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Mental Health Awareness in Children & Teens: Facts, Clues & What to Do

We all experience emotional ups and downs from time to time caused by events in our lives. Childhood and adolescence are synonymous with these high and low experiences. Mental health issues, however, go beyond these emotional reactions and become something longer lasting. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) states these are medical conditions that cause changes in how we think and feel and in our mood. They are NOT the result of personal weakness, lack of character or poor upbringing. With proper treatment, people can realize their full potential, cope with the stresses of life, work productively and meaningfully contribute to the world. Without mental health we cannot be fully healthy.



When we think about cancer or diabetes, we don't wait years for treatment to see how it develops. No, we begin with prevention. This is what we should be doing with mental illnesses, too.

Research has now shown that most mental disorders follow a developmental course that typically starts early in life. So, many people who suffer from mood, anxiety, psychotic disorders, depression, social phobia, obsessive compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia showed signs in adolescence or even earlier. Intervening as early as possible preserves education, employment, social supports, housing and quality of life; not to mention it costs less both emotionally and monetarily.

The instances of mental health disorders have risen dramatically in recent years which may be attributed to increased stress and pressure in school and among peers, as well as the rise in use of social media, smart phones and other new technologies.

Learn the Facts (provided by the National Institute of Mental Health)

- 20% of youth ages 13-18 live with a mental health condition including mood disorders, behavior or conduct disorders and anxiety disorders.
- 50% of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14.
- The average delay between onset of symptoms and intervention is 8-10 years.
- 37% of students with a mental health condition age 14 and older drop out of school-the highest dropout rate of any disability group.
- 70% of youth in state and local juvenile justice systems have a mental illness.
- Suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death in youth ages 10 - 24.
 - 90% of those who died by suicide had an underlying mental illness.
 - For a link to our handout on ***Depression and Suicide: Signs & Symptoms***, click [here!](#)

Clues to Watch For in your Child

- Feeling very sad or withdrawn for more than 2 weeks (e.g., crying regularly, feeling fatigued, feeling unmotivated).
- Trying to harm or kill oneself or making plans to do so.
- Out-of-control, risk-taking behaviors that can cause harm to self or others.
- Sudden overwhelming fear for no reason, sometimes with a racing heart, physical discomfort or fast breathing.
- Not eating, throwing up or using laxatives to lose weight; significant weight loss or gain.
- Severe mood swings that cause problems in relationships.
- Repeated use of drugs or alcohol.
- Drastic changes in behavior, personality or sleeping habits (e.g., waking up early and acting agitated).
- Extreme difficulty in concentrating or staying still that can lead to failure in school.
- Intense worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities like hanging out with friends or going to classes.

What Parents Can Do

- If you're concerned about your child's mental health, seek advice. Don't avoid getting help for your child out of shame or fear. With appropriate support, you can find out whether your child has a mental health condition and explore treatment options to help him or her thrive with the help of a specialist.
- Ask your child's mental health specialist for advice on how to change the way you interact with your child, as well as how to handle difficult behavior.
- To help your child succeed in school, inform your child's teachers and the school counselor that your child has a mental health condition. If necessary, work with the school staff to develop an academic plan that meets your child's needs.
- Consider seeking family counseling or the help of support groups, too. It's important for you and your loved ones to understand your child's illness and his or her feelings, as well as what all of you can do to help your child.
- Seek ways to relax and have fun with your child.
- Praise his or her strengths and abilities.
- Explore new stress management techniques, which might help you understand how to calmly respond to stressful situations.
- Contact the NAMI HelpLine at 800-950-NAMI to find out what services and supports are available in your community.
- Connect with a trained crisis counselor to receive free, 24/7 crisis support via text message by texting "NAMI" to 741-741.

In case of crisis, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255