



Mental illness in children and adolescents can be treated effectively

May 1-7 is National Children's Mental Health Awareness Week

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

The recent Netflix series “13 Reasons Why” explored the tragic story of a high school-aged young woman who, after suffering sexual trauma and bullying, chose to end her life by suicide. Although many praised the show for raising awareness of teen suicide, others were critical of the series for giving too little attention to the young woman’s mental health complications or discussing treatment and recovery.

Regardless of whether “13 Reasons Why” provided a public service or failed to do so, teen suicide continues to be a substantial cause for concern, especially since it is often linked to mental illness. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) reports that up to 90 percent of individuals who die by suicide experience mental illness.

This link between mental illness and self-harm is particularly concerning because mental illness in children is more common than many people realize. According to NAMI, one in five children (20 percent) ages 13 to 18 has a mental health condition, with mood disorders (e.g., depression), behavior disorders and anxiety being the most common. Further, half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14.

Of course, the signs of mental illness in children can sometimes be harder to recognize than a physical illness. It may be easy to think a child – or especially a teenager – who is moody, acts out or is easily distracted is just being a “normal teenager” or “going through a phase.” But actually he or she may be suffering from depression, anxiety or attention deficit disorder.

Unfortunately, these misperceptions often mean parents are hesitant to seek mental health treatment for their children. NAMI reports the average length of time between the onset of a child’s mental health symptoms and receiving treatment is an astounding eight to ten *years*. It’s unlikely any parent would let their child suffer from a physical illness for half of his or her life before seeking help and treatment.

Of course, not every young person who experiences mental illness resorts to self-harm. But left untreated, mental illness can result in worsening symptoms, including erratic behavior, substance abuse, violence toward others and the disintegration of relationships with family and friends. Research has also found that children with mental health problems get lower grades and miss more school; more than 40 percent drop out of school altogether.

But there is also good news about mental illness in children: it is treatable. In fact, doctors and researchers understand more about mental illness in children and adolescents than ever before –

how and when it starts, what can cause it, and how it can be treated most effectively. In addition, many mental health providers, including Highland Rivers Health, have doctors and therapists specializing in child and adolescent mental health – and can tailor medication, therapy and support services to the unique needs of each young person.

Mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of, but something that should be taken seriously. If you are concerned about the mental health of your child or teen, talk to your child's doctor or school counselor, or call a local mental health clinic. Most importantly, don't wait. Like a physical illness, the sooner a child receives treatment for mental health problems, the more likely he or she is to recover and be a productive member of your family, peer group and community.

If "13 Reasons Why" told the story of the tragic results of untreated mental illness in a young person, it is important to remember that with the right treatment and support, there are many, *many* more reasons to be hopeful.