiences of agitation, anxiety and prolonged sadness. Other symptoms include loss of energy, an inability to concentrate, a loss in self-esteem, and suffering in school and their relationships with family and peers.



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One fifth of females between the ages of 14 and 17 reported feeling severely depressed at some point, according to a recent Department of Education report.

In teens, depression issues often lead to self-violence as an outlet of dealing with their pain. Cases of cutting, burning and other forms of self-mutilation are not uncommon.

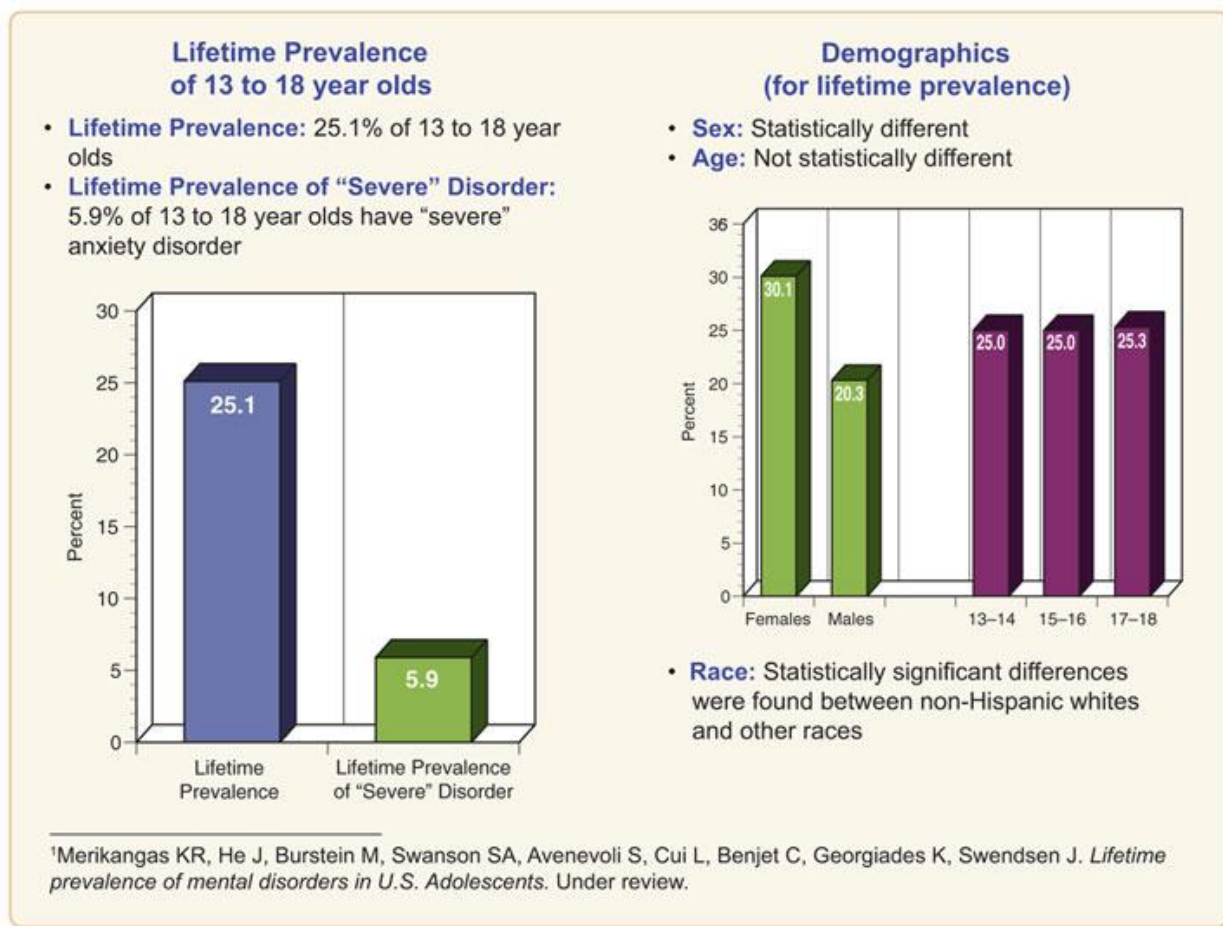
There is also the risk of this violence escalating to the extreme of suicide or taking their anger and sadness out on others.

The increase of school shootings in the past few decades have magnified the need to focus attention on teen depression, and develop methods for intervening before it can reach such extremes.

It's not uncommon for someone with depression to also suffer from an anxiety, or vice versa.

Nearly one-half of those diagnosed with depression are also diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, and anxiety disorders can often occur well before depression. Issues with anxiety typically begin around age 13, and occur equally among boys and girls. Anxiety disorders affect one in eight children, and research shows that untreated children with anxiety disorders are at higher risk to perform poorly in school, miss important social experiences, and engage in substance abuse. Anxiety disorders also often co-occur with other disorders such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and eating disorders. According to a 2007 ADA survey, 36% of people with social anxiety disorder report experiencing symptoms for 10 or more years before seeking help. This highlights the need for the adults in their life to notice the children struggling with these issues, and take measures to assist children suffering from anxiety, or depression, or both.

Anxiety Disorders Among Children



Source: http://www.nimh.nih.gov/statistics/1ANYANX_child.shtml

Recognizing It When You See It

Depression and Anxiety manifest differently in children than adults sometime expect, and often go unnoticed or misinterpreted. Such oversight is understandable, since children's natural emotional and mental fluctuations can sometimes disguise larger issues. It is intensely important, however, that parents and teachers alike pay close attention to whether a child is having momentary, manageable problems or showing signs of deeper distress.

The first warning sign for a teacher should be a downturn in a student's performance. If the student has a longstanding emotional issue, than they might come to the class with a history of poor work. A teacher should pay close attention if the student has trouble handing in work on time, or if the student or their work seems distracted, unfocused, or confused. The student might be low energy, distant, have trouble focusing on the classwork or lecture, or in conversations with the teacher or their peers. Children with depression have trouble concentrating in school and on important tasks, and often have trouble sleeping at night, so may seem exhausted or fall asleep in class. A depressed child may be highly sensitive to critical feedback or failure, so observing their reactions in instances where they receive average or below average grades could hint at this trait.



Classroom Warning Signs:

- Moodiness
- Acting withdrawn or not engaging in activities like he/she used to
- Low energy
- Weight loss or weight gain
- Appearing overly tired or falling asleep in class
- Self-deprecating language, or observable self-esteem issues
- Threatening others
- Acting out in a manner of rage
- Inability to accept criticism without getting violently

upset

- Any signs of drug and/or alcohol use
- Alienating themselves, or appearing alienated, by their peers
- Signs of being a victim of bullying
- Poor academic performance
- Yells, hits, punches, kicks, etc.
- Gets into regular fights or altercations with peers



For Anxiety, the most common and prevalent to the classroom is Social Anxiety. This may be hard to notice without looking for such cases, due to the nature of social anxiety its self.

Children with social anxiety feel uncomfortable and often noticeably distressed by having a large amount of attention on them, such as in cases of answering questions or entering a classroom late, and have an intense fear of misunderstanding directions or doing something wrong. They may not volunteer answers in class even if they know the material, they may avoid eye contact or speak in a stilted or quiet manner, or continually ask clarification on assignments. Some socially anxious children will manifest their anxiety in headaches, upset stomachs, or restlessness. Children who frequently need to go to the nurse, especially in proximity to situations that require social interaction or preforming in front of the classroom, may be having issues with social anxiety. Some children may even be frequently absent, either from school related anxiety or from the physiological effects of such anxiety.

What To Do?

Amber Douglas, assistant professor of psychology and education at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, has suggested the teacher privately talk to the student in a "non-threatening" way.

Also, speaking to the school psychologist or councilor could provide support for a delicate situation. It is best, however, to let the student decide whether or not they would like to speak to the school councilor themselves, especially if they are in their teenage years, since control and independence are very important at that age and should be respected.

"I think that if the teacher is really concerned, then sure, get the parents involved," she says. "But I think a lot can be learned by having a one-on-one conversation." - *Amber Douglas*

For a child with social anxiety, especially a young one, there is much more you can do to make the classroom a more comfortable place for such a student. Because change and uncertainty can be unsettling, a structured classroom, calmly disciplined will let children feel safe and know what to expect. Anxious children perform best in a calm, supportive, but organized environment.

A list of sample accommodations for socially anxious students can be found at <http://www.worrywisekids.org/node>



Reflective Note: Pamphlet Educating Teachers About Depression and Anxiety In Students

The pamphlet is designed to convey to teachers in a succinct and quick manner the necessity of being aware of the emotional state of your students, in this case in regards to the risk of their students suffering from depression or social anxiety. As a psychologist, there is only so much that can be done from the theater of paid for, personalized sessions. In many ways, it is necessary to make use of the research done in the field of psychology to educate and assist others. Teachers are in the unique position of being able to observe some of the first consequences of depression or anxiety on a child's life, if they are only open to looking for it. Since the classroom is a high pressure situation for many children, and the results of their work reflect their functioning capabilities so much more accurately than their surface habits, which can be more easily faked, they could spot the change early enough to make a difference in assisting the child. This, in turn, could make a world of difference in the life of that child.

Teachers read many such guides and memos every day (they often receive such pamphlets in their mailboxes in the morning), but this should stand out to teachers who are interested in focusing on the wellness of their students, as opposed to just learning the material, based purely on the information topics. This boxy and sectioned structure of the packet should make the important points stand out, and give the information a more manageable feel.

Note: I think this would make a good addition to my portfolio, since it allows me to display a more creative side that can be merged for attractive results with professional writing.