

Adolescent's Mental Health Issues

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Introduction

Adolescence is the transition period from childhood to adulthood. World Health Organization (WHO) defines adolescents as people aged 10-19 years. It is a unique and dynamic period where a wide range of physical, emotional, sexual and social changes occur that can put adolescents at risk of developing mental health disorders. Promoting the adolescents' psychological and emotional well-being and protecting them from risk factors that may have detrimental impact on their mental health are of immense importance for their well-being during adolescence and for their potential to have a productive and fulfilling life in adulthood.

Global Burden of Adolescent's mental health Issues

As per WHO(Oct 2019), mental health disorders account for 16% of the global burden of disease and injury among adolescents. Worldwide, depression is the fourth leading cause of disability among 15–19 year olds. Anxiety is the ninth leading cause of disability among adolescents aged 15–19 years and sixth among those aged 10–14 years. Globally, suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents aged 15-19-year. Childhood behavioral disorders (Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and conduct disorder) are the second leading cause of disability in adolescents aged 10–14 year. Around the globe, the prevalence of episodic drinking among 15–19 year-olds is 13.6%. Numerous factors including biological, psychological, behavioural, familial and societal risk factors play a vital role in the occurrence of mental health disorders among the adolescent population.

Common mental health disorders in adolescence

It is absolutely normal for adolescents to experience a wide range of emotions. Mental health disorders, on the contrary, are characterized by persistent symptoms that interfere with regular activities and daily functioning in several domains, such as family life, peer relationships, school performance, biological functions like sleep, appetite etc. Mental health disorders in adolescents can present with a wide range of overlapping symptoms. Adolescent mental health disorder may be roughly divided into Emotional disorders (ie. Depression, anxiety, ocd, post traumatic stress), Behavioural disorders (ie. ADHD, ODD and conduct disorder), Addiction disorders and Psychotic disorders, and Disorders of Sleep, Eating, Elimination and Sexual behaviour.

Intervention strategies for mental health disorders in adolescence

Choosing the right modalities of intervention for an adolescent is of immense importance because treatment choices for mental health disorders vary from person to person. Even two people with the same diagnosis will have a different clinical presentation, side effect profile and goals for treatment. There is no “one size fits all” intervention. The different intervention strategies include medication, psychotherapy, and a combined approach. Various helpful interventions include Lifestyle interventions such as diet, sleep, physical activity, controlled media usage, structured routines, Guided self-help such as mindfulness activities, meditation, or yoga, Skill building (such as Coping skills, problem solving, building self esteem), Addressing family issues, Seeking school support, Close watch and observation (follow ups).

Red flag signs: when to refer to specialist?

Red Flag signs indicate serious underlying psychopathology. A specialist referral should be sought for deteriorating behavior changes such as Persistent ongoing anxiety/fear that gets in the way of daily activities, Persistent low mood (frequent crying, negative talks), Severely withdrawn or isolated, frequent mood swings causing difficulty in interpersonal relationship, highly aggressive, obsessive or antisocial behavior, Recurrent self-harm, Suicidal ideation or attempts, Prolonged school refusal, Risk taking behaviour jeopardizing own or others' safety, Regular substance use, Psychotic symptoms (suspiciousness without any apparent reason, hallucinatory behaviour), Catatonic behavior (posturing, mutism), Extreme difficulty in concentration leading to a significant academic decline, Refusing food, using laxative, inducing vomiting, Drastic changes in sleep pattern (not improving by sleep hygiene), and Significant change in weight over a short period of time.

Take home message

Adolescence is a vulnerable period to develop various mental, emotional and behavioral disorders. It is crucial to recognize the early warning signs of mental health disorders in adolescents. Early identification and intervention is the key to achieve a better long term outcome. Timely referral to a specialist should be done in case there is deterioration of behavior and functioning.

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