

MENTAL HEALTH INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Mental health is how people think, feel, and act as they face life's situations. It affects how people handle stress, relate to one another and make decisions. Mental health influences the way individual look at themselves, their lives, and other in their lives. Like physical health, mental health affects all aspects of our lives and is virtually important at every age.

Like adults, children and adolescents can have mental health disorders that interfere with the way they think, feel, and act. When untreated, mental health disorders can lead to school failure, family conflicts, drug abuse, violence, and even suicide. Untreated mental health disorders can be very costly to families, communities, and the health care system.

WHEN SHOULD A PARENT SEEK OUT COUNSELING FOR THEIR CHILD?

Signs of mental health disorders can signal a need for help in children and adolescents and the need to get help as soon as possible. A variety of signs may point to mental health disorders or serious emotional disturbances in children or teens. Caring for and protecting our children is an obligation and is critical to their daily lives and their independence. Pay attention if a child or teen you know has any of these warning signs:

A child or teen is troubled by feeling:

- Sad and hopeless for no reason, and these feelings do not go away
- Very angry most of the time and crying a lot or overreacting to things
- Feeling worthless or guilty often
- Anxious or worried often
- Unable to get over a loss or death of someone important
- Extremely fearful or having unexplained fears
- Constantly concerned about physical problems or physical appearance
- Frightened that his or her mind either is controlled or is out of control

A child or teen experiences big changes, such as:

- Showing declining performance in school
- Losing interest in things they once enjoyed
- Experiencing unexplained changes in sleeping or eating patterns
- Avoiding friends or family and wanting to be alone all the time
- Daydreaming too much and not completing tasks
- Feeling life is too hard to handle
- Hearing voices that cannot be explained
- Experiencing suicidal thoughts or thoughts of hurting themselves

A child or teen experiences

- Poor concentration and is unable to think straight or make up his or her mind
- An inability to sit still or focus attention

- Worry about being harmed, hurting others, or doing something “bad”
- A need to wash, clean things, or perform certain routines hundreds of times a day in order to avoid an unsubstantiated danger
- Racing thoughts that are almost too fast to follow
- Persistent nightmares

A child or adolescent behaves in ways that cause problems, such as:

- Using alcohol or other drugs
- Eating large amounts of food and then purging, or abusing laxatives, to avoid weight gain
- Dieting and/or exercising obsessively
- Violating the rights of others or constantly breaking the law without regard for other people
- Setting fires
- Doing things that can be life threatening
- Cruelty to pets or animals

Children and adolescents can sometimes be in need of mental health services as a result of stressful situations such as:

- Sexual Abuse
- A death in the family
- Family problems
- Coping with a family member who uses alcohol or drugs excessively
- Family violence
- Dating violence
- School violence

WHEN SHOULD A PARENT SEEK OUT COUNSELING FOR THEMSELVES

- Feeling overwhelmed as a parent
- Severe emotional stress
- Feeling sad, trapped, or feeling like giving up
- Feeling sad for a long period of time
- Feeling empty
- Loss of interest or pleasure in ordinary things
- Changes in appetite or sleep or feeling tired all the time
- Inability to concentrate, make decisions
- Feeling hopeless or worthlessness
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Worrying all the time
- Panic attacks

Adapted from MSPCC article