Chapter 5
Mental Illness, Youth, and Lessons from Residential Treatment Centers

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores mental illness in children and youth. In addition to understanding who is affected, this chapter seeks to express a holistic and comprehensive approach to physical, mental, and spiritual health. Research in each of these areas is discussed and relevant stories are presented from the authors' combined 10 years of experience in various residential treatment centers. Additionally, practical tools for families, educators, and clinicians are discussed. The purpose of this chapter is to increase awareness of the struggles mentally ill children endure and equip families, educators, and clinicians with practical tools for assisting children with mental illnesses.

MENTAL ILLNESS AND YOUTH

The school bell rings. For most students, this sound signals a time to begin the school day or chat with friends between classes. The bell releases students to stretch their legs and scurry to the next class. Administrators might hear the final bell as the start of the work day. However, for some students with mental health issues, the sound of the bell ringing can cause additional anxiety or stress. For a student with early childhood trauma, a simple sound, like a bell, can even initiate a fight or flight response if the sound is associated with their trauma. Many daily sounds and experiences, which the mass of our population consider insignificant, can have significant impact on students dealing with a variety of mental illnesses and issues stemming from early childhood trauma.

In this chapter, we explore the growing concern of mental illness in children, youth, and college students and some holistic, comprehensive approaches that may help others in assisting students or clients struggling with mental illness. In recent years, clinicians are seeing more mental illness among students than in years past (NAMI, 2015). Throughout this chapter, findings from research will be discussed, leading practitioners to greater insights in working with students who have certain forms of mental illness. As parents, clinicians and educators, it is imperative to understand and equip others with some holistic approaches to assisting children and youth as they develop and cope with these issues.

WHO IS AFFECTED AND HOW?

Children and Youth

Depression, anxiety and mental illness has risen among children, adolescents and young adults in recent years. By some estimates, the number of high school and college students meeting the criteria for diagnosis of major depression and/or an anxiety disorder is five to eight times what it was a half century ago (Gray, 2010). Depression and anxiety often have side effects including irritability, restlessness, fatigue, physical ailments, and difficulty concentrating. With these side effects, learning and maturing may become unbearable.

In addition to depression and anxiety, the number of school age children diagnosed with Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Conduct Disorder (CD) and Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD) is rising (CDC, 2015; Hamilton & Armondo, 2008). For instance, the diagnosis of ADHD rose from about 8 percent in 2003 to 11 percent in 2011 (CDC, 2015). In fact, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) suggests one in five youth aged 13-18 has experienced a severe mental disorder (2015).

Children are directly affected by these mental illnesses. Disruptive behavior, outbursts, aggression, lying and stealing are some of the indicators of these disorders (CDC, 2015). As the number of students with these conditions rise, parents, clinicians and educators alike will face a great number of challenges. These challenges can result in a great number of opportunities to assist individuals and institutions seeking to meet the changing needs of our population.

Family and Friends

Family and friends with loved ones experiencing mental illness are often heavily affected. The illnesses of loved ones can be physically and mentally exhausting.

Physical exhaustion may play a role in family and friends' role with children who are mentally ill. Loss of sleep, worry, and efforts to comprehend children's behavior often require energy and can lead family and friends to feel tired and physically weary.

Mental illness in children can have psychological and social effects on family and friends. With 70% of youth in juvenile justice systems having at least one mental health condition and at least 20% living with a serious mental illness, parents and friends often face difficult decisions and can feel hopeless (NAMI, 2015). Serious mental illness costs America $193.2 billion in lost earnings per year, this figure illustrates the monetary difficulties involved with mental health which can often compound the issues of exhaustion surrounding a child or friend with a mental illness (NAMI, 2015).

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