



Children's Mental Health:

A Guide for Parents





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If you've taken the time and trouble to find this handbook, more than likely, you're searching for answers. You know a child or a teenager who may need help, but you're not sure where to turn.

Your child may be withdrawn or is very anxious and disrupts the family's life. He or she may be overactive and doesn't respond to traditional parenting. Or they may be having consistent problems with behavior at school. Maybe a more serious crisis happened and took you by surprise.

Sometimes these problems can be a result of stressful situations, such as a death of a family member, divorce or other separation, a high level of stress in the family, or a move. It could be the child is experiencing a mental health problem, but don't let those words scare you.

Mental health and wellness is integral to being human. A mental illness is a condition that disrupts a person's thinking, feeling, mood and ability to relate to others.

You may be feeling somewhat uncomfortable at the thought of facing a problem like this. Questions arise, like: **Am I over-reacting? Is this just a phase? If I seek help, am I just going to make things worse? What can I expect?**

We've been in your shoes before and know the challenges of that path. That's why we wrote this manual.

First, understand that you're not alone. Mental health problems affect one in five children and teenagers. That's 20 percent of ALL kids. It touches people regardless of the neighborhood they live in, parenting skills, IQ, education, race or income. Unlike a sore throat or a broken bone, it can be hard for a parent to find their way to a mental illness diagnosis.

But a mental health problem is a real issue — an issue that needs immediate attention just as you would a broken bone. Children and teens who experience mental illness have trouble functioning normally in family, school and social settings. And all the good intentions and efforts of their parents don't seem to be help.

Sometimes, the behavior of a child makes the issue very apparent, like those who are overactive or act out in obvious ways. But many are more difficult to detect, especially those who withdraw or suffer inside.

Children and teens who experience an illness and are not getting the help they need are at risk of resorting to destructive behavior to cope with their problem. We also know that a child or teenager's mental health problem won't simply go away with time. In fact, not doing anything can put the child at risk of more serious harm later in life. It may greatly limit the child's chance to succeed, and it can lead to destructive behavior.

Just like any other medical condition, a mental health problem can be assessed, diagnosed and successfully treated. Roughly, 70 to 90 percent of individuals treated for a mental illness have significant reduction of symptoms and improved quality of life. The earlier the problem is addressed, the better chance to succeed.

So what do you do? How do you know whether to wait or when to act? How do you take the first step? That's why we, as parents who walked this path before, wrote this practical guide to getting children mental health care. Our goal is to help other parents discern whether their child needs professional help or not, and if so, how to research and find help and how to get other support.



What is mental illness?

When we hear these words, a number of ideas may come to mind, many of them distressful and negative, and it helps to have a better understanding of what we're talking about.

First, it is important to understand what mental health or mental wellness means. The American Psychiatric Association explains that "mental health is the foundation for thinking, communication, learning, resilience and self-esteem. Mental health is also key to relationships, personal and emotional well-being and contributing to community or society." For all of us, our capacity to think, communicate, learn and cope fluctuates, and we can have good days and bad days. But for many people, including many children experiencing mental illness, every day is a tough day.

The renowned Mayo Clinic describes mental illness as "a wide range of mental health conditions — disorders that affect your mood, thinking and behavior. Examples of mental illness include depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders and addictive behaviors."

They also explain that it is different from mental health concerns that happen from time to time (stress, sadness, etc.). An illness is frequent and affects one's ability to function.

What causes **mental illness**?

It is easy to confuse mental illness with the external manifestations of the illness. We may think the child is bad, has poor personality, or isn't smart. We also tend to feel guilty as parents and may believe the way we parent causes the child to behave a certain way. In reality, very smart people can experience serious mental illness. Children raised in optimal conditions can experience mental illness. Understanding mental illness is complex. There are three possible root causes. Sometime one factor is prevalent, but most often all three are present to some degree:

1

Genetic: Scientists' progress in mapping the human genome has helped to identify some genetic causes of mental illness. In 2011, a consortium of research organizations identified five genetic markers associated with the mental illness. A child born from two parents with bipolar disorder has 65 percent chance of developing bipolar.

2

Biological: In a 2012 article on the American Psychological Association's website, Eric Kandel, M.D., a Nobel Prize laureate and Columbia University professor, contends the root cause of mental illness is biological. "All mental processes are brain processes, and therefore all disorders of mental functioning are biological diseases," he writes. In other words, mental illness is caused by a brain chemistry unbalance. To function normally, the brain produces chemical substances that impact the way we think, feel and act. In the absence of these chemical substances, a behavior or action results.

3

Environment: In the same article, Richard McNally, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at Harvard University, states, "Certain disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and autism fit the biological model in a very clear-cut sense." He continues, acknowledging, "Yet for other conditions, such as depression or anxiety, the biological foundation is more nebulous. Often mental illnesses are likely to have multiple causes, including genetic, biological and environmental factors." Environment factors can include trauma, lifestyle, exposure to harmful substances and intense stress. A reduction in exposure can make a significant difference.

Mental illness is not laziness, bad behavior, hormones, attention seeking, or other teen drama. It is no less a physical illness than diabetes and must be treated just as any other physical illness must be treated.

Note that mental health disorders can vary in intensity, and are not always as severe as chronic illnesses such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. Conditions like ADHD, anxiety or mood disorders are more prevalent among children, and can have a serious impact if not treated.

Lastly, while some mental illness may require lifelong care, know that many people become happy and productive members of society despite a mental illness. It is not a sentence to a wasted life or even death. Controlled studies show rates of recovery range from 70 to 86 percent for children with issues like ADHD, anxiety or depression who are treated with a combination of medication and therapy. However, absence of treatment can jeopardize the future of the child in many ways.

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