

Know! To Focus On Mental Health

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If our pancreas has a chemical imbalance, we seek treatment. If our kidneys are not physiologically working right, we seek treatment. When our most complex organ, the brain, is not physiologically working right or has a chemical imbalance, for some reason we ignore or hide it. May is Mental Health Month; an opportunity to break the negative stigma that surrounds mental illness and promote the well-being of the whole child.

Mental health conditions are far more common among teens than most people would imagine. In fact, one in five youth ages 13 to 18 have or will develop a serious mental illness.

They are disorders that affect a person's thinking, feeling or mood, impacting their ability to interact with others and function in their daily lives. However, just like many physical conditions, mental health conditions can be treatable and people can and do recover and live happy, full lives.

Mental illness is no one's fault and is rarely the result of one particular thing. Instead, research suggests that there are multiple linking causes including genetics, environment and lifestyle. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), extreme stress, traumatic events and substance abuse are among the factors that can make a person more susceptible.

The importance of early detection and intervention is crucial, yet the average delay between the onset of symptoms and intervention is usually between 8 to 10 years - and lack of treatment can be fatal. Suicide is now the second leading cause of death for 15 to 24-year olds, and the third leading cause of death for 10 to 24-year-olds. More than 90 percent of young people who die by suicide have a mental health condition.

Adolescents with untreated mental illnesses are also more likely to drop out of school, have chronic physical health conditions in adulthood and have a shortened lifespan of up to 25 years.

Half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14. For some youth, the onset of symptoms can be scary and confusing, and for some parents, it can be unclear whether what they are seeing in their teen is typical adolescent behavior and personality changes or symptoms of a mental health condition.

Every child with mental illness will have different experiences, even those with the same diagnosis. However, common warning signs include:

- Feeling sad or withdrawn for more than two weeks (crying, fatigued, unmotivated)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 (racing heart, physical discomfort, fast breathing)
- Significant weight loss or gain (not eating, throwing up or using laxatives to lose weight)
- Severe mood swings that cause problems in relationships
- Repeated use of drugs or alcohol
- Drastic changes in behavior, personality or sleeping habits
- Extreme difficulty in concentrating or staying still that can lead to problems in school
- Intense worrying that gets in the way of daily activities, including hanging out with friends and going to class

As a parent who suspects there may be an issue with your child, there are four very important things you can do, according to the experts at NAMI. Talk with your pediatrician, get a referral to a mental health specialist, work with your child's school and connect with other families experiencing similar situations.

A teen experiencing symptoms of mental illness needs to know they are not alone, and that they have many resources available to them as well, including Ok2Talk.org – an online opportunity to connect with other young people who may be going through the same things as them.