When Should I Seek Professional Help for My Child?

When does distress turn into something you need to take more seriously and seek specialized help?

Everyone experiences distress from time to time. Children and teenagers can go through spells where they seem very upset. However, people who struggle with a mental health disorder tend to experience distress more regularly and more strongly. When should you think about going to a professional for guidance? Below are a few characteristics that can help in figuring out the extent of your child/adolescent’s distress*. Always seek immediate help if a child engages in unsafe behavior or talks about wanting to hurt him or herself or someone else.

### Typical Distress

The upsetting symptoms should last a few hours or a few days.

- After a breakup your adolescent cries for a few days
- Complaining of a stomachache after eating too much ice cream
- Has a temper tantrum when they are tired

Difficulties take place in one setting (school, home, friends, community).

- Before a test/presentation you get the feeling of butterflies in your stomach (school)
- Misbehaves at home but follows the rules at school

Generally, your child is doing well across most settings (such as school, friends, family relationships, work).

- Feels betrayed by a friend; however, continues to hang out with the family, school performance stays the same
- Is usually a good student but experienced a recent decline in grades due to a change in teachers
- Has a few friends in the neighborhood and one friend at school but hangs out with family

### Distress that may require professional guidance

#### PERSISTENT
The upsetting symptoms last longer. Generally, we think about more days than not for 2 weeks or longer.

- Crying regularly without knowing why
- Complaining about frequent stomach aches or headaches with no known medical cause that keep them from attending school
- Has frequent tantrums or are intensely irritable much of the time
- If your child is (consistently) not meeting the milestones for his or her age, or you feel there could be a problem with their development

#### PERVERSIVE
Difficulties take place in more than one setting (school, home, friends, community).

- After a “poor” grade on exam, feeling worthless or hopeless all the time (school, home, friends) and not engaging in regular activities
- Doesn’t like to eat at parties and at school for fear of gaining weight
- Throws severe tantrums at home and at preschool

#### INTERFERES WITH NORMAL FUNCTIONING
Symptoms get in the way of everyday life (such as school, friends, family relationships, work).

- Is spending more and more time alone, and avoid social activities with friends or family
- Has lost interest in activities that they used to enjoy doing
- Is not interested in playing with other children or has difficulty making friends
- Is experimenting/engaging in alcohol or drug use and is not engaged with family/friends or shows a decrease in school or job achievement

*Note this is not intended to replace a specialized medical assessment
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References

Website: www.nimh.nih.gov
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National Institutes of Health
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