

# Support for those who are most vulnerable



Maintaining optimal mental health and well-being is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood to old age.

## Children

Mental health in childhood means reaching developmental and emotional milestones and learning healthy social skills. Children must also learn how to cope when there are problems or stressful situations. Symptoms of mental disorders change over time as a child grows. Symptoms of mental disorders often start in early childhood, although some may develop during the teenage years.

### What parents, teachers and health professionals can do

Parents know their child best. If you are a parent, talk to your child's health care provider if you have concerns about the way your child behaves at home, in school or with friends. Act early if you have a concern. Parents and health care providers should work closely with a child's teachers, coaches, therapists and other family members to guide the child toward success.<sup>1</sup>

## Adolescents

Adolescence is a time of many physical, mental, emotional and social changes. Teens may face peer pressure to use alcohol, tobacco products and drugs and to have sex. Other challenges can be eating disorders and family/relationship problems. As they become more independent, teens make more of their own choices about friends, interests and school.

### Positive tips for parents of adolescents<sup>2</sup>

- Talk with your teen about concerns and pay attention to any changes in behavior. If he or she seems sad or depressed, ask about suicidal thoughts. (Asking about suicidal thoughts will not cause these thoughts, rather it will show that you care.) Seek professional help if necessary.
- Be honest and direct with your teen when talking about sensitive subjects, such as drugs, drinking, smoking and sex. Talk about and help plan ahead for uncomfortable or difficult situations.
- Meet and get to know your teen's friends. Show an interest in your teen's school life and personal activities. Encourage participation in sports, music, art and volunteer activities.
- Help your teen make healthy choices. Encourage getting enough quality sleep (eight to 10 hours per day) and exercise (at least one hour per day). Encourage your teen to have meals with the family, which promotes overall well-being.
- Respect your teen's opinions and take into account his or her thoughts and feelings. It is important that teens know you are listening. Compliment your teen and celebrate efforts and accomplishments.
- When there is conflict, be clear about goals and expectations. Allow your teen input on how to reach those goals.

### Older adults

Mental health and well-being are as important in older age as at any other time of life. According to the World Health Organization, approximately 15% of adults aged 60 and older suffer from a mental illness, such as depression or dementia. In addition to the stressors that impact all adults, older adults are more likely to experience physical problems, including a significant decline in functional ability and mobility, chronic pain, frailty and other chronic health problems. Bereavement, a drop in socioeconomic status with retirement, isolation and loneliness and even elder abuse may reduce the quality of life of older adults.<sup>3</sup>

#### How to help older adults

Recognizing the signs of a mental or other health problem is easier if you see the older person frequently. If you suspect a problem, you can help him or her visit a health care provider as the first step in getting treatment. But if you don't live close to an elderly friend or family member, a phone call or brief visit may not be the best way to notice important changes in behaviors. Consider trying these tips:

- With the person's permission, contact people who see the person regularly — neighbors, friends or local relatives — and ask them to contact you with any concerns. Ask if you can contact them periodically to get updates.
- If you are able to visit in person, look for safety issues and overall living conditions. Try to determine the older person's mood and general health status.

In some cases, you may be in the position of having to help your family member make difficult health care decisions. If the person is sick, it is important that they assign a power of attorney for health care to allow someone to act on his/her behalf in medical situations.<sup>4</sup>



#### What can you do?

Pay attention to the mental health needs of children, teens and older adults in your family or community.

#### Sources:

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. What Are Childhood Mental Disorders? 2020.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Child Development: Positive Parenting Tips – Teenagers, 2020.
3. World Health Organization. Mental health of older adults, 2017.
4. National Institute on Aging. What Are the Signs that an Aging Parent Needs Help? 2017.

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