

What is Mental Health?

In order to understand serious emotional disturbances, it is important, first, to understand mental health. Mental health is how we think, feel and act in order to face life's situations. It is how we look at ourselves, our lives, and the people we care about and know. It also helps to determine how we handle stress, relate to others, evaluate our options and make choices.

How can I tell if my child has a serious emotional disturbance?

It is easy for a parent to recognize when a child has a fever. A fever is a symptom that something is physically wrong. There are also symptoms that could indicate that your child has a serious emotional disturbance. As a parent, you know your child best. Ask yourself the following questions or look for these symptoms:

What is your child saying to you and to others? Is he or she troubled by feeling:

- Really sad, irritable, or "down?"
- Very angry most of the time?
- Worthless?
- Anxious, worried, or fearful a lot more than others his or her age?
- Constantly concerned about physical problems or physical appearance?
- Frightened that his or her mind is controlled or out of control?
- That life is too hard to handle or that life seems hopeless?

Have you noticed a "big change" in your child? For example, is he or she:

- Doing much worse in school?
- Losing interest in things that he or she used to enjoy?
- Sleeping or eating much more or less than usual?
- Avoiding friends or family and wanting to be alone all of the time?
- Daydreaming too much, and can't get things done?
- Hearing voices that cannot be explained?
- Unable to get over a loss or death of someone important?

Is your child limited at home, in school or in social situations by:

- Poor concentration; can't seem to think straight or to make up his or her mind?
- The inability to sit still?
- Thoughts that race almost too fast to follow?
- Worries about being harmed, hurting others, or about doing something "bad?"
- The need to wash, clean, or perform certain routines many times a day?
- Persistent nightmares?

Does your child behave in ways that cause problems? For example, does he or she:

- Use alcohol or other drugs?
- Eat large amounts of food, then vomit; abuse laxatives?
- Continue to diet and to lose weight even though very thin?
- Do things that can be life threatening?

Here are some other things to consider:

- Does anyone in your child's family have a history of serious emotional disturbances? This would include parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters and extended family.
- Is your child a girl or a boy? Be sure to consider possible symptoms in relation to your child's

gender. Symptoms are occasionally overlooked because it is socially acceptable for boys or girls to act in a certain way.

- What is your child's age? Behavior that is alarming at one age may be perfectly normal at another age.
- Has your child been physically ill or in an accident? Physical problems can sometimes lead to serious emotional disturbances.
- Have your child's symptoms lasted for a period of time? Some symptoms may appear and then disappear quickly.

Your observations are important. If you are concerned by your answers to the above questions, it may be important to have your child evaluated. Serious emotional disturbances can be recognized and treated before your child is in a crisis situation. Caring parents and professionals working together can make the difference.

What causes serious emotional disturbances? Am I to blame?

It is natural for both the parent and the child to want to find a reason for serious emotional disturbances. As a parent, you may blame yourself for your lack of parenting skills, your job, your style of discipline or even your lack of consistency. You may wonder, "If only I had done this or that differently, would my son/daughter be fine?" On the other hand, children want to know why they do the things that they do, or feel the way that they feel. If no answers are available, your child may start believing that the situation is hopeless.

It is important to realize that blaming yourself, or your child, is not the answer. All of the causes of serious emotional disturbances are not yet known, however, great strides in understanding serious emotional disturbances have been made in the past ten years, and a great deal more is being learned every day. It is known that both biology and environment play a part.

Biological causes include genetics, chemical imbalances, and damage to the central nervous system. The medical profession refers to these as "neurobiological brain disorders." Researchers continue to advance in understanding the biological links to serious emotional disturbances, and treatment today is much more effective than it was in the recent past.

Environmental factors can put children at risk or make existing biological factors even worse. Children exposed to violence, abuse, neglect, loss of a loved one, or to substances such as lead, are more at risk of developing serious emotional disturbances. Other risk factors include rejection due to race, religion, sexual orientation or poverty. Fortunately, treatment options for children experiencing unfavorable environmental factors have also improved. Therapy and a wide range of community based services are available to help children and their families deal with serious emotional disturbances and issues.

If you suspect that your child has a serious emotional disturbance, your willingness to seek help for your child in working through his or her problems is a major part of the solution.