

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

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 behaviors indicative of a mental disorder or illness. Identified warning signs that warrant professional input and possible help 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- Feeling very sad or withdrawn for more than two weeks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 behavior 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 behavior or personality
- Repeated use of drugs or alcohol

Parents who notice any of these behaviors 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.

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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 behavior. 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. Even though there are a variety of treatment options available, it can be difficult to locate and secure the proper treatment. You can find directories of mental health professionals and treatment facilities through Psychology Today and SAMHSA. You can also call your Employee Assistance Program to speak to an EAP counselor 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 EAP counselor, 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 behavioral 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.