



Effective treatment can change the life of a child suffering from mental illness

May 7-13 is Children's Mental Health Awareness Week

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

As a licensed therapist that has specialized in child and adolescent mental health for more than 30 years, I have seen firsthand the suffering a child with mental illness often endures. But I've also seen how effective and timely treatment can help stop the suffering and change a child's world.

A child with depression or anxiety is likely already suffering from the symptoms of such illnesses. Feelings of worthlessness, sadness or constant worry are not only difficult for a child to understand, but can also affect how the child might interact with other children. Sometimes children with a mental health problem are perceived as being 'different' by other children and may be bullied – only adding to the suffering.

Mental illness can also affect a child's relationship with family members. Parents or siblings may not understand a child or teen's erratic behavior. Apathy, anger or self-isolation don't always mean the child is simply 'going through a phase,' but rather may be trying to cope with feelings or emotions caused by mental illness. This can be especially troubling because support of family or loved ones is often essential to coping with and recovering from a mental health problem.

School, of course, is another critical area that can be impacted. A child with a mental health or behavior disorder may have difficulty learning, comprehending, following rules or interacting appropriately with others. Studies have found that children with mental health problems miss more school and receive lower grades; more than 40 percent of children with mental illness drop out of school altogether.

Having a child with mental health problems can be frightening, but it is more common than many parents realize. In fact, according to the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI), up to one in five children (20 percent) ages 13 to 18 live with a mental health condition, with mood disorders, behavior disorders and anxiety being the most common. Half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14.

But the most shocking – and heartbreaking – fact about children and mental illness is that the average length of time between the onset of a child's 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. As anyone who has endured great physical or mental pain can attest, suffering is only more distressing the longer it persists.

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 have doctors and therapists specializing in child and adolescent mental health who can tailor medication, therapy and support services to the unique needs of each young person.

Inasmuch as mental health problems can cause a child to suffer – individually, in school and at home – effective treatment can help end the suffering and change a child’s life. 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 sooner he or she can stop suffering and begin healing.