



Assessing Child Maladaptive Behaviors: Distinguishing Between Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Depression

June 3, 2021

There are several conditions with overlapping diagnostic criteria that can look similar to ADHD. Diagnostic evaluations can help you identify the problem correctly and prescribe appropriate interventions. Let’s take a closer look on how to assess and distinguish between ADHD and major depressive disorder (MDD).

Characteristics of ADHD and MDD

When you assess a child patient for ADHD remember to overlap criteria and characteristics and distinguish these diagnoses. Symptoms of mental health conditions are sometimes characterized in terms of changes in self-esteem, pleasure, attention, hyperactivity, sleep, speech, impulsivity, psychomotor activity, and social and academic performance.

Behavior:	Self-esteem	Pleasure	Attention	Hyperactivity	Sleep	Speech	Impulsivity	Social	Academic	Psychomotor activity
ADHD	Inflated and/or deflated	Variable	Distractible	Unproductive	Chronic, poor, often late bedtimes	Often rapid, may be pressured	Internally driven	Often poor	Often poor	Chronically agitated
MDD	Deflated	Unable, sad	Inattentive	May be restless	Often poor	Normal, slow	May be normal	Often poor	Often poor	Slowed

Patient Health Questionnaire

MDD screening tests are valuable, but it is important to understand that results of any depression screening alone are inadequate. The [US Preventive Services Task Force](#) recommends MDD screening for children ages 12 and older. The Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ)-2 is a self-administered version of the PRIME-MD diagnostic tool for common mental disorders. There is also a longer PHQ-9 that is the most common tool used to monitor the severity of depression and response to treatment. It is available in Spanish and has a [modified version for adolescents](#).

ADHD Clinical Practice Guidelines

Always refer to [clinical practice guidelines for ADHD](#), and if you do diagnose and treat for ADHD with medications, please make sure to schedule an in-person visit within 30 days of the member starting those medications.

Additional learning tools:

ADHD Clinical Practice Guidelines

- [Quality Improvement Tools](#)
- [Criteria for diagnosing ADHD per DSM-5 and by the American Academy of Pediatrics](#)
- [Guidance for Diagnosing MDD](#)
- [US Preventive Services Task Force](#)
- [PHQ-9](#)
- [Screening for MDD is available for adolescents with the modified version](#)



**BlueCross BlueShield
of Texas**

Need Help?

Magellan Behavioral Healthcare manages services related to mental and behavioral healthcare. Medicaid providers can call 1-800-327-7390. You can also view the [Behavioral Health Toolkit](#) for additional information.

Resources

Reference and review the [BCBSTX Preventive Care Guidelines \(PCGs\)](#), [Clinical Practice Guidelines \(CPGs\)](#), and [Texas Health Steps \(THSteps\) for Medical Providers](#), which includes all current vaccine schedules, [ImmTrac2](#) and other important guidance for treating your patients.

© 2020 American Academy of Pediatrics

The information in this document is being provided for educational purposes only and is not the provision of medical care or advice. Physicians and other health care providers are instructed to use their own best medical judgment based upon all available information and the condition of the patient in determining the best course of treatment. Regardless of any benefit determination, the final decision regarding any treatment or service is between the patient and the health care provider. Additional limitations and requirements may apply.

HEDIS is a registered trademark of NCQA. Use of this resource is subject to NCQA's copyright, [found here](#).

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Texas, a Division of Health Care Service Corporation, a Mutual Legal Reserve Company, an Independent Licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association