



Aig-Imoukhuede
Foundation

The Important Role of Our Community in Children and Teens' Mental Health

Community Mental Health Toolkit



Our community plays a big part in helping children and teenagers grow up with healthy minds. When the adults around young people, like neighbours, mentors, and leaders in our community, create a caring and understanding atmosphere, it makes a real difference in how kids and teens feel.



It is important for us all to learn how to spot the early signs that a child or teen might be struggling with their mental health. We can also encourage them to talk openly about their feelings and help them find the support they need. By working together, we can make sure young people feel safe, strong, and able to ask for help when things get tough. This makes our whole community a healthier and happier place for everyone.

What is Mental Health?

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.

The WHO definition of mental health implies that when we are enjoying good mental health or wellbeing, our minds are healthy enough to handle the normal stresses of life. It means we can:

- Feel good about ourselves.
- Deal with tough times.
- Understand our strengths.
- Learn and work well.
- Be a positive part of our community.

Good mental health is just as important as good physical health. It's shaped by our experiences, our relationships, and the world around us. Everyone's mental health can change over time, and we can all experience good times and bad times.

How Mental Health Challenges Look in Children and Teens

While mental health is important for everyone, kids and teenagers are still growing and developing. This means that when they face mental health challenges, it might look different than it does for adults. Mental health and emotional well-being are really important for how kids and teens grow and learn. When young people struggle with their mental health, it can sometimes affect them reaching typical milestones in their development. Think of reaching developmental milestones like building a tower, step by step. Each milestone is a block that helps the tower grow taller and stronger. When a mental health challenge or strong emotional distress comes along, it can be like something shaking that tower. Think of these milestones as steps children usually take as they get older, like learning to talk, making friends, doing well in school, and becoming more independent.

Here are some ways mental health challenges can sometimes affect these steps:

- **Talking and Communicating:** A child who is very anxious or withdrawn might have a harder time learning new words or expressing themselves clearly.
- **Making Friends and Getting Along:** Feeling very sad, worried, or having trouble controlling anger can make it difficult for children and teens to connect with others and build healthy friendships.
- **Learning and School:** When a young person is struggling with focus, anxiety, or feeling down, it can be much harder for them to pay attention in class, learn new things, and do their best in school. This can sometimes lead to falling behind.
- **Managing Emotions:** Learning to understand and handle feelings like sadness, anger, and frustration is a big part of growing up. Mental health challenges can make these feelings feel overwhelming and harder to manage in healthy ways.
- **Becoming Independent:** As teenagers get older, they usually become more independent. But if they are dealing with severe anxiety or depression, they might find it harder to take on new responsibilities or feel confident doing things on their own.



It's important to remember that development happens at different paces for everyone, and not every delay is a sign of a mental health problem. However, if you notice a child or teen consistently struggling with these kinds of milestones, especially if there are other signs of emotional distress, it's worth considering that their mental well-being might be playing a role. Getting support early can help them get back on track with their development.

Think of it like this: having good mental health helps manage their feelings, focus at school, and make friends. When they struggle, it can be harder for them to do these things.

For example:



Instead of just being sad, a young child might get angry or have more tantrums



A teenager feeling anxious might avoid hanging out with friends



A child might have trouble focusing on their schoolwork



Some children may be inattentive because of worries or unpleasant thoughts.



Some kids and teens might have difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep



Others might have changes in their eating habits or lose interest in food

It's important for us to recognize these signs. They could mean that a young person needs some extra care and support to feel better. Just like we help them when they have a fever or a tummy ache, we need to be there for them when they are having a tough time with their mental health. This may require special attention from trained health workers who can provide them with or link them with the services they need.

Here are some common mental disorders and commonly observed signs and symptoms seen in these disorders:

1. Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD):

- a. Trouble paying attention.
- b. Being very active and in their teenage years, they may appear restless.
- c. They might fidget or squirm
- d. Acting without thinking.

2. Depression:

- a. persistent sadness
- b. loss of interest
- c. changes in appetite and sleep
- d. fatigue,
- e. feelings of worthlessness
- f. suicidal thoughts

3. Anxiety Disorders:

- a. excessive worry
- b. excessive fear
- c. nervousness
- d. restlessness
- e. difficulty concentrating
- f. physical symptoms like rapid heartbeat or sweating.

4. Substance Use Disorders:

- a. Loss of interest
- b. Sleep disturbances
- c. Mood swings
- d. Poor decision making
- e. Unexplained loss or gain of weight
- f. Recurrent respiratory problems
- g. Social isolation
- h. Dwindling school performances
- i. Keeping late-night out

5. Autism:

- a. Trouble connecting with others
- b. Different ways of communicating
- c. Strong interests and repetitive behaviors
- d. They might be very bothered by loud noises, bright lights, or certain textures of food or clothes.
- e. Following routines

It's important to remember that just because someone does one or two of these things doesn't mean they have autism. It's about a pattern of these things.

6. Trauma-Related Disorders

When children and teens experience something very scary or upsetting, it can sometimes lead to ongoing difficulties. Here are some signs to watch out for:

- a. They might have bad dreams or keep thinking about what happened; they might even act out parts of the event in their play.
- b. They might try to stay away from places, people, or things that remind them of what happened. They might also not want to talk about it.
- c. Feeling on edge
- d. Changes in mood or behaviour
- e. Difficulty concentrating

It's important to remember that some of these signs can just be a normal reaction to tough times or sudden changes in a young person's life and might not always mean they have a mental health problem. However, if you notice several of these signs happening, especially after a child or teenager has gone through a difficult experience, it could be a sign that they need some extra support.

If you're worried about a young person, talking to their parents or another adult they trust is a good first step. Trained healthcare workers in our community can provide initial help and support. They can also connect children, adolescents, and their families with mental health professionals who can properly diagnose and provide the right treatment if needed.



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This toolkit was developed by **Dr Fatima Abba Ali**, AIG Public Leaders programme alumna, as part of the Aig-Imoukhuede Foundation's Mental Health Awareness Week campaign, highlighting innovative approaches to community mental health support. Our AIG Public Leaders Programme, facilitated by the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, supports transformational public sector leaders like Dr. Fatima Abba Ali, who are creating practical solutions to Nigeria's healthcare challenges.



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