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Ask Doctor Harold: Are Our Kids Depressed?

By Dr. Harold Jules Hoyle, Ph.D.

Coming out of Pete's in Lafayette last week, a mother stopped me and thanked me for my column on ADHD. We had a short conversation during which she said, "You know, I think a lot of our Lamorinda kids are depressed." So here is your quick rundown on kids/teens and depression.

Depression is a rough disorder for us Americans. The pull-yourselfes-up-by-your-own-boot-straps culture is hard on those who are not always happy. It is almost un-American to say you are depressed. A quick Google search came up with 8,740,000 hits for positive thinking techniques. Amazon had 17,111 books with "Positive Thinking" in the subject or title. So in a culture obsessed with positive thinking, what do we know about kids who suffer from negative thoughts?

The US Department of Health and Human Services publishes rates as high as 1 in 8 adolescents suffering from depression. It is real and serious; it is not something people make up. Suicide and self-destructive behavior are the main dangers. If you think there is something serious with your son or daughter get it checked out by your pediatrician and then a mental health professional.

Secondly, depression is not just one thing. There are several "symptom areas" that include negative mood, negative thoughts, difficulty concentrating, restlessness, sleep problems, physical symptoms, loss of energy, self-destructive or aggressive thoughts, and aggressive or noncompliant behavior. When a child has enough of these and is overwhelmed then a diagnosis of depressive disorder can be made.

Depression manifests differently in youth than in adults. Most adults who are depressed have depressive symptoms (depressed mood). Many children and teens act out more when depressed. Imagine an adult at a holiday gathering getting bad news, they may get quiet, avoid the fun, want to go home early; they will shut down. A young person in that same situation might start screaming, arguing, acting irritated; they are more likely to act out.

The cause of depression falls into our usual three categories of physical, social, and psychological. Research indicates genetics, brain chemistry, levels of neurotransmitters, and metabolic functioning are all involved in depression.

When I was in Fiji last year and told people I worked with children who were depressed, they didn't understand. How could a kid be depressed? The social lives of our youth are difficult. Children have to negotiate the dangerous world of making friends, dealing with groups at school, and knowing how to get social positives. Breaking the code of the social groups in today's schools is much more difficult than it used to be.

Psychologically kids are dealing with deciding who they are going to be. Kids often feel isolated and under enormous pressure. Teens are trying to figure out how to separate from their parents in a safe and secure way. They are dealing with relationships, drugs and alcohol, and sexuality. No wonder they don't want to take out the trash. The world has increased in its complexity without a whole lot of training for them on how to do get it all done.

So what are you likely to see and what can you do?

The depressed kids and teens I work with in the Lamorinda area are dealing with a lot of pressures. Younger kids have to deal with complicated social networks that can be exclusive and difficult to figure out. Older kids are dealing with incredible amounts of school pressure on top of the previous mentioned issues. I

had a kid tell me he was going to have to live in a bad neighborhood because he got a 0 on his math test which would drop his grade and that would "mess" with the college he wanted to get into. That math test held a lot more power than it should have. These pressures can hit teens hard. Kids/teens I work with describe it as feeling as if there is something wrong all the time but not knowing what it is.

One of the most valuable activities we can do with our kids is to pay attention. Pay attention to mood, thoughts, and activities. Remember, a psychological disorder happens when people get to the point of being overwhelmed. If we can help kids avoid becoming overwhelmed we are one step closer to being helpful. Be involved in their lives and make sure they take the time they need to do the activities that bring them energy. Maybe it is snow boarding, or a sandwich at Morucci's, or a trip to The Jungle with their friends. In any case, put yourself in their shoes and think of some things that you could do with or for them that would help relieve the Lamorinda pressure.

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