

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS OF CHILD AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Growing up can be difficult for many children, as well as for the adults around them. Sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish between developmentally appropriate problems and behaviors associated with adolescence, and ones which indicate a more serious problem. Adolescence is a time with an increased risk for the development of mental health problems: 50% of mental illnesses occur by the age of 14 and 75% by the age of 24.

The range of mental health problems is wide. Some people with mental illnesses experience mild symptoms and can recover with relatively low levels of treatment, especially if early identification and help is available. Others can affect a person's life profoundly and require longer-term treatment. When mental health problems are ignored, they can get worse. Parents and teachers are the first to notice the warning signs of mental illness in children and adolescents, as they have the opportunity to regularly observe their everyday life.

While each mental illness has a unique set of symptoms, there are several warning signs that are generally present in adolescents who may have a mental illness and need professional support:

- Loss of motivation and interest in activities that they previously enjoyed
- Poorer concentration, both at school and across daily functioning and activities
- Feelings of worthlessness or uselessness
- Significant or sudden drop in school performance and grades
- Extreme mood swings, including uncontrollable feelings of euphoria or prolonged feelings of irritability or anger or tantrums
- Prolonged feelings of sadness, low or fear
- Avoidance of friends and social activities
- Changes in sleeping habits, troubled sleeping, prolonged feelings of tiredness and lack of energy, frequent nightmares
- Changes in eating habits, such as excessive overeating or prolonged lack of appetite, fear of weight gain or excessive concern about appearance
- Substance abuse
- Numerous physical complaints with no obvious cause, e.g. headaches, stomach aches, vague and persistent "aches and pains"
- Signs of self-harm such as inappropriate covering up (e.g. long sleeves in summer, wrist bands), cuts, burns on the skin, prepared excuses for targeted questions
- Thinking about suicide, using phrases like, *"There's no meaning to life. Nothing matters anymore. I wish I'd never been born. Nobody cares about me. No one would miss me if I was gone. I'm a burden to others. I have nothing to live for. You won't have to worry about me anymore. I wish I was dead."*

Mental illnesses can severely affect thoughts, emotions, behavior and overall physical health. Early detection and intervention will ensure that children and adolescents receive early support to lessen their symptoms and enable them to live happy and fulfilling lives.

