



How common are the core symptoms of depression in adolescents?

Becca Watson | Professor Shirley Reynolds |

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 old¹.

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 NICE² 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 Questionnaire³. 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.

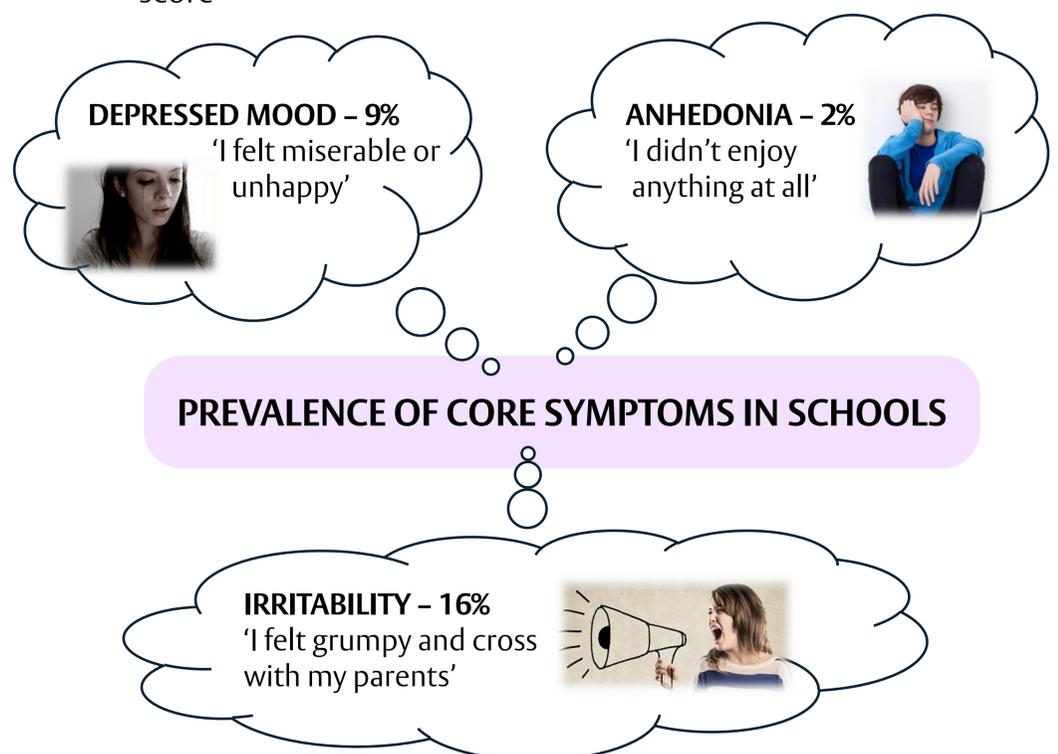
Results

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>
3. Angold A, Costello EJ, Pickles EJ, Winder. F: The development of a questionnaire for use in epidemiological studies of depression in children and adolescents. 1987, London: Medical research Council Child Psychiatry Unit.

Contact information Email: r.watson2@pgr.reading.ac.uk