

Girls More Vulnerable to Risk of Major Depression

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MIAMI BEACH — Studies increasingly suggest that adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to many of the risk factors for major depression, and that depression in this population manifests in several unique ways.

For example, depressed girls are more likely than are depressed boys to have poor body image, to feel disappointed in themselves, to feel like a failure, and to have difficulty concentrating, Dr. Nada Stotland said at the annual meeting of the American Society for Adolescent Psychiatry.

Girls tend to have more inwardly directed symptoms, she explained at the meeting, which was cosponsored by the University of Texas at Dallas. And they experience unique consequences of depression. A recent study suggests that de-



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DR. STOTLAND

pressed girls are at double the risk of nondepressed girls of becoming involved in abusive relationships, said Dr. Stotland of Rush Medical College, Chicago.

Another study showed that 3 years after being diagnosed with depression, girls had decreased self worth, poorer body image, and increased feelings of vulnerability, compared with prior to their depression. Depressive symptoms, along with dietary restrictions, weight control behaviors, and feeling that one's parents are overweight, also appear to be a risk factor for obesity, Dr. Stotland noted.

Race also appears to play an important role in depression in girls; white girls with depression in adolescence were shown in one study to be more likely than African American girls to improve in early adulthood. And in a study of Hawaiian youth, 38% of girls in the study had a psychiatric disorder. Chinese girls in one study commonly reported anxiety, with 48% saying they had anxiety that interfered with enjoyment, 40% saying their anxiety interfered with relaxation, and 27% saying it interfered with sleep.

Ethnic differences also are apparent in the effects of body image on depression, with white girls being the most likely to feel pressure to be model-thin.

As for gender differences in depression, a study from Spain suggests cognitive styles may be to blame. Girls were shown to be less likely than boys to think positively, and when faced with a problem, they were less likely to consider the problem to be solvable. Girls also were more likely to think negatively of themselves.

Other factors shown recently to be particularly associated with depression in girls include:

► **Maternal depression.** A recent large study confirms much of what was already

suspected: that maternal depression has a significant impact on adolescent depression risk. Other studies have suggested girls are particularly vulnerable to these effects.

► **Sexual orientation.** Parental discrimination was shown to be "an enormous risk factor" for depression in homosexual adolescents.

► **High-risk behaviors.** There has been some controversy regarding whether high-risk behaviors such as drug use and promiscuity come before or after depres-

sion, but findings from a very large study suggest that such behaviors are predictive of depression, particularly in girls.

► **Parental marital problems.** Divorce and marital distress in parents was linked in a longitudinal study in Norway to an increased risk of depression in adolescent children, and the effects were more lasting in girls.

► **Stress.** While stress can be difficult to define, at least one study shows that girls experience more stress than do boys, and

that they experience more depression as a result of stress.

► **Maternal relationship.** In a recent study 65% of girls, compared with 34% of boys, who felt their mothers didn't care about them reported depression.

► **Hormones.** Depressive symptoms may change with the menstrual cycle, as may blood levels of certain medications. Pre-menstrual symptoms and oral contraceptive use should be considered when evaluating girls with depression. ■

