Mental Health Basics

This resource outlines a few mental health basics. Program Leaders and Staff will find this Tip Sheet helpful for identifying behaviors that may indicate a mental health challenge. This resource is not intended as a diagnostic tool or substitute for treatment. Diagnoses can only be made by qualified medical professionals.

Common Mental Health Disorders in Children/Youth

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD)
- Child Traumatic Stress (CTS)
- Reactive Attachment Disorder

Common Causes of Mental Health Disorders

- Trauma
- Neglect
- Stress
- Brain Injury
- Biology/Genetics

Approximately 1 in 5 youth experience a mental health disorder in early childhood.

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**Signs of Anxiety in Children/Youth**
- Excessive and debilitating worry with negative emotions and fear
- Crying
- Tantrums
- Becomes frozen with fear
- Clinging
- Internalizing symptoms

**Signs of Depression in Children/Youth**
- Loss of interest in things that used to be enjoyable
- Trouble completing simple tasks
- Poor performance in school and/or activities
- Boredom
- Changes in appetite
- Peer relationships suffer
- Regressing (acting younger)
- Trouble sleeping
- Fatigue
- Feelings of worthlessness

**Signs of ODD in Children/Youth**
- Low frustration tolerance
- Lack of adaptability
- Extreme reactions/intensity of emotion
- Uses anger to mask other emotions, has trouble expressing: shame, embarrassment, sadness, guilt, worry, disappointment, hurt

**Caregiver Suggestions for Anxiety**
- Art Activities
  - Allow child to choose their activity
  - Encourage expression of feelings
  - Create structure around time and materials to avoid over-stimulation
  - Praise the youth’s effort and say, “Would you like to tell me about your art work?”

- “72 Phrases to Calm an Anxious Child”

- Create a “Cozy Corner”
  - Include a beanbag or big fluffy pillow
  - Squishy or plush toys
  - Pictures of nature
  - Books

**Caregiver Suggestions for Depression**
- When possible, give activity choices that match the child’s strengths and interests
- Play the “Good At Game”
  - Everyone molds a cup/nest out of clay and fills their cup with trinkets (stones, buttons, coins) that represent the things they are good at
  - Encourage anyone who wants to share; staff should model first

**Caregiver Suggestions for ODD**
- Teach children how to express their emotions using a variety of words
- Set clear behavior expectations and follow through consistently
- Avoid power struggles
- Use “Reflect, Connect, & Redirect” strategies

**Additional Resources:**
- National Institute of Mental Health
  www.nimh.nih.gov
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network
  www.nctsn.org
- Go Zen
  (Anxiety Stress Relief Programs for Kids)
  www.gozen.com/allprograms
- Mental Health America
  Free Mental Health First Aid Certification
  http://mhasd.org/first-aid-programs/