

Tips From Your School Psychologist

Mood Disorders: What Parents and Teachers Should Know

Mood disorders, often called affective disorders, are among the most common mental health problems in children and adolescents. These disorders include depression and bipolar disorders and generally result from chemical imbalances that produce depressed mood or manic behavior (unrealistically up or hyper). Mood disorders emerge most commonly in adolescence but they can occur at any age. Even children as young as preschoolers may demonstrate signs indicating that they are at risk for developing a mood disorder. Symptoms of mood disorders can sometimes look like other disorders (such as ADHD) or mirror the typical mood swings in adolescence, so it can be hard for parents to recognize when their child is struggling with serious mental health problem.

Without treatment, mood disorders can lead to academic and behavioral problems, school failure, irritability, substance abuse, risky or self-injurious behaviors, and even suicide. Luckily, mood disorders are treatable and, as with most mental health issues, early intervention is key to successful treatment. Schools and community providers can help parents and young people know when, why and how to get help by working to reduce stigma surrounding mental health issues, and providing information to help them recognize the signs of mood disorders.

Signs of Mood Disorders

- Preschool children
 - Somber demeanor
 - Physical complaints with no medical cause
 - Tearfulness, lack of enthusiasm
 - Irritability more often than typical
 - Frequent negative self-statements
 - Self-injurious or self-destructive behaviors

- Elementary Age and Adolescents
 - Disruptive behavior and problems with peers
 - Irritability and aggression
 - Suicidal threats
 - Sleeping too much
 - Unpredictable emotional changes, anhedonia (experiencing little pleasure)
 - Racing thoughts, flight of ideas, increased strength and energy, overspending, drug use, and grandiosity with inflated self-esteem
 - Greatly increased or decreased sexual drive
 - Uncharacteristically poor judgment

Help for Youth With Mood Disorders

- A thorough mental health evaluation will help determine specific treatments and may include
 - Age, overall health, medical history
 - Extent and severity of the condition
 - Type of mood disorder
 - Prognosis or expectations for the course of the condition
 - Opinions and preferences of the parents and the child in collaboration with mental health professionals

- Treatment may include
 - Medications such as anti-depressants and mood stabilizers
 - Psychotherapy to help the child change distorted views of themselves and the environment, improve interpersonal relationship skills, and develop effective coping skills for stressors
 - School supports that are coordinated with a treatment plan
 - Family counseling, as families can play a vital, supportive role in treatment

If you are concerned about your child or a student in your class, contact your school psychologist, pediatrician, or private mental health provider.

Adapted from “Mood Disorders: What Parents and Teachers Should Know”, Ralph E. (Gene) Cash, PhD, NCSP & Katherine C. Cowan, Communiqué, Vol. 35, #3, National Association of School Psychologists, 2006.