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Straight Talk About Mental illness: Information for Siblings



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Summary: About 1 in 5 young people experience a mental illness like anxiety or depression before their 18th birthday. You probably already know someone with mental illness, like a friend, classmate or even family member. When this happens, it can be hard to know what the right thing is to do or say. It can also be confusing if you don't have a good understanding of mental illness.

About 1 in 5 young people experience a mental illness like anxiety or depression before their 18th birthday. Chances are you probably already know someone with mental illness, like a friend, classmate or teammate. Sometimes, it's a brother or sister coping with a mental illness. When this happens, it can be hard to know what the right thing is to do or say. It can also be confusing if you don't have a good understanding of mental illness. This information sheet should help answer some questions for you.

Ways to help your brother or sister

“Do’s”

Some things that could help:

- Do be open and ask questions.
- Do ask if you can help – your support can make a big difference!
- Do be patient.
- Do be respectful.
- Do give your brother or sister space during a difficult time.
- Do talk to people you can trust (friends, family members, a doctor or counselor).
- Do ask your parents to give you information. Secrets can make everyone feel worse.
- Do remember that when people have a mental illness, they don't 'feel like themselves'.

“Don’ts”

These things don't help at all, so:

- Don't tease your sibling (like saying mean things or making fun of your brother or sister) -this really hurts
- Don't assume anything – ask questions if you don't know
- Don't say things like "Just get over it!" Don't think your brother or sister is behaving this way just to get attention
- Don't take outbursts personally
- Don't be afraid to let your parents know if your brother or sister does things that seem scary to you. It is okay to talk openly about your feelings. It may even be important information that your parents don't already have, and may help them get the right help for your brother or sister.

Fast Facts

- Between 10 - 20% of Canadian youth experience a mental illness at some point. It is the most common illness experienced by youth worldwide.
- About 5% of males and 12% of females between the ages of 12 and 19 will have a major depression.
- Stigma around mental illness is the biggest reason why youth don't ask for help. Getting help early can prevent a lot of pain and suffering. Illnesses can also be easier to treat in the early stages.

Questions and Answers (Q & A)?

Many young people have questions when their brother or sister has a mental illness. We hope these answers will help.

Q: How did my brother or sister get a mental illness?

A: There are lots of different reasons why people get a mental illness. It is usually because of a few things happening all at the same time, instead of one single reason. Mental illness does run in families, so if a parent or close relative has a mental illness, there is a greater chance that other members of the family may experience mental illness. Difficult relationships with friends or parents or problems at school (like bullying) can also make things stressful for young people. With lots of stressors adding up, it is easy to see how a young person can become overwhelmed with their lives.

Q: Will I get a mental illness if my brother or sister has one?

A: Although having a brother or sister with a mental illness puts you at higher risk for developing a mental illness, it doesn't mean that you will get one. What it does mean, is that you need to take care of yourself. If you start feeling sad or anxious or have other symptoms that are upsetting, you need to talk to someone you trust to help you figure out what is going on. We all have these feelings sometimes but if they continue for more than two weeks it is important to let someone know.

Q: My sister hurts herself on purpose. Why does she do this?

A: Sometimes people with mental illness are in such pain that they use unhealthy ways to cope. This can mean hurting themselves on purpose. The good news is that with the help and support of family, friends and professionals, they can find new healthier ways to manage their mental illness and difficult feelings. Even though it might be upsetting for you to know your sister hurts herself, try and be patient with her. Talk to someone you trust to discuss how you're feeling about it.

Q: Why did my brother or sister have to go into the hospital?

A: Although it may seem like a pretty scary place to be, sometimes it is the best place for youth if they are not able to keep themselves safe. Having someone you care about in the hospital is never fun, but it can be even more upsetting for the families of young people admitted to a psychiatric unit. Just remember that the kids you may see on the unit are just like your brother or sister. They're also trying to get better to go home to their family and friends. Try and be as supportive as possible to your brother at this time.

Q: Will my brother or sister be different once they are better?

A: We all change and grow over time, especially when we have had something important happen to us, like experiencing a mental illness. Even so, your brother or sister should mostly be the same as before they got sick. You might even notice positive changes. Youth can learn to cope with difficult situations by learning ways to better take care of themselves when things get tough.

Q: How long does mental illness last?

A: Having a mental illness is like having a cold – sometimes you begin to feel better quickly and other times it drags on much longer than you thought it would. Some people experience a mental illness only once in their lives and they never have it again. Others may experience several episodes during their life. It's different for everyone.

About this Document

Written by Michel Poirier (social worker) and the Mental Health Information Team at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO).

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