

Your child has a mental disorder. Now what?

Most parents breathe a sigh of relief when the doctor delivers their newborn baby along with the status of excellent health. As the baby grows and develops, through childhood and into adolescence, their child may develop some behaviors indicative of a mental disorder or illness.

A child's mental illness diagnosis can be devastating to parents. While there may be some comfort in the knowledge that they are not alone – about 20 percent of children ages 13 to 18, and 13 percent of children ages 8 to 15, [experience severe mental disorders](#) in a given year – it can be a difficult time and leave parents feeling upset, confused and unsure about the future. If you are among those parents facing this kind of challenge, there are a few things you can do to learn more about mental disorders or illness and what to expect.

What to do when you suspect your child has a mental disorder or illness

Speak with your child's doctor – Your first stop is your doctor's office. Schedule a complete physical exam and share your concerns with the doctor. The physical exam is important to rule out underlying organic or physical issues that could be causing or contributing to your child's behavior. Your child's doctor will find helpful any information you can provide related to what your child has trouble with, the time of day and circumstances surrounding these difficulties, where these issues typically occur, and what you've done thus far in response.

Gather information – Do some research and gather information from reputable organizations like the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#). You can also call your Employee and Family Assistance Program to speak to a counselor for more information.

Learn about your child's specific condition – As parents of a child with a mental illness, your challenge may be time-limited or ongoing, depending on the diagnosis and severity. After gaining a broader understanding about mental illness from professionals such as your doctor and EFAP counselor, ask them for resources where you can learn more about what to expect and how to cope.

Get inspired – While troubling, a diagnosis of mental disorder or illness needs to be put into perspective; not all diagnoses mean severe or permanent impairment and many can be successfully treated or managed with medication and/or therapy. History provides numerous examples of individuals who have made outstanding contributions who have also been affected by mental illness, including Abraham Lincoln, Ludwig van Beethoven, Leo Tolstoy, Winston Churchill, and Michelangelo.

Find a support group – As the parent of a child with a mental illness, you may benefit greatly from the support of others. Join a support group, either in person or online, and participate wholeheartedly. Knowing that you're not alone is comforting and empowering.

Though raising a child with a mental illness is challenging, with the right support systems in place, your journey will be a much easier one.

Kids with mental illness: fighting the stigma

For parents raising a child with a mental illness, sometimes the experience of stigma and ignorant reactions of others can be harder to deal with than the condition itself.

According to the World Health Organization, stigma, discrimination and neglect prevent care and treatment from reaching people with mental illnesses. If you think about it, this makes perfect sense: if you were suffering from a condition that

would likely subject you to ridicule, discrimination, rejection and possible isolation, would you admit it – even to those who could potentially help you?

The [Mayo Clinic](#) details some of the harmful effects of stigma. The results, which can be blatant or subtle, include:

- A lack of understanding by others
- Bullying, harassment, or physical violence
- Discrimination
- Difficulty finding housing
- Inadequate health insurance
- A belief that you cannot improve your situation or will never be successful in life

Stigma doesn't always come from other people; it can be internalized and therefore experienced as self-generated. Kids suffering from a mental illness may have their own misconceptions about their condition, contributing to low self-esteem, self-doubt, and shame.

Are you ready to fight back on your child's behalf? If so, you're not alone. Several organizations are on your side, with resources and campaigns to address mental illness stigma.

[StigmaBusters](#) – The National Alliance on Mental Illness has a network of advocates, known as StigmaBusters, who battle inaccurate and hurtful representations of mental illness. StigmaBusters' goals are to protest prejudice and stereotypes in the media and advocate for and highlight accurate information about and portrayals of those affected.

[Stand Up for Mental Health](#) – The Stand Up for Mental Health campaign is the brainchild of HealthyPlace.com which bills itself as "America's Mental Health Channel." Stand Up for Mental Health aims to stop the stigma, stop the hate, and stop the culture of intolerance.

Local Community Resources – States, cities, hospitals and schools can all be good resources for people concerned about mental health. For example, Sacramento County runs a website dedicated to stopping the stigma associated with mental illness. It's aptly named <http://www.stopstigmatasacramento.org/>.

Joining any one of these groups is one of the first steps you can take to help kids with mental illness. Make a pledge today to do your part, learn more about mental illness, talk to others about it, and become an advocate for the cause.

Get involved with Mental Illness Awareness Week, October 6-12. If you're raising a child with a mental disorder or illness, your journey has just begun. You can become much more productive by supporting efforts to increase awareness and efforts to stop the stigma.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee Assistance and Work/Life Program can help through a variety of resources. Call your Employee and Family Assistance and Work/Life Program at **1 866 468-9461**. Visit shepellfgi.com.