

Child & Adolescent Health Issues

Mental Health

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) refers to a group of developmental disorders characterized by 1) difficulty communicating and interacting with others, and 2) repetitive behaviors as well as limited interests and activities. The symptoms of ASD may appear as early as infancy. The severity of the symptoms and the degree of disability can vary widely. Diagnosis relies on a medical examination and careful review of the child's history. Treatment for ASD often involves a variety of interventions, including behavior and communication therapies, structured educational programs, and family therapies.

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a condition that affects millions of children. Symptoms include difficulty maintaining attention, hyperactivity, and impulsive behavior. Symptoms can be mild to severe and may differ between boys and girls, with boys more likely to be hyperactive and girls more likely to be quietly inattentive. Symptoms of ADHD in a child may be predominantly inattention or predominantly hyperactive-impulsive behavior or a mixture of the two. Diagnosing ADHD relies on a comprehensive examination and detailed data gathering conducted by a pediatrician, psychologist, or other health professional with expertise in ADHD. Treatment for ADHD includes education, counseling, training, and, at times, medications.

Depression

One of the most serious mental health issues for adolescents is depression. While it is not uncommon for adolescents to feel sad at times, and perhaps use "depression" to describe how they are feeling, approximately five percent of adolescents will experience a much more serious emotional disturbance, a condition that health professionals refer to as either major or clinical depression. This is a medical illness that can lead to significant problems at home and school and that increases the risk of both substance abuse and suicide, the second leading cause of death among individuals ages 15 to 24. One of the greatest challenges about addressing the needs of adolescents who are depressed is that it often goes unrecognized and untreated. Even when it is recognized, many adolescents do not talk about what they are experiencing because they fear being criticized or judged by others. They also may be reluctant to seek the help of health professionals because they do not realize that there are effective treatments.

Depression is the second leading cause of death among individuals ages 15 to 24.

The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention provides the following list of signs & symptoms of depression:

- Feeling sad, hopeless, or irritable a lot of the time
- Not wanting to do or enjoy fun things
- Changes in eating patterns—eating a lot more or a lot less than usual
- Changes in sleep patterns—sleeping a lot more or a lot less than normal
- Changes in energy—being tired and sluggish or tense and restless a lot of the time

- Having a hard time paying attention
- Feeling worthless, useless, or guilty
- Self-injury and self-destructive behavior

Depression should be viewed as a medical illness, in the same way that asthma and diabetes are seen as medical illnesses, and not the result of personal failure or lack of willpower. Additionally, the message that this is a treatable illness needs to be conveyed. The treatments for adolescents who are depressed are the same as those for adults who suffer from depression.

Anxiety

Another important mental health issue for children and adolescents is anxiety. Although it is not unusual for children and adolescents to feel anxious about school or friendships or when they are facing new, unfamiliar situations, when these feelings of anxiety persist for weeks or months and interfere with their schoolwork or relationships with family and peers, this can be an indication that they have an anxiety disorder. It is estimated that about one in seven young persons will experience an anxiety disorder, but as with depression, anxiety disorders often go unrecognized and untreated.

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Following are examples of anxiety disorder given by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- Being very afraid when away from parents (separation anxiety)
- Having extreme fear about a specific thing or situation, such as dogs, insects, or going to the doctor (phobias)
- Being very afraid of school and other places where there are people (social anxiety)
- Being very worried about the future and about bad things happening (general anxiety)
- Having repeated episodes of sudden, unexpected, intense fear that come with symptoms like heart pounding, having trouble breathing, or feeling dizzy, shaky, or sweaty (panic disorder)