



Youth, teens and mental health

Condition Report: It's no secret the emotions and actions of youth and teenagers can be a dizzying array of ups, downs, quirks and contradictions. But, where mood swings, tantrums, and dramatic phases do constitute what have always been accepted as a normal part of growing up, there are notable instances when shifts in mood and behaviour may be indicators of a larger, more daunting issue: mental illness.



Children And Mental Health Disorders: The Challenges They Face

As adults, it may be difficult to imagine children suffering from such difficult challenges, yet child psychiatrist, Dr. Jean Clinton, worries the number of young people today experiencing mental health problems is on the rise. The statistics do paint a striking portrait: close to 20 percent – one in five – young people are actively dealing with a mental health issue.¹ These include:

- Anxiety disorders
- Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Bipolar disorder
- Conduct disorder
- Depression
- Eating disorders
- Psychosis
- Schizophrenia
- Suicide

Of these, anxiety disorders most commonly affect children and teens, with six percent experiencing them at some point.^{1,2} Suicide, the most concerning of mental health issues, is the number one non-accidental cause of death among Canadian youth. The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) reported that a shocking five percent of youth attempted suicide in the past year, while another 12% had given suicide serious thought.³ Without question, our youth and teens are facing stressors and pressures in their lives which are manifesting in ways that go well beyond the often inconsequential “growing pains”.

Just as concerning, only one in four will get the help they need.^{2,4} This can create a disruptive ripple effect: the mental illness itself makes its way into the daily fabric, relationships, academics and physical health of the child. This, in turn, can negatively impact their future development, their overall mental and physical well-being and their perceptions of success in their adult lives.

It's crucial that we eliminate the stigma and fear surrounding mental health, while opening up helpful dialogues that will benefit youth now and in the years to come.

Mental Health Disorders: What To Look For

With 50-70% of mental health disorders showing up before 18 years of age², it's important to identify those who are struggling as early as possible. Some of the most common signs to watch for are:

- **Avoiding people, places or situations** they normally engage with or suddenly keeping to themselves
- **Changes in eating patterns, feelings or behaviour surrounding food, weight or physical appearance**
- **Changes in self-esteem or self-image**
- **Changes or decline in relationships at school, home, or with other kids**
- **Changes or decline in school or extracurricular performance**
- **Changes or inability to sleep, relax or concentrate**
- **Deliberately hurting themselves or others**
- **Inability to cope with everyday life, issues or activities**
- **Lack of regard or interest in the feelings or property of others**
- **Lack of self-care or neglecting themselves**
- **New or increased use of alcohol and/or drugs**
- **New or unusual physical behaviours or ailments** like recurring head or stomach aches, neck pain, excess energy or nervous habits (i.e.: nail biting, hair twisting, thumb-sucking, odd or repetitive movements)
- **Overreactions to relatively small incidents**
- **Reduced interest in social or extracurricular activities they normally enjoy**
- **Speaking of suicide or having a preoccupation with death**
- **Sudden changes or extremes in emotion** such as feeling rejected, worthless, hopeless, sad, helpless, anxious, worried, guilty/self-blaming, disillusioned, angry or afraid
- **Sudden or unexplained changes in behaviour** (i.e.: an active child becomes withdrawn or a good student's grades drop)

Certain circumstances may also make children more susceptible to mental health disorders. These include:

- A family history of mental health disorders
- A history of previous suicide attempts
- Being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered
- Ethnicity and societal discrimination
- Facing or having witnessed trauma, including abuse
- Having been the victim of, or having engaged in bullying
- Having recently gone through a major life change (moving to a new country, city or school)
- Having substance abuse problems

If you're concerned about your child, talk to them about how they're feeling. Letting them know you care is a powerful first step in showing they aren't alone.

Ensuring Children Don't Suffer Alone: Being Proactive And Offering Support

Daunting as it may be to broach the subject of mental health and kids, there's reason to be optimistic: 70 per cent of mental health cases that appear in children *can* be addressed through early intervention⁴.

Getting ahead of mental health disorders, and offering support to those who need it empowers both the at-risk child and the adults who love them. The good news? There are a multitude of ways to do just that.

Foster resiliency: As a parent, resist the urge to "bubble-wrap" or constantly protect your kids. Instead, actively provide the tools and skills to help your child problem solve, resolve conflict and help cope with the normal roadblocks, responsibilities and inevitable setbacks they'll face. Boost their self-confidence by supporting good decision-making, assertiveness, perseverance and self-determination.

Communicate: Openly, honestly and often. Some of our favourite expert advice:

- Notice the little conversation openers your child offers up
- Ask non-judgemental questions and really pause to listen to what they have to say
- Acknowledge their feelings
- Answer questions directly and honestly
- Give your undivided attention
- Resist the urge to quickly jump in with solutions or advice
- And, above all, make time to connect whenever you can

Apart from keeping the lines of communication open and natural, checking in frequently also provides a great baseline; if things change where your child's mental health is concerned, you'll be far more likely to notice it, and they'll be far more likely to share their struggles with you.

You and your child may also consider creating a signal (i.e.: a code word or specifically worded email or text message) to be used when they'd like to open a discussion about something important. This can help set the stage for a conversation they may not otherwise know how to begin.

Nurture a healthy, safe environment at home: Establishing routines and setting clear boundaries, rules and limits are key, as is building in daily time together. Mealtimes are fantastic opportunities to talk and listen (especially when devices are put away!). In fact, research suggests kids who share fewer meals at home with their family actually become sexually active or experiment with drugs at earlier ages¹, while kids living in a healthy, supportive environment have better mental health and less risk of mental health disorders.⁵

Be respectful: Demonstrate that you value and accept your child for who they are.

Create a network of strong relationships: Help your child build a wider support system through friends, team sports, their church or other social activities. Even taking care of a pet can prove deeply fulfilling and beneficial to mental health.

Provide outlets to relieve anxiety and stress: Physical activity, meditation and the arts are super for self-expression, growth and work wonders on a young person's overall mental health and ability to handle stress.

Avoid involving children in adult problems: When dealing with your own personal issues, look to other adults for support instead of bringing your child into the fray. Not arguing in front of your child or asking them to pick sides is important to ensuring your child's mental health is maintained.

When necessary, seek professional help: If your child needs more intensive support, don't hesitate. Your EFAP or family doctor are great places to start. They can help you navigate the various therapists, therapies, support groups, help lines and other services available, and determine which may be the best fit for your child. Provide information on your EFAP or local help line to your child so they can access services themselves, confidentially, if they ever need someone else to talk to.

Mental Health And Stability Outside The Home: Staying Informed About Your Child

Whether school, sports, work or their social lives, your child likely spends significant time away from the predictability of home. Be assured, however, that staying in the loop is possible, encouraged and supported by your community. You need only reach out or take some initiative to get a read on how your child's doing outside the home.

Consider:

Keeping an eye on online activity: Monitor your child's social media activity or messaging apps to see how they're feeling, coping and interacting with others. Keep it subtle and non-intrusive so your child feels their self-expression and privacy are being respected.

Communicating frequently with those who interact with your child: Teachers, guidance counsellors, administrators, friends, youth leaders and other parents can offer unique insights into how your child or teen may be acting or feeling when you're not present.

Getting involved...together: Joining your child in activities they enjoy, or volunteering together for a good cause provides a space for bonding, self-esteem building, communication and connections that are often different than at home.

Mental health disorders in children and teens can be a source of great trepidation and fear, but it needn't be. Acknowledging the very real challenges and complexities facing children – and letting them know you're there to listen and help – this can be just what's needed to ensure they feel supported, allowing them to flourish, during this exciting and dynamic time in their lives.

Sources:

- ¹ Vuchnich, Allison , and Carmen Chai. "Young Minds: Stress, anxiety plaguing Canadian youth." Global News. Shaw Media, 6 May 2013. Web.
- ² CMHA BC Division. "Mental Illnesses in Children and Youth." Canadian Mental Health Association British Columbia Division. BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information and HeretoHelp, and BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services, 2014. Web.
- ³ "Guide For Parents And Caregivers: Opening the Door to Better Mental Health For Yor Youth." RightByYou.ca. Right By You, n.d. Web.
- ⁴ "Youth Mental Health." PHE Canada. Physical and Health Education Canada, n.d. Web.
- ⁵ "The Mental Health Strategy for Canada: A Youth Perspective." Mental Health Commission of Canada. N.p., 2016. Web.



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