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800-233-4050

ADHD and Depression

About the series: These five information sheets provide an overview of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and some of the more common conditions that coexist with ADHD. Extended versions of each may be found at www.help4adhd.org.

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

To be diagnosed with depression, a person must feel sad for most of the day or show decreased interest or pleasure in activities that used to be pleasurable to them. In addition to these symptoms, at least four of the following symptoms must be present:

- weight loss or weight gain;
- problems sleeping or excessive sleeping;
- hyperexcitability (greater than seen with ADHD);
- lack of motivation;
- feeling tired or having no energy;
- feelings of worthlessness;
- lack of concentration;
- recurring thoughts of suicide or death.

Symptoms must be present for at least two weeks and represent a change from previous functioning before a diagnosis of depression can be made. The criteria for the diagnosis of depression are based on symptoms as seen in adults and so children may not show signs of depression in quite the same way. Health care professionals more often observe irritability or hyperactivity as major symptoms in young children who are suffering from depression, so a careful evaluation is essential.

Over time, children with ADHD may become frustrated and discouraged because of their symptoms. As a result, they may become depressed as they experience repeated failures or negative interactions in school, at home, and in other settings. In these situations, ADHD symptoms usually appear first and the depression comes later. Depression in children with ADHD can also be affected by the presence of other coexisting conditions. For example, in children with ADHD and a disruptive behavior disorder, depression rates are substantially higher.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR ADHD AND DEPRESSION?

Treatment of children with ADHD and depression involves treating the symptoms of ADHD and minimizing those things in their world that influence the child's depression. It is important to make certain that the health care professional who is treating the child is familiar with both

ADHD and depression. When beginning treatment, the clinician must first determine which symptoms are having the greatest impact on the child before initiating a treatment plan.

Certain types of therapy have been used successfully to manage symptoms of both ADHD and depression. Talk therapies involve talking with a mental health professional about things that are occurring in a person's life and family. The aim of these therapies is to decrease suffering and to return to more normal functioning. Therapies used in cases of ADHD and/or depression include:

- behavioral therapy, which focuses on current behaviors and ways to change them;
- cognitive therapy, which focuses on changing negative thoughts and thinking patterns;
- interpersonal or family therapy, which focuses on current family issues and relationships; or
- school-based mental health interventions.

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In addition to talk therapy, the use of medication may be necessary to reduce symptoms of either ADHD or depression or both. When medications are used, they should be part of a total treatment plan and in conjunction with talk therapy. It is important that your child be followed closely as he or she begins taking any medication. If your child's symptoms get worse or if new symptoms are observed, report this to your child's prescribing health care professional immediately. In some cases, antidepressants may be prescribed in

addition to the medication used to treat ADHD. In these cases, antidepressants should be used with caution and children and adolescents who take these medications should be closely monitored, especially during the first few months of use.

Identifying and treating children with coexisting depression and ADHD can be difficult; many factors need to be taken into consideration. Parents who seek help for their child with ADHD and depression should keep the following in mind:

- Find a mental health professional, such as a psychologist or psychiatrist, for your child;
- If you are unsure what path to follow in choosing a treatment for your child, get a second opinion;
- Engage a therapist who is familiar with diagnosing and treating both conditions in children;
- Be aware that depression that includes suicidal thoughts or plans should be taken very seriously; and
- Read all you can about both disorders and their treatment.

For more information on ADHD and Depression, please see *What We Know #5C: ADHD and Depression* on our website at: www.help4adhd.org/en/treatment/coexisting/WWK5C.

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