



# How common are the core symptoms of depression in adolescents?

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## Introduction

### Background

Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) is one of the most common mental health problems faced by adolescents, with up to 20% of adolescents experiencing an episode of depression by the time they reach 18 years old<sup>1</sup>.

**Depressed mood, irritability, and anhedonia** (loss of interest and pleasure) are the core symptoms of depression. This means at least one of these symptoms must be present for a diagnosis of MDD.

According to NICE<sup>2</sup> guidelines (2015) in the UK, children and adolescents referred to mental health services without a diagnosis of depression should be routinely screened with a self-report measure - the Mood and Feelings Questionnaire<sup>3</sup>. However, despite this recommendation and its wide-spread use, little is known about the prevalence of core depressive symptoms assessed using this screening tool.

### Research Aims

To establish the prevalence of anhedonia, depressed mood, and irritability in schools (total sample & high depressive symptom sub-sample)

To examine age and gender differences in the prevalence of core depressive symptoms

## Method

### Participants

- **1097 adolescents** (483 females & 605 males), aged 13-18, recruited from secondary schools predominantly located in the South of England

### Design & Procedure

- **Cross-sectional questionnaire study (completed at one-time point)**
- Completed as part of a number of research studies
- Filled out the questionnaire in groups in classroom settings



### Materials

- **The Mood and Feelings Questionnaire (MFQ)** - a well validated and widely used self-report measure of depression. It has good reliability and moderate diagnostic accuracy for adolescents.

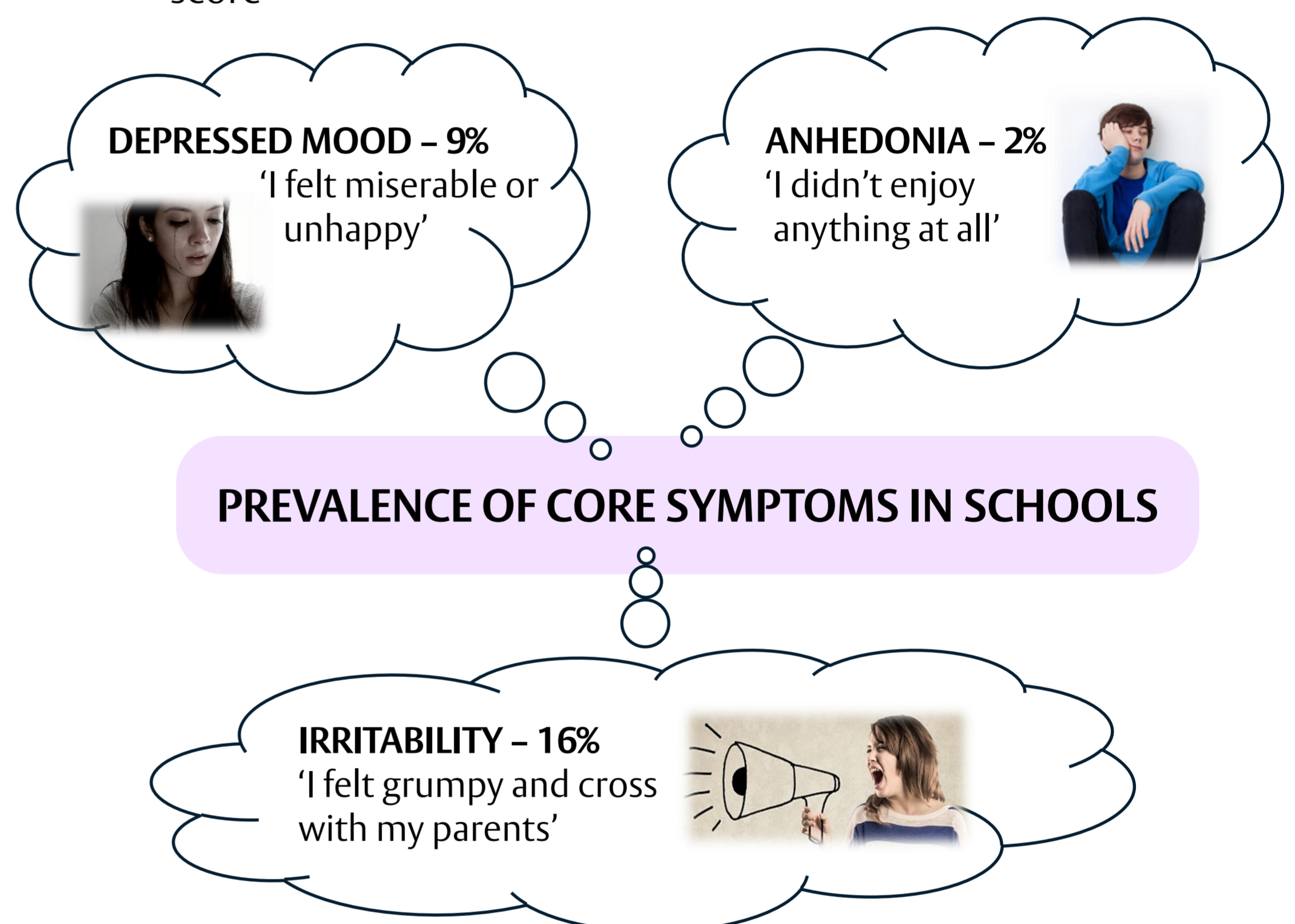
## Results

### Total School Sample

- Irritability was the most commonly occurring core symptom, followed by depressed mood, then anhedonia
- Females scored higher than males on all core symptoms
- No age differences in symptom prevalence

### High Depressive Symptom Sub-Sample

- 17% of adolescents scored above the clinical threshold for depression
- Anhedonia rarely occurred in the absence of a high overall MFQ score



## Discussion

**Main Findings** - Irritability was the most commonly reported symptom in adolescents. Anhedonia may be the best indicator of depression.

**Strengths** - Large sample of adolescents and incorporates data from a range of schools (Ofsted status' from Outstanding to Needs Improvement).

**Limitations** - Each symptom only measured by one item, potentially leading to issues with the prevalence rates reported.

**Future Directions** - Better measures needed to assess depression. Irritability should be focused on in further depression research.

### References

1. Lewinsohn, P. M., Rohde, P., & Seeley, J. R. (1998). MAJOR DEPRESSIVE DISORDER IN OLDER ADOLESCENTS: PREVALENCE, RISK FACTORS, AND CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 18(7), 765-794.
2. NICE. (2015). Depression in children and young people: identification and management | Guidance and guidelines | NICE. Retrieved April 18, 2017, from <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg28>
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