

Disability Campaign.org

Information on Childhood Mental Illnesses



Image: Rethink-Anxiety-Disorders.com

The U.S. Surgeon General estimates that 20% of American children suffer from a diagnosable mental illness during any given year. Furthermore, four million American children and adolescents suffer from a serious mental disorder that causes significant functional impairments at home, school, and with peers. Those that go undiagnosed or untreated may be at higher risk of suicide, school failure, juvenile crime involvement, and as adults may face problems such as unemployment or violent crime.

Due to the stigma associated with mental illness, some parents experience fear or shame in addressing the signs and symptoms of mental illness in their children. Adolescents may feel pressured to keep their mental disorders hidden due to teasing, misunderstanding, or lack of comprehension from their peers. As a parent or adult in the life of a child, it's important to have a general understanding of mental illnesses that affect children and when to seek professional help, as well as to converse with your children about mental illness. Children who have a general grasp of mental illness may demonstrate greater empathy towards others, as well as be more mindful of their own mental health.

Common Childhood Mental Illnesses

- **Anxiety disorders** are those in which children respond to certain things or situations with dread and fear. They may experience physical signs, such as irregular heartbeat, trouble breathing, and sweating, in addition to the mental distress.
- **Eating disorders** such as anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating involve intense emotions and attitudes associated with weight and food. Teens, particularly girls, are more at risk for developing eating disorders.
- **Depression** can manifest itself at any age. Children may pretend to be sick, refuse to go to school, shy from friends, or talk about feeling useless or wanting to die. Some children do not exhibit signs at home, but do so at school.
- **Schizophrenia** in the past was mostly seen in adults, but today more children are being diagnosed with this disorder. Schizophrenia is a serious disorder that involves distorted thoughts and perceptions such as hearing voices, seeing things, or feeling that people are out to harm you.
- **Elimination disorders** are when children manifest odd behaviors associated with the elimination of body wastes (feces and urine). This may include “accidents” seen in children above the age of five or secretive behavior associated with bowel movements, and can be involuntary or voluntary.
- **Bipolar disorder (manic-depression)** is a serious medical condition that causes shifts in a person’s mood, energy, and ability to function. Children exhibit times of mania (feelings of extreme happiness, impulsive actions, little sleep) followed or preceded by times of depression (sadness, thoughts of suicide, excessive sleep).
- **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)** are behavior disorders that affect how children behave and learn at school, home, and in public. Children may exhibit difficulty focusing and struggle controlling behavior.
- **Autism spectrum disorders** are developmental disorders characterized by impaired communication, social interaction, and behavior.
- **Tic disorders** cause a person to involuntarily perform repeated and sudden movements and sounds (tics).



Image: FoodMag.com.au

When to seek professional help for your child

You know your child best; if you believe your child is behaving outside of his or her usual self or is experiencing physical and mental problems, speak with your child. Evaluate the situation and then seek professional help if needed. Treatments vary depending on the mental illness, but they can include psychotherapy, medications, exercise, and changes in diet. Research from the New Freedom Commission on Mental Health shows that early identification and intervention can minimize the long-term disability of mental disorders. Furthermore, if your child has been diagnosed with a mental disorder, follow the advice of his or her medical doctor, psychiatrist, or psychologist. Below is a list of signs that may indicate your child needs to be evaluated for a mental disorder.

- feelings of helplessness
- frequent crying or worrying
- changes in eating habits or sleep; weight loss or weight gain
- poor concentration
- low self-esteem
- low grades in school or concerns from teachers
- the need for perfection
- conversations held with people or objects not visible; hearing voices; illusions
- increasing health problems, such as frequent colds, headaches, or stomachaches
- abuse towards siblings, classmates, or parents
- signs of self harm, such as cutting or use of drugs and alcohol



Image: ChildTrends.org

How to talk to your kids and teens about mental illness

1. **Know your facts.** Read about mental illness, have some statistics that are easy to understand for children (such as 2 out of every 10 kids instead of 20%), and present mental illness as something that is serious, but treatable. Children with mental illnesses can be as good of friends as children without mental disorders, but it's important your kids understand such children have a condition that may make it difficult to interact at times, that they sometimes need extra help at school or home, and that they may have extra doctor's appointments.

2. **Remove stigma and dispel common myths.** Kids will throw around words like “retard” or “psycho” without a care; others do so with the intention of hurting their peers. Teach your child to use people first language, so that instead of saying “that autism kid” he can say “that kid with autism.” Work on removing hurtful words from their vocabulary, such as “moron” or “retard.” Talk to them about the stereotypes of mental illness and then explain what mental illness really is. Not all people with mental illness are violent or suicidal, and not all children with it have difficulties learning or making friends.
3. **Find a teaching opportunity.** Like with talks about “the birds and the bees,” it can be awkward or challenging for some parents to talk about mental illness with their children. If as a family you just watched a movie about a child who displays signs of depression, or maybe your daughter’s favorite singer declared she has an eating disorder, this is the time to talk. Have resources for kids handy, which can be found online or at your local library. Remember the conversation you have with your kids depends on their age, maturity, personality, and your parent-child relationship.
4. **Remind them you are there for them.** Today your child may be healthy or his peers may not have mental disorders, but if one day things change, let him know you are there for him. He is not alone and you will help him find treatment if he were to ever have a mental illness. Work on improving your relationship, for as children grow into adolescence, the relationships at home and at school change, making it challenging at times to talk about personal matters. Furthermore, just as you wouldn’t blame your child for his or her mental illness, do not blame yourself if some day your child is diagnosed with a mental illness.

For more information on mental illness, visit the National Alliance on Mental Illness at <http://www.nami.org/>.

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