

Emotional and mental wellness in kids: Should I be concerned?

By Charlie Kanzig
Correspondent

As a long-time (now retired) school counselor I was often asked by parents:

“Is this normal?”

“Should I be worried?”

In answer, I would often run through a basic checklist of what they were experiencing with their child to see if any notable “red flags” were waving.

With anxiety and depression being reported among young people at a higher rate than ever, it is very important to help parents understand what to look for when it comes to their children’s emotional/mental/behavioral health.

Mental health concerns in children tend to make parents feel scared and helpless. Let’s face it, a broken arm or a case of acne is much more easy to diagnose and treat than a mood disorder or attention deficit disorder.

Common mental health disorders in youth can include, but are not limited to: anxiety disorders, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), eating disorders, mood disorders (e.g. depression or bipolar disorder), and even schizophrenia.

Warning signs for these and other issues may include:

- Noticeable drop in school performance.
- Mood swings that persist over time and affect relationships.
- Ongoing agitation and combativeness.
- Difficulty concentrating and/or inability to sit still.
- Acts or thoughts of self-harm, including cutting, suicidal comments/thoughts.
- Significant weight loss or gain.
- Sleeping issues – too much or too little.
- Withdrawal from friends and family.
- No longer involved in activities such as sports, youth group, or co-curriculars.
- Extreme levels of risky behavior.
- Use of marijuana, alcohol, or other drugs (which can exacerbate other conditions).

Many young people might exhibit one or more of these warning signs for short periods of time. It’s when the issue persists and the young person is struggling to perform routine tasks (school, physical fitness, family time, social situations) that parents should definitely intervene.

The first step for parents is checking in with your child to see if they can communicate how they are feeling and how they perceive they are doing. Kids don’t understand what’s normal or not, but they can tell you some basic facts:

“I am not sleeping well.”

“My stomach hurts all the time when I am at school around other people.

“I feel sad all the time.”

“I keep getting in trouble at school for being out of my seat.”

“My mind wanders all the time.”

Assure your child that it’s your job as a parent to make sure they are as healthy and well as possible and that you are going to support them. Kids who are struggling often behave in ways that result in negative consequences which then can make relationships between them and their parents challenging.

Next steps for parents can be to check in with others who observe your children on a regular basis, including teachers, school counselors, and coaches. See if they have any

concerns or have noticed changes, (e.g. poor attendance, lack of participation in class, lack of focus, disruptive behavior, sleepiness, low grades).

If concerns rise to the point of needing outside help, school counselors may be able to help make a referral to a professional, which might be the student’s pediatrician. Some conditions are truly medical in nature, so it makes sense to get an examination from a medical practitioner. Based on the results, the doctor may recommend other resources, including referrals to a counselor, psychologist or psychiatrist. These specialists can provide feedback and care to help the student through identifying root causes, teaching coping skills and, in some cases, prescribing and monitoring medication.

It is a serious decision to have a young person begin on medication for emotional/mental health. Parents are encouraged to get comprehensive information about the drug, its potential side effects, and planned duration of its use.

Sometimes young people wind up “self-medicating.” A teenager with anxiety might get introduced to pot and discover it takes the edge off, and before long they are a daily user.

If parents believe their child is using marijuana or other drugs, but aren’t sure, drug testing kits are available



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Advantage Dental serves people of all ages in the Sisters community — from the very young to the elderly. Dr. Traynor sees about 20 of those patients each day, covering all aspects of dental work, including bridges, fillings and dentures. They have a full-time hygienist to conduct cleanings.

Dr. Traynor’s approach to her practice is to listen to her patients to really ascertain their needs and to treat each patient individually. For her, dental practice is about much more than technical skills. She is a strong believer in education and preventative measures that the patient can undertake to promote their own health.

Dr. Traynor brings broad experience to her Sisters practice, having seen a variety of oral pathologies and poor oral health — which helps her to be a well-rounded dentist who can solve problems and help prevent them from developing in the first place.

