Mental Illness Among Adolescents: An Evidence-Based Practice Guide for Parents of Adolescents with Mental Illness

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The multiple physical, emotional, and social changes adolescents have to go through can be incredibly stressful (WHO, n.d). Some of these behavioral changes look like defiance, disrespect, or illogical, but in reality, a lot of adolescents are going through pivotal life changes that can be causing such behavior. Mental health concerns are on the rise in adolescents and could be the cause of your child’s unexplainable emotional outbursts.

The mental health problem among adolescents seems to only be getting worse. The number of teens with major depressive disorder has increased from 9.2% in 2016, to 9.7% in 2017. This rising percentage is even more concerning knowing that 60% of youth with major depression disorder do not receive mental health treatment (Mental Health America, 2021). According to the same study from Mental Health America, half of the youth included in the survey experienced suicidal ideation every day, or more than half of the days in the previous 2 weeks.

With 50% of lifelong mental illnesses starting at the age of 14, it is crucial for parents to reach out to their adolescents and build healthy relationships so that they feel supported (AdolescentAdmin, 2020). Being diagnosed with a mental illness, or struggling emotionally, doesn't mean the youth are hopeless. With parenting skills, professional help, and hard work from the teenager, mental illness can be coped with and managed. It might sound stressful and overwhelming to have to think about what to do if your child is experiencing some emotional and mental struggles, but there are ways to do the best you can as a parent. This evidence based practice guide is for parents of adolescents who are struggling with mental illness. This guide will help parents know what the first steps are to helping their teen.
Recommendation 1

**KNOW HOW TO RECOGNIZE THE WARNING SIGNS OF MENTAL ILLNESS**

Warning signs of mental illness can differ for everyone, but knowing the most common signs can help.

Understand that teenagers go through a lot of changes in their lives that can impact them and their mental health. What's important is to be aware of what the warning signs are for mental illness so that you can recognize them if necessary. As a parent, take notice of how much you child isolates themselves, their mood swings, their diet, their interest level in activities, and if they have any sort of drastic sleep changes (Morin, 2020). All of these can be sign of mental illness and it is important to pay attention to them so that the next steps can be taken. Once the warning signs are recognized, it is important to have a conversation with your child about your concerns (Mayo Clinic, 2019). It may be uncomfortable to talk about, but when a child's mental health and safety are at risk, the conversation is wroth it.

Recommendation 2

**DON'T BE PART OF THE GROWING STIGMA OF MENTAL HEALTH**

If your child approaches you about their mental health, believe them. Don't contribute to the stigma.

There is an ongoing societal stigma about mental health and the way parents fight that stigma can be the difference in getting your child the help that they need. Not believing your child’s issues can lead to them feeling ashamed, abandoned, and they are most likely going to be more reluctant to receive treatment (Better Health Channel, 2015). Think of how brave your child is for approaching you about their concerns for their mental health; it’s important to realize the situation they’re putting themselves in by approaching you and instead of trying to solve their problem, it is best to validate their feelings and listen (Ehmke, 2020). Developing these 2 simple skills can help your child be more open about their mental health and how they want to solve the issue.
**Recommendation 3**

**MAKE THE HOME AN EMOTIONALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT**

*Feeling safe will be an important part of your child's mental health*

Mental health is affected greatly by an environment, whether good or bad. The more we are surrounded by sadness, anger, neglect, etc., the more likely it is that a teenager (or anyone) develops a mental health issue (National Counseling Society, n.d.). Their main influences in life are the interactions within their physical and social environments (Teater, 2014). Set expectations for your house with cleanliness, volume level, conflict resolution, and expressing emotions. If your child feels supported and emotionally safe in their environment, they are more likely to open up to you about their mental health concerns. Understanding how much your environment impacts you will help you create that safe space to improve your teen's mental health.

**Recommendation 4**

**KNOW YOUR COMMUNITY RESOURCES**

*As a parent, you can't be your child's therapist. Find out what resources are available.*

Recognizing warning signs of mental health and the ability to have a conversation about it are all great skills to have. But what good do those skills do if you don't know what to do next? Helping your teenager decide what to do for their mental health will be a critical moment in their life. It's important to find resources in the community that provide the services needed. If finances are a struggle, a lot of mental health clinics accept Medicaid, or have plans for families without insurance (Medicaid, n.d.). The important step to do next is to research your community's resources. As you're choosing a mental health provider, keep in mind that you are trying to find the best therapist for your teenager. Try not to let your perspective of someone keep you from choosing the best option for your child. Your teenager is in this process of developing into a more independent person and they should have an opinion about where they go for help (The Whole Child, 2018).

**Recommendation 5**

**TRUST YOUR MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDER AND YOUR TEENAGER**

*Respecting the therapeutic process is essential for your child's progress.*

Initially, you may feel kind of uncomfortable sending your teenager to see a therapist who you have just met. You may be skeptical of their skills and you'll want to know how your child is doing in therapy and what they're talking about. Calling your child's therapist asking for their notes is inappropriate and a violation of your child's privacy. Due to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (OCR, 2020), mental health professionals are required to keep therapy sessions confidential, even for minors. This would be the same rule at every mental health clinic. The most you can do as a parent is trust your child's therapist. Confidentiality is a huge part of the therapeutic process. When teenagers know their conversations are confidential, they are more likely to be more open and honest about their problems (Bentsianov, 2016). This doesn't mean you will always be completely shut out of your child's therapy. If your child asks you to join them for a session, that is appropriate. It is also appropriate to sit in on their sessions without their consent if you choose to do so. Respecting your child's therapeutic process is a big step in the trust they will have for you as a parent.
REFERENCES