CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

When is a teen’s behavior a warning sign of mental health concerns, and when is it just typical teen behavior? The answers to two questions can help you decide when to investigate further.

BY COLLEEN REILLY

Adolescence is a difficult time for many teens, but how can you know the difference between typical teen issues and behavior that might signal a more serious problem? Mental health problems in teens are real, painful and, left untreated, can have serious consequences.

For some teens, adolescence can be the period of their lives when mental health problems appear. In fact, according to a study by the New York Academy of Science, 90 percent of people who develop a mental health problem show warning signs during their teen years.

These problems can interfere with the way teens think, feel and act. When left untreated, mental health problems can sometimes lead to failure in school, family conflicts, drug and alcohol abuse, trouble with the law and suicide.

Mental health disorders that can affect teenagers include depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and eating disorders.

Today’s teens are affected by a wide variety of issues. “There are high school kids who are feeling so much pressure to achieve,” says Sharon Sevier, Ph.D., director of guidance and counseling, Rockwood School District, Mo. “A lot of it is perceived, but nevertheless it is very real to them and it becomes overwhelming.” Other students are truly dealing with mental health. “They want to escape the pain that they’re in.” For these students in particular, early intervention can change—or even save—lives.

Startling Statistics

The facts are sobering. About four million 9 to 17 year olds have a major mental health disorder resulting in significant impairment at home, at school and with peers, according to a report of the Surgeon General’s Conference on Children’s Mental Health. At least one in five children and adolescents has a mental health disorder, and one in 10 has a serious disorder. And most tragically, the National Center for Health Statistics reports that suicide is the third leading cause of death among teens and young adults ages 15 to 24.

Research supported by the National Institute of Mental Health has found that half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14, and despite
effective treatment, there are long delays, sometimes decades, between first onset of symptoms and when people seek and receive treatment. Untreated mental disorders can lead to a more severe, more difficult-to-treat illness and to the development of co-occurring mental illnesses.

Although the statistics are startling, early recognition of mental illnesses, early diagnosis and referral to appropriate care can greatly improve the lives of adolescents and young adults. When young people who suffer from emotional or mental health problems get help through counseling and other treatment, it can really change the course of their lives.

Research shows that teens with mental health problems who get appropriate treatment have increased test scores and that effective mental health interventions and a positive school climate contribute to improved student achievement.

Mental health intervention can also delay the onset of substance abuse, if intervention occurs before the ages when young people are most likely to begin experimenting with or using drugs and alcohol, according to research from the New York Office of Mental Health.

Spotting the Signs

School counselors, teachers and other school staff may be the first to notice symptoms. They see students every day and have a unique role in helping troubled teens get help. How do you tell the difference between typical teenage behavior and something more serious? Some of the signs there might be a serious problem include:

- Increased tardiness or absences – one of the earliest signs
- Angry or aggressive behaviors
- Poor concentration – student can’t focus, fidgets
- Student seems withdrawn, silent, lacks friends – especially if this is a change in behavior
- Student appears overly anxious or worried, even fearful

The teen years are complex; even normal adolescents may display alterna-

Typical or Troubled?

School personnel can play an important role in advancing teen mental health. They see teens everyday, observe teens over time and are aware of teen behavior. Schools are an ideal place for a coordinated effort of educators, families and mental health professionals focused on understanding and improving teen mental health.

To assist school staff with this vital issue, the American Psychiatric Foundation (APF), a philanthropic and educational subsidiary of the American Psychiatric Association (APA), established the Typical or Troubled? School Mental Health Education Program. Typical or Troubled? is an educational program designed for school personnel to raise their awareness of mental disorders in adolescents.

The program focuses on the importance of early recognition and treatment, recognizing the early warning signs of mental health problems and encouraging action and appropriate referral to a mental health professional. It was developed in collaboration with parents, teachers, school counselors, principals, school psychologists and others in the school community and reviewed for medical accuracy by child and adolescent psychiatrists.

"APF has dedicated resources to this program because we believe this issue is of great importance," said Paul Burke, APF executive director. "We're proud to have the American School Counselor Association as a successful partner."

The foundation conducted extensive research on how best to address teen mental health. Research shows that adults close to teens, especially school personnel, are motivated to help and want to learn to recognize the warning signs of mental health problems in teens as well as understand how to take action and refer the teen to a mental health professional.

The program includes a PowerPoint presentation with scripted notes for various presenters, a brochure, an instruction guide and planning document focused on best practices for implementing the program, evaluation forms and technical assistance.

To date, the program has been used in more than 125 urban, rural and suburban schools and educated and trained more than 15,000 teachers and other school personnel who are connected to 180,000 students. For more information visit www.psychfoundation.org.

tions of mood, distressing thoughts, anxiety and impulsive behavior. So how car, you distinguish normal teen behavior from behavior that might signal a more serious mental health problem?

The answers to two questions can provide insight and guidance: The first is, "How frequent?" Are warning signs happening over and over again? Do they persist over a couple of weeks and don’t go away? The second question is, "How extreme?" If a warning sign or behavior shows up, even if it is infrequent, the important question to ask is, "Is this warning sign extremely different from this student’s usual way of behaving?"

A "yes" answer to either question is a good indicator that there may be a serious problem. If these indicators are present, you should talk to the student and connect the student to school mental health staff if available or community mental health resources.

There are four major overall categories of mental disorders:

- Mood disorders (depression, bipolar disorder)
- Anxiety disorders (post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, social phobia)
- Psychotic disorders (such as schizophrenia)
- Behavioral and disruptive disorders (oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder)

While only mental health professionals can diagnose these disorders, it is helpful to be familiar with the characteristics. To learn more about these disorders, see "Understanding Mental Disorders in Youth" on p. 24.

Take Action to Make a Difference

The process for referring an adolescent to appropriate help when noticing signs of trouble can vary for different schools and school districts. Many times the school or district has set up a referral system and policies to guide action. Oftentimes there is a social worker, psychologist or other mental health professional on the school staff or associated with the school district. You can also refer troubled adolescents
to the appropriate agency within your network of community agencies.

Parental involvement is crucial. You should make sure to inform parents about their child's behavior in school and discuss resources available to them. It is important to focus on making the first meeting with parents a positive experience. It will help pave the way for future meetings or discussions that may have to address a sensitive issue like a student's troubling behaviors. Make an effort to maintain frequent and open communication with parents. And it's also important to communicate the positive, not just the negative. Parents tend to have a hard time listening or discussing issues if all they are hearing about is poor progress or problem behavior.

Only a mental health professional can diagnose a mental health disorder. When talking to parents, it is important to discuss only those observable behaviors you believe are warning signs. If the parents choose to move forward, they would work with a mental health professional, who will do an evaluation. The parents may choose to talk to their family physician or pediatrician. Following the evaluation, treatment may include psychotherapy, medications or a combination of both.

By noticing early warning signs, you can work with mental health professionals and parents to ensure young people get the help they need to remain healthy. A practical piece of advice from Sevier is to pay attention. In her words, "You have to know your students well enough to notice when their behavior changes." 68

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