

Causes and Frequency of Depression in Youth with ADHD

What We Found

About one fifth of young people with ADHD experience significant depression

Young people with ADHD are more likely to experience depression compared to the general population of the same age.

Our meta-analysis of 23 papers found that 21.14% of adolescents with ADHD were either diagnosed with clinical depression, or experienced depressive symptoms severe enough to impact their quality of life. The rates of depression were higher in women than in men.

This relationship between having ADHD and depression is affected by a few things, including:

- *Socioeconomic Factors:* growing up in a low income household or deprived area can increase chances of depression
- *Family Dynamics:* conflict within the family and parental mental ill-health makes young people with ADHD more likely to be depressed
- *Friendships:* young people with ADHD may have difficulties with friendships, making them prone to loneliness and bullying
- *School:* young people with ADHD often perform below where would be expected from IQ and this low academic attainment can drive depression

There are some common features of ADHD and depression which might make depression hard to spot. These include irritability, restlessness and difficulty concentrating.

On the other hand, the fact that depression is often associated with lack of energy, but ADHD entails high energy, may also result in depression being missed in this group if it looks different to what people expect.

What We Suggest

Services and schools should be aware of the high rates of depression in this group and work to minimise it, e.g. via effective school support

This review adds to the increasing body of evidence showing that depression is common amongst those with ADHD.

Depression and ADHD features can lock into a vicious cycle, e.g. if lack of effective school support for ADHD leads to poor attainment, leading to depression, further negatively affecting attainment and so on.

Since school attainment and friendships with people of the same age are both related to depression, schools have a key role to play in preventing depression for young people with ADHD by providing good support within and beyond the classroom.

Further research is needed into how young people with ADHD can best be supported within mental health services, and on any potential interactions of medications commonly prescribed for depression or for ADHD.

Salvesen Mindroom Policy Briefing

Causes and Frequency of Depression in Youth with ADHD

What We Did

This policy briefing is based on an undergraduate student project carried out in 2022.

The systematic literature review focuses on the prevalence of depression amongst young people with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). We drew on epidemiological studies, meaning research that is broadly inclusive of large populations, making it more relevant in the real world.

We also emailed key authors in the field to try to find unpublished data but received no responses within our timeframe.

Searches were carried out in databases, for results from 1994-2022. We initially found over 6800 papers. A systematic screening process identified 29 suitable papers for qualitative and quantitative analysis.

About half the studies were longitudinal, tracking the same people over years, and half were cross-sectional, looking at simultaneous depression and ADHD.

Most studies were from the US and UK (15 in total) and the rest came from seven different European countries, plus Australia, Brazil, South Africa, South Korea and Taiwan. This represents quite good global coverage.

The average age of participants in the studies was 12 years old, but the range was from 3 years to 28 years of age.

Why We Did It

ADHD is one of the most common diagnoses made by child psychiatrists, affecting up to 10% of children¹. In an estimated 65% of these children, the ADHD profile persists throughout adolescence and into young adulthood², though lived experience suggests that adult ADHD may be more common than this statistic suggests.

Adolescents with ADHD are at an increased risk of mental ill-health, including depression. Understanding how common this problem is, and what are the factors that increase the chances of depression for young people with ADHD, is important because:

- It can help clinical services plan ahead
- It can support clear communication with patients and their parents
- Preventative measures to help young people not become depressed can be put in place after ADHD diagnosis

Raising awareness of this risk is a key part of helping mental health service staff care more effectively for their neurodivergent patients.

Thank you

1. Biederman, J., et al. (1996). "A prospective 4-year follow-up study of attention-deficit hyperactivity and related disorders." *Archives of General Psychiatry* 53 5: 437-446
2. Schiweck, C., Arteaga-Henriquez, G., Aichholzer, M., Edwin Thanarajah, S., Vargas-Cáceres, S., Matura, S., Grimm, O., Haavik, J., Kittel-Schneider, S., Ramos-Quiroga, J.A., Faraone, S.V., and Reif, A., 2021. Comorbidity of ADHD and adult bipolar disorder: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 124, 100-123.

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The review is based on 29 relevant papers drawn from a wide range of research locations. Many of the studies have high-quality longitudinal data, tracking the same people over time.

Understanding how common depression is in young people with ADHD can equip clinicians and services to effectively care for and support patients