

## Seeking Professional Help

### Preparing for your first visit to a mental health professional

Unfortunately, you may hesitate to seek help for your child. You may be afraid about what will happen during your first visit to a professional, or about what the professional might say is wrong with your child. You may be afraid about what others may think or say. After all, there are many myths and misconceptions about serious emotional disturbances. But, if you are reading this information, you have already taken the first step in realizing that your child might need help (and in preparing to get that help).

Between 80 and 90 percent of all children with serious emotional disturbances will respond very well to treatment.

At your first visit, you will be asked questions about your child and your family history. You will also be asked about your child's mental health symptoms. This information is **confidential**, meaning that it will not be shared with anyone else unless you give written permission for it to be shared. You will have an opportunity to ask questions, and will want to be prepared to do so.

Some therapists treat the child individually, while others involve the parents and other family members in the process. You need to be comfortable with the level of family involvement. If you aren't, talk to the therapist about this. If you are not comfortable with the therapist after a reasonable amount of time, get a second opinion. Remember that you are an advocate for your child, and you should be comfortable with the professionals who are providing services.

Some information that you will want to have available for the first visit includes:

- Your child's birth certificate (a copy is fine)
- Your child's Social Security number
- Your child's health insurance information
- Knowledge of your child's medical history (any illness or injuries)
- Knowledge of your child's developmental milestones (when your child walked, talked, etc.)
- Knowledge of your child's mental health symptoms
- Knowledge of your child's strengths, skills, and talents

#### **At the end of your first visit, you should be glad that you went. You have taken the first step!**

Your doctor or therapist will present you with treatment options for your child. You will be able to make choices about the services that you and your child may receive. Mental health services are voluntary. Ideally, you will work in partnership with your child's doctor or therapist in restoring your child to good health.

#### **How Do I Advocate for my Child?**

To initiate mental health services and find the resources your child needs, you must be able to adequately represent your child. This requires that you act as an **advocate** for your child, making sure that your child's needs are met and his or her rights are protected. To become an effective advocate, you can:

- Identify the needs of your child and note the areas in which he or she might need help.
- Gather information on available resources.
- Start keeping your own records including notes on your observations.
- Prepare in advance for meetings or telephone calls with agencies or therapists. Know which questions you want to ask and which concerns you want to discuss.
- Follow up to make sure that things occur when promised or services agreed to have actually been

delivered.

- Monitor your child's progress and express yourself if you have concerns.
- Learn about and understand the rights of your child and family.

You know your child best. You will want to make sure that the needs of your child and your family are being met.

### **Understanding and Dealing with Stigma**

Despite advocacy efforts, there continues to be myths and misunderstandings around serious emotional disturbances. Your initial decision to see a mental health professional is a great first step. However, you may feel hesitant to talk to others about the situation because you don't know how they will react. Too often, results of the stigma surrounding serious emotional disturbances may create consequences worse than the illness itself. Here are some ways you can cope with and help end stigma:

- Get appropriate treatment - Don't let the fear of being stigmatized prevent you from seeking treatment.
- Surround yourself with supportive people - Because stigma can lead to withdrawal, it's important to stay in touch with understanding friends and family.
- Make your expectations known - Friends and family may not know how to help you. Offer them specific suggestions and, if you are comfortable, remind people of appropriate language.
- Don't equate your child with his/her illness - Your child is not an illness. Instead of saying that your child is depressed, say that your child has depression.