



Mental illness in children is real – and treatable

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

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

When your child has a sore throat or fever, you probably don't hesitate to take him or her to the doctor. You know with the right medication and care your child will likely recover fully – and the sooner the child is treated, the sooner he or she will be healthy again.

But when it comes to mental illness, parents sometimes feel differently. The words “mental illness” sound scary – and many people believe, incorrectly, that once a child has mental illness, he or she will always have it. Some parents blame themselves, believing – again incorrectly – that if their child has mental health problems, it's their fault and they have failed as parents.

The signs of mental illness can sometimes be harder to recognize than a physical illness. It may be easy to think a child who is moody or easily distracted is just “going through a phase” when actually he or she may be suffering from depression or attention deficit disorder.

Unfortunately, these misperceptions often mean parents are hesitant to seek mental health treatment for their children, and sometimes feel ashamed when they do. But like a physical illness such as an ear infection or bronchitis, mental health problems can get worse without treatment.

Mental illness in children is more common than many people realize. In fact, half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (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.

But the most shocking – and heartbreaking – fact NAMI reports about children and mental illness is that the average length of time between the onset of symptoms and receiving treatment is an astounding eight to ten *years*. In other words, many children suffer from mental health problems for up to a decade before getting help. It's unlikely any parent would let their child run a fever for half of his or her life before seeking medical care.

The impact of untreated mental health problems can be devastating for children, not only interfering with their ability to make friends and function at home, but also impacting their performance in school. Research has found that children with mental health problems get lower grades and miss more school. More than 40 percent of children with mental illness drop out of school altogether.

But there is also good news about mental illness in children: it is treatable. Just as children can recover from an intestinal or sinus infection with the right combination of medication and care, children can also recover from mental health problems with medication, counseling and other supports (that could include tutoring, art therapy, home visits and more).

Mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of, but something that should be taken seriously. Like any 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. The only shame is in ignoring the problem and not getting your child the help he or she needs.

If you are concerned about the mental health of your child, talk to your child's doctor or school counselor, or call a local mental health clinic. Mental health treatment is widely available and proven to be effective. Like a physical illness, with the right care and support, your child can recover from mental illness and be healthy again.