



OVERVIEW on Child and Adolescent Mental Health

Mental health is an important part of overall health for children as well as adults. For many adults who have mental disorders, symptoms were present—but often not recognized or addressed—in childhood and youth. For a young person with symptoms of a mental disorder, the earlier treatment is started, the more effective it can be. Early treatment can help prevent more severe, lasting problems as a child grows up.

Warning Signs

Your child or teen might need help if he or she:

- Often feels anxious or worried
- Has very frequent tantrums or is intensely irritable much of the time
- Has frequent stomachaches or headaches with no physical explanation
- Is in constant motion, can't sit quietly for any length of time
- Has trouble sleeping, including frequent nightmares
- Loses interest in things he or she used to enjoy
- Avoids spending time with friends
- Has trouble doing well in school, or grades decline
- Fears gaining weight; exercises, diets obsessively
- Has low or no energy
- Has spells of intense, inexhaustible activity
- Harms herself/himself, such as cutting or burning her/his skin
- Engages in risky, destructive behavior
- Harms self or others
- Smokes, drinks, or uses drugs
- Has thoughts of suicide
- Thinks his or her mind is controlled or out of control, hears voice.

It may be helpful for children and teens to save several emergency numbers to their cell phones. The ability to get immediate help for themselves or for a friend can make a difference.

Introduction

Research shows that half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14.¹ Scientists are discovering that changes in the body leading to mental illness may start much earlier, before any symptoms appear.

Through greater understanding of when and how fast specific areas of children's brains develop, we are learning more about the early stages of a wide range of mental illnesses that appear later in life. Helping young children and their parents manage difficulties early in life may prevent the development of disorders. Once mental illness develops, it becomes a regular part of your child's behavior and more difficult to treat. Even though we know how to treat (though not yet cure) many disorders, many children with mental illnesses are not getting treatment.

This fact sheet addresses common questions about diagnosis and treatment options for children with mental illnesses. Disorders affecting children may include [anxiety disorders](#), [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder \(ADHD\)](#), [autism spectrum disorders](#), [bipolar disorder](#), [depression](#), [eating disorders](#), and [schizophrenia](#).

Q. What should I do if I am concerned about mental, behavioral, or emotional symptoms in my child?

A. Talk to your child's doctor or health care provider. Ask questions and learn everything you can about the behavior or symptoms that worry you. If your child is in school ask the teacher if your child has been showing worrisome changes in behavior. Share this with your child's doctor or health care provider. Keep in mind that every child is different.

If you take your child to a specialist, ask, "Do you have experience treating the problems I see in my child?" Don't be afraid to interview more than one specialist to find the right fit. Continue to learn everything you can about the problem or diagnosis. The more you learn, the better you can work with your child's doctor and make decisions that feel right for you, your child, and your family.

Q. How do I know if my child's problems are serious?

A. Not every problem is serious. In fact, many everyday stresses can cause changes in your child's behavior. For example, the birth of a sibling may cause a child to temporarily act much younger than he or she is. It is important to be able to tell the difference between typical behavior changes and those associated with more serious problems. Pay special attention to behaviors that include:

- Problems across a variety of settings, such as at school, at home, or with peers
- Changes in appetite or sleep
- Social withdrawal, or fearful behavior toward things your child normally is not afraid of
- Returning to behaviors more common in younger children, such as bed-wetting, for a long time
- Signs of being upset, such as sadness or tearfulness
- Signs of self-destructive behavior, such as head-banging, or a tendency to get hurt often
- Repeated thoughts of death.

Q. Can symptoms be caused by a death in the family, illness in a parent, family financial problems, divorce, or other events?

A. Yes. Every member of a family is affected by tragedy or extreme stress, even the youngest child. It's normal for stress to cause a child to be upset. Remember this if you see mental, emotional, or behavioral symptoms in your child. If it takes more than one month for your child to get used to a situation, or if your child has severe reactions, talk to your child's doctor.

Check your child's response to stress. Take note if he or she gets better with time or if professional care is needed. Stressful events are challenging, but they give you a chance to teach your child important ways to cope.

Q. How are mental illnesses diagnosed in young children?

A. Just like adults, children with mental illness are diagnosed after a doctor or mental health specialist carefully observes signs and symptoms. Some primary care physicians can diagnose your child themselves, but many will send you to a specialist who can diagnose and treat children.

Before diagnosing a mental illness, the doctor or specialist tries to rule out other possible causes for your child's behavior. The doctor will:

- Take a history of any important medical problems
- Take a history of the problem - how long you have seen the problem - as well as a history of your child's development
- Take a family history of mental disorders
- Ask if the child has experienced physical or psychological traumas, such as a natural disaster, or situations that may cause stress, such as a death in the family
- Consider reports from parents and other caretakers or teachers.

Very young children often cannot express their thoughts and feelings, so making a diagnosis can be challenging. The signs of a mental illness in a young child may be quite different from those in an older child or adult.

As parents and caregivers know, children are constantly changing and growing. Diagnosis and treatment must be viewed with these changes in mind. While some problems are short-lived and don't need treatment, others are ongoing and may be very serious. In either case, more information will help you understand treatment choices and manage the disorder or problem most effectively.

While diagnosing mental health problems in young children can be challenging, it is important. A diagnosis can be used to guide treatment and link your child's care to research on children with similar problems.

Q. Will my child get better with time?

A. Some children get better with time. But other children need ongoing professional help. Talk to your child's doctor or specialist about problems that are severe, continuous, and affect daily activities.

Q. How can families of children with mental illness get support?

A. Like other serious illnesses, taking care of a child with mental illness is hard on the parents, family, and other caregivers. Caregivers often must tend to the medical needs of their loved ones, and also deal with how it affects their own health. The stress that caregivers are under may lead to missed work or lost free time. It can strain relationships with people who may not understand the situation and lead to physical and mental exhaustion.

Stress from caregiving can make it hard to cope with your child's symptoms. One study shows that if a caregiver is under enormous stress, his or her loved one has more difficulty sticking to the treatment plan.⁴ It is important to look after your own physical and mental health. You may also find it helpful to join a local support group.

Q. Where can I go for help?

A. If you are unsure where to go for help, ask your family doctor. Others who can help are listed below.

- Mental health specialists, such as psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, or mental health counselors
- Health maintenance organizations
- Community mental health centers
- Hospital psychiatry departments and outpatient clinics
- Mental health programs at universities or medical schools
- State hospital outpatient clinics
- Family services, social agencies, or clergy
- Peer support groups
- Private clinics and facilities
- Employee assistance programs
- Local medical and/or psychiatric societies.