

Information about Emotional/Behavioural Disorders

Definition

“...a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child’s educational performance:

(A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.

(B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.

(C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.

(D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.

(E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.”

Mental illnesses are medical conditions that disrupt a person’s thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others and daily functioning. Just as diabetes is a disorder of the pancreas, mental illnesses are medical conditions that often result in a diminished capacity for coping with the ordinary demands of life.

Some of the characteristics and behaviors seen in children who have an emotional disturbance include:

- Hyperactivity (short attention span, impulsiveness);
- Aggression or self-injurious behavior (acting out, fighting);
- Withdrawal (not interacting socially with others, excessive fear or anxiety);
- Immaturity (inappropriate crying, temper tantrums, poor coping skills); and
- Learning difficulties (academically performing below grade level).

Children with the most serious emotional disturbances may exhibit distorted thinking, excessive anxiety, bizarre motor acts, and abnormal mood swings.

Many children who do not have emotional disturbance may display some of these same behaviors at various times during their development. However, when children have an emotional disturbance, these behaviors continue over long periods of time. Their behavior signals that they are not coping with their environment or peers.

Causes

No one knows the actual cause or causes of emotional disturbance, although several factors—heredity, brain disorder, diet, stress, and family functioning—have been suggested and vigorously

researched. A great deal of research goes on every day, but to date, researchers have not found that any of these factors are the direct cause of behavioral or emotional problems.

Mental illnesses are not the result of personal weakness, lack of character, or poor upbringing. Mental illnesses are treatable. Most people diagnosed with a serious mental illness can experience relief from their symptoms by actively participating in an individual treatment plan.

Specific Emotional Disturbances

As we mentioned, emotional disturbance is a commonly used umbrella term for a number of different mental disorders. Let's take a brief look at some of the most common of these.

Anxiety Disorders

We all experience anxiety from time to time, but for many people, including children, anxiety can be excessive, persistent, seemingly uncontrollable, and overwhelming. An irrational fear of everyday situations may be involved. This high level of anxiety is a definite warning sign that a person may have an anxiety disorder.

As with the term emotional disturbance, "anxiety disorder" is an umbrella term that actually refers to several distinct disabilities that share the core characteristic of irrational fear: generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social anxiety disorder (also called social phobia), and specific phobias.

According to the Anxiety Disorders Association of America, anxiety disorders are the most common psychiatric illnesses affecting children and adults. They are also highly treatable. Unfortunately, only about 1/3 of those affected receive treatment.

Bipolar Disorder

Also known as manic-depressive illness, bipolar disorder is a serious medical condition that causes dramatic mood swings from overly "high" and/or irritable to sad and hopeless, and then back again, often with periods of normal mood in between. Severe changes in energy and behavior go along with these changes in mood.

For most people with bipolar disorder, these mood swings and related symptoms can be stabilized over time using an approach that combines medication and psychosocial treatment.

Conduct Disorder

Conduct disorder refers to a group of behavioral and emotional problems in youngsters. Children and adolescents with this disorder have great difficulty following rules and behaving in a socially acceptable way. (14) This may include some of the following behaviors:

- aggression to people and animals;
- destruction of property;
- deceitfulness, lying, or stealing; or
- truancy or other serious violations of rules.

Although conduct disorder is one of the most difficult behavior disorders to treat, young people often benefit from a range of services that include:

- training for parents on how to handle child or adolescent behavior;
- family therapy;
- training in problem solving skills for children or adolescents; and
- community-based services that focus on the young person within the context of family and community influences.

Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are characterized by extremes in eating behavior—either too much or too little—or feelings of extreme distress or concern about body weight or shape. Females are much more likely than males to develop an eating disorder.

Anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are the two most common types of eating disorders. Anorexia nervosa is characterized by self-starvation and dramatic loss of weight. Bulimia nervosa involves a cycle of binge eating, then self-induced vomiting or purging. Both of these disorders are potentially life-threatening.

Binge eating is also considered an eating disorder. It's characterized by eating excessive amounts of food, while feeling unable to control how much or what is eaten. Unlike with bulimia, people who binge eat usually do not purge afterward by vomiting or using laxatives.

According to the National Eating Disorders Association:

The most effective and long-lasting treatment for an eating disorder is some form of psychotherapy or counselling, coupled with careful attention to medical and nutritional needs. Some medications have been shown to be helpful. Ideally, whatever treatment is offered should be tailored to the individual, and this will vary according to both the severity of the disorder and the patient's individual problems, needs, and strengths.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Often referred to as OCD, obsessive-compulsive disorder is actually considered an anxiety disorder (which was discussed earlier in this fact sheet). OCD is characterized by recurrent, unwanted thoughts (obsessions) and/or repetitive behaviors (compulsions). Repetitive behaviors (handwashing, counting, checking, or cleaning) are often performed with the hope of preventing obsessive thoughts or making them go away. Performing these so-called "rituals," however, provides only temporary relief, and not performing them markedly increases anxiety.

A large body of scientific evidence suggests that OCD results from a chemical imbalance in the brain. Treatment for most people with OCD should include one or more of the following:

- therapist trained in behavior therapy;
- Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT);
- medication (usually an antidepressant).

Psychotic

Disorders

“Psychotic disorders” is another umbrella term used to refer to severe mental disorders that cause abnormal thinking and perceptions. Two of the main symptoms are delusions and hallucinations. Delusions are false beliefs, such as thinking that someone is plotting against you. Hallucinations are false perceptions, such as hearing, seeing, or feeling something that is not there. Schizophrenia is one type of psychotic disorder. There are others as well.

Treatment for psychotic disorders will differ from person to person, depending on the specific disorder involved. Most are treated with a combination of medications and psychotherapy (a type of counseling).