

Mental illness and your child

Most parents breathe a sigh of relief when the doctor delivers their newborn baby along with the status of excellent health. As the baby grows and develops, through childhood and into adolescence, their child may develop some behaviours indicative of a mental disorder or illness.

The Reach Institute's [Action Signs Project](#) has identified warning signs that warrant professional input and possible help. These include:

- Feeling very sad or withdrawn for more than two weeks
- Seriously trying to harm or kill oneself, or making plans to do so
- Intense worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities
- Frequent fighting, using weapons or desire to harm others
- Severe out-of-control behaviour that can cause harm to the child or others
- Weight loss caused by not eating, vomiting or use of laxatives
- Extreme difficulty in concentrating, focusing or sitting still that negatively impacts performance in a school setting
- Severe mood swings that cause problems in relationships
- Drastic changes in behaviour or personality
- Repeated use of drugs or alcohol

Parents who notice any of these behaviours need to pay attention and act, not minimize or ignore them. If you are among those parents facing this type of challenge, the first step is to try to have an honest discussion with your child, in as open and non-judgmental manner as possible, noting what you have observed and expressing concern for their well-being. If you still believe there may be a mental disorder, or if you are not sure, here are further steps to consider.

What's next?

Speak to your child's doctor – Your first stop is your child's doctor's office. Schedule a complete physical exam and share your concerns with the doctor. The physical exam is important to rule out underlying organic or physical issues that could be causing or contributing to your child's behaviour. Your child's doctor will find helpful any information you can provide related to what your child has trouble with, the time of day and circumstances surrounding these difficulties, where these issues typically occur, and what you've done thus far in response.

Gather information – If you suspect your child has a mental illness, do some research and gather information from reputable organizations like the [Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health](#). You can also call your Employee and Family Assistance Program to speak to a counsellor for more information.

Learn about your child's specific condition – As parents of a child with a mental illness, your challenge may be time-limited or ongoing, depending on the diagnosis and severity. After gaining a broader understanding about mental illness from professionals such as your doctor or EFAP counsellor, ask them for resources where you can learn more about what to expect and how to cope.

Get inspired – While troubling, a diagnosis of mental disorder or illness needs to be put into perspective; not all diagnoses mean severe or permanent impairment and many can be successfully treated or managed with medication and/or therapy. History provides numerous examples of individuals who have made outstanding contributions who have also been affected by mental illness, including Abraham Lincoln, Ludwig van Beethoven, Leo Tolstoy, Winston Churchill, and Michelangelo.

Find a support group – A child's mental illness diagnosis can be devastating to parents. While there may be some comfort in the knowledge that you're not alone – [nearly one in five children](#) under the age of 18 experience a mental, emotional, or behavioural disorder severe enough to affect daily functioning at home, school or within the community – it can be a difficult time and leave you feeling upset, confused and unsure about the future. During this time, learn more about mental illness and what to expect; with the right information and supports in place, your journey will be a much easier one. You may also benefit greatly from the support of others. Join a support group, either in person or online, and participate wholeheartedly. Knowing that you're not alone is comforting and empowering.

Kids and mental illness: fighting the stigma

Dealing with the stigma and ignorant reactions of others to mental illness can sometimes be harder to deal with than the condition itself.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), stigma, discrimination and neglect prevent care and treatment from reaching people with mental illnesses. If you think about it, this makes perfect sense: if you were suffering from a condition that would likely subject you to ridicule, discrimination, and rejection, would you admit it – even to those who could potentially help you?

The Mayo Clinic details some of the [harmful effects of stigma](#). These results, which can be blatant or subtle, include:

- A lack of understanding from others
- Bullying, harassment, or physical violence
- Discrimination
- Difficulty finding housing
- Inadequate health insurance when private resources are required
- A decline in confidence; belief that life will not improve or success will not be achieved

Stigma doesn't always come from other people; it can be internalized and therefore experienced as self-generated. Kids suffering from a mental illness may have their own misconceptions about their condition, contributing to low self-esteem, self-doubt, and shame.

How you and your child can combat stigma

Fighting stigma begins with you. Both you and your child should understand the diagnosis and its impact. Your doctor will likely have information sheets and recommend educational materials and websites where you can learn more.

From there, you may want to inform family members, caregivers, teachers, daycare providers, and other people involved with your child about the diagnosis. Keep in mind that your attitude and demeanour when discussing your child's diagnosis often sets the tone for others. Teach your child how to share the diagnosis as well. Remind your child that there is nothing to be ashamed about. Reassure them that you will be there to help them cope with their diagnosis and the reactions of others.

Resources to help

You are not alone! Several organizations are on your side with resources and campaigns that will help you to fight the stigma surrounding mental illness.

[Mental Health Commission of Canada "Opening Minds" Project](#) – Established in 2009, the Opening Minds Project is the largest systematic effort in Canadian history dedicated to reducing the stigma associated with mental illness. This project focuses on four fronts: healthcare providers, the workforce, the media, and youth. Its goal is to create an environment where those suffering from mental illness can feel comfortable seeking help, treatment, and support.

[Canadian Mental Health Association](#) – With a simple premise – STOP (Stereotypes, Trivializes, Offends, and Patronizes) – the Canadian Mental Health Association helps people to recognize attitudes and actions that stigmatize mental illness. If you or your child hear or witness something that stereotypes, trivializes, offends, or patronizes people with mental illness – stop and speak up!

Looking for additional support? Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) can help. You can receive support through a variety of resources. Call your EFAP at **1 800 387-4765** or visit workhealthlife.com.

Local Community Resources – Provinces, cities, hospitals and schools are all good resources for people concerned about mental health and the stigma attached to mental disorders. For example, the [Ontario Hospital Association](#) frequently offers webcasts and other educational programs addressing stigma surrounding mental illness.

Joining any one of these groups, or a mental illness support group near you, is one of the first steps you can take to help kids with mental illness. Make a pledge today to do your part, learn more about mental illness, talk to others about it, and become an advocate for the cause. Empower your child to do the same. Through heightened awareness, education and active efforts, you can help stop the stigma.

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