

Children and adolescents can have mental health problems*

Mental health is how we think, feel, and act as we face situations in life. It is how we look at our selves, our lives, and the people in our lives. Like our physical health, our mental health is important at every stage of life. Mental health includes how we handle stress, relate to others, and make decisions. Mental health can impact the daily life and the future of a young person. For example, schoolwork, relationships, and physical health can be affected by mental health. Caring for and protecting a child's mental health is a major part of helping that child grow to become the best he or she can be.

Like adults, children and adolescents can have mental health problems that interfere with the way they think, feel, and act. These problems are real and painful. They can lead to school failure, family conflicts, drug abuse, violence or suicide. Mental health problems can be severe. Sometimes a young person has a mental health problem that severely disrupts his or her ability to function at home, in school, or in the community. This child or adolescent is said to have a "serious emotional disturbance." These problems are common in young people. Studies show that, at any given time, at least one in five children and adolescents may have a mental health problem. At least 1 in 10 – or as many as 6 million young people – may have a serious emotional disturbance.

What Causes Mental Health Problems in Children and Adolescents?

The causes are complicated. Mental health problems in children and adolescents can be caused by biology, environment, or a mix of both. Examples of biological causes are genetics, chemical imbalances in the body, and damage to the central nervous system, such as a head injury. Environmental factors that can put young people at risk of developing mental health problems include exposure to environmental toxins, such as high levels of lead, exposure to violence, such as witnessing or being the victim of physical or sexual abuse, drive-by shootings, mugging, or other disasters; stress related to chronic poverty, discrimination, or other serious hardships; and loss of important people in the lives of young people through death, divorce, or broken relationships.

Some Warning Signs

A variety of signs may point to a possible mental health problem or serious emotional disturbance in a child or adolescent. Pay attention if a child or adolescent you know:

Is troubled by feeling:

- Really sad and hopeless without good reason and the feelings don't go away
- Very angry most of the time, cries a lot or overreacts to things;
- Worthless or guilty a lot;
- Anxious or worried a lot more than other young people
- Unable to get over a loss of death of someone important
- Extremely fearful – has unexplained fears or more fears than most kids;

Experiences big changes, for example

- Does much worse in school
- Loses interest in things usually enjoyed;
- Has unexplained changes in sleeping or eating;
- Avoids friends or family and wants to be alone all the time;
- Daydreams too much and can't get things done;
- Feels life is too hard to handle or considers suicide;
- Hears voices that cannot be explained.

Is limited by:

- Poor concentration – can't think straight or make up his or her mind;
- Inability to sit still or focus attention;
- Worry about being harmed, hurting others, or about doing something "bad";
- Need to wash, clean things, or perform certain routines hundreds of times a day in order to avoid danger;
- Thoughts that race – almost too fast to follow;
- Persistent nightmares;

Behaves in ways that cause problems, for example:

- Uses alcohol or other drugs;
- Eats large amounts of food and then makes self vomit, abuses laxatives, or takes enemas to avoid weight gain;
- Continues to diet and/or exercise obsessively although bone-thin;
- Constantly violates the rights of others or breaks the law without regard for other people;
- Does things that can be life threatening.

Services Can Help

Caring families and communities working together with service providers can help young people with mental health problems. These problems in children and adolescents can be recognized and treated. The range of services that children and adolescents may need is coordinated in "systems of care." In Broward County, the Children's Services Administration Division is coordinating a System of Care called One Community Partnership. The focus of One Community Partnership is to help families and service providers work as partners to help young people with mental health problems. For more information on One Community Partnership, visit our website at www.broward.org/onecommunity

* Information for this article was adapted from Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA)– Center for Mental Health Services, Caring for Every Child's Mental Health: Communities Together Campaign. For more information contact CMHS National Mental Health Services Knowledge Exchange Network, 1-800-789-2647.

