

MENTAL HEALTH: OVERVIEW FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

There are many misconceptions about mental health in our culture. Mental health challenges are universal and come from difficult experiences that we have been through as children and ways that our minds have adapted to cope in those early situations. These can be big challenges like the loss of a loved one or a serious illness, or relatively simple ones such as moving home or struggling with school work. When we encounter challenges as children, our minds form beliefs about the world as we try to understand what we are facing. So if we experience a loss, we might form a belief that the people we care about will not be available when we need them, or if we struggle to learn in school we might form a belief that we will never be as smart as our peers. These beliefs form the basis of mental health struggles like feeling anxious (eg "people will leave me") or feeling depressed (eg "I'm not good enough"). These thoughts reflect our experiences at the time, but our minds then carry them forward to future experiences unless we learn to recognise these patterns in ourselves and work to change them.

WILL MY CHILD BE AFFECTED BY MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES?

Everyone struggles with mental health to varying degrees, because we have all experienced challenges and all of our minds have adjusted to cope with these challenges. Every single one of us has countless versions of limiting brain patterns. Sometimes we don't notice them, and other times they impact us a great deal and we give it a diagnosis. There is no way to protect a child from all the challenges of life, and there are many situational and biological factors that impact children that are completely outside the control of their caregivers. Many mental health challenges begin in adolescence, so as a parent it is best to assume that your child will struggle in one form or another at some point. But remember - this is a normal part of being human, and it does not mean there is something wrong with your child. It simply means that they have experienced something hard, and need a bit of extra support to work through it and remember their own strength and self-worth.

WHAT CAN I DO TO SUPPORT MY CHILD?

You don't have to understand all the different diagnoses to help the mental health of your child, the important thing to remember is that these patterns are perfectly normal and often times unavoidable. When children and adolescents struggle, they assume they are the only one who feels this way and that they must be flawed. As a parent you can focus on normalizing mental health by talking about the fact that everyone struggles with their mental health when they face challenges, and it doesn't mean there is something wrong with them.

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD'S MENTAL HEALTH:

- If your child is acting rudely or irrationally, it is a signal that they are hurting
- Remind them it is normal for all of us to struggle when we face challenges
- Tell them the positive coping qualities you notice in them (eg strength, courage)
- Help them identify what supports they need and ways they can access these supports
- You don't need to fix it for them - just let them know you see their pain and you care