

To get us thinking about how parents' emotional problems can affect teenagers, let's consider Noah and his family:

Noah is a high school junior who just took his first psychology class. He really liked the class and wonders if he might like to be a counselor one day. He learned a lot about mental illness, including common symptoms, causes, and treatment options.

Leslie, Noah's mother, is a stay-at-home mom who has always supported Noah and his younger brother. Although she has a part-time business in her home and volunteers at church, Leslie has always found time to attend her boys' games, concerts, and other activities.

Lately, however, Leslie has let her business slip, and she quit her volunteer work. She spends a lot of time alone in her bedroom or lying on the couch watching television. When she does go to one of Noah's school events, she looks like she just got out of bed and doesn't talk to any of the other parents. Noah also hears her crying late at night.

Noah is worried about his mom and doesn't know what to do. He remembers from his psychology class that many people experience clinical depression, and that depression can involve sleeping a lot, crying often, and withdrawing from other people and regular activities. Although Noah made excuses for his mom for a long time ("my mom can't come to my game because she has to work"), he now wonders if his mom is experiencing severe depression.

Noah is correct—Leslie is experiencing many signs of major depression.

Some kids, like Noah, may sense for quite a while that "something isn't right" at home but don't know exactly what is going on. Being told the diagnosis and having a name for the problem can be really helpful, because then you know that someone else understands your parent (and likely wants to help).

Kinds of Mental Illness

There are many different kinds of mental illness, but all of them involve problems with how the brain works. The brain is very complex and has many important jobs, which we will talk about in a later chapter. When problems develop in how the brain functions, a person can have difficulties with their feelings, behavior, thoughts, and perception. Let's look at these areas one at a time:

■ Feelings

- Having a wide range of feelings is normal. Everyone has emotions, such as happiness, fear, sadness, anger, and jealousy.
 - Mental illness can involve very strong feelings that last for a long time. People can be overwhelmed by their intense emotions and have a hard time getting along with others and completing everyday tasks.

■ Behavior

- Behavior is simply how we act and interact with other people.
 - People with a mental illness can act in ways that are confusing and unusual, such as staying in bed for long periods of time, having angry outbursts, or saying things that don't make sense.

■ Thoughts

- Well, this is a pretty obvious one! You are always thinking about something!
 - For people with mental illness, thinking can be very slow or very fast. People may have unusual beliefs—for example, someone with a mental illness may think that he/she is a famous person. Others may develop very negative thoughts about themselves, or they may worry that people are out to get them.

■ Perception

- Perception refers to what you see, hear, feel, smell, and taste.
 - Someone with a mental illness may sense things that other people do not, such as hearing voices or seeing things others do not see.

When these problems are present for a considerable amount of time and interfere with the person's ability to function in daily life, a mental illness (or "disorder") may be present. Mental illness is much more than just having a "bad day" or having trouble at work occasionally. Everybody gets down, has unpleasant thoughts, and acts in ways they later regret. That's normal. Mental illness may be present when the problems are really intense, last a long time, and make it difficult to participate in everyday life (work, school, family, friendships, church, etc.).

Although some days it may feel like your family is all alone in dealing with mental illness, it can be helpful to know that mental illness is actually quite common.

Lesson Number 1

You are not alone!

In fact, almost half of all Americans experience some mental illness during their lifetimes—and one in four families have a loved one dealing with a serious mental illness (major depression, schizophrenia, or bipolar disorder). That's a lot of people.

Just to get an idea of what this number means, look around your classroom tomorrow at school. If you have about 30 students in the room, odds are good that six other kids in class also have a family member who has a serious mental illness. Did you know that mental illness is so common? Remember, you're definitely not alone.

