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Abstract Title:

Depression in adolescents in Malta-is it a growing cause for concern?

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Abstract

Background: Mental health is vital for the optimal development and wellbeing of children and adolescents. It is estimated that 50% of lifetime mental illness begins before the age of 14 years. Childhood psychiatric disorders are associated with educational failure, risk-taking behaviour and increased risk to enter the criminal justice system. Thus the social and economic costs of mental ill-health for societies are wide ranging and long lasting. This study set out to assess the prevalence of symptoms of depression amongst school-aged adolescents in Malta.

Method: Three cross-sectional studies were carried out at three definite time points; 2006, 2010 and 2015 amongst students attending forms 3, 5 and 4 respectively. Multi-stage sampling was used to ensure that the sample was representative of the school-aged adolescent population in Malta. Students completed a self-administered, anonymous questionnaire and only those having parental consent were allowed to participate.

Results: In the 2006 study, 21.3% of form 3 students manifested symptoms of depression. In the 2010 study, 44.5% of the form 5 student population had symptoms whilst in the 2015 study, 27.3% of form 4 students were symptomatic. All three studies revealed that females were more at risk of depression than males.

Conclusions: The prevalence of symptoms of depression among school-aged adolescents in Malta is a cause for concern and calls intervention. Working towards enabling environments within schools, homes and in community settings would support mental well-being. Raising awareness about mental problems in adolescence among parents and people working with adolescents can lead to early detection of problems and intervention. Empowering parents with the appropriate skills would translate into improved support and understanding of their offspring leading to improved mental health outcomes. Selective and indicated prevention strategies aimed at high risk individuals are shown to be cost-effective. Investing in proactive care to promote, protect and sustain mental health in the population will lead to good financial returns and health gains.

Summary:

The prevalence of symptoms of depression among school-aged adolescents in Malta is a cause for concern and calls for immediate action through the concerted effort of all the stakeholders namely parents, education and health sectors.



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Fostering skills among children and adolescents to cope in adverse situations would improve their resilience auguring improved mental health outcomes.