

How to Support Children with Mental Illness

Education Bureau 2022

Introduction

Parents always wish to provide their children with a suitable living and learning environment in order to help them develop their potential. With early identification and support, the conditions of children and adolescents who are suspected to have mental health needs can be prevented from getting worse, so that the impact of the illness on their lives can be reduced and there would be higher chance for recovery.

What is “Mental Illness” (MI)?

MI is a health condition. The symptoms displayed by students with MI include abnormal cognition, thinking, emotion, perception, behaviour or physical functioning. MI will affect students' various aspects of life, including learning, social or work performance. In general, patients with MI may have precursors or symptoms before the onset of mental illness, such as persistent low mood, poor appetite, long-term insomnia, neglect of self-care, making rash or unrealistic decisions, etc. There are different types of MI. Those commonly seen in children and adolescents include Anxiety Disorders, Depressive Disorders and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Among them, there are more severe types, such as Psychotic Disorders and Bipolar Affective Disorder, and the symptoms are more persistent and may generate wider impact. Other types of MI include Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Tourette Syndrome and Eating Disorders, etc.

Children and adolescents with MI are more likely to have the following difficulties in adjustment due to their health condition and side effects of the medication:

➤ **Mental Conditions:** easily feel fatigue, sleepy, have blurred vision, feel

dizzy, become tardy, get agitated, etc.

- **Communication and Social Relationships:** being sluggish, silent and highly sensitive to the reactions of others, etc. These changes may affect their communication and interaction with others, and others may easily misunderstand their behaviours and attitudes
- **Cognitive Functioning:** their learning progress may be hindered due to difficulties in processing speed, attention, planning and organisation, verbal fluency, working memory, verbal learning/memory, visual memory, etc.

Roles of Parents

I suspect that my child may have MI...

- Seek psychiatric consultation and assessment for my child as early as possible, so that appropriate treatment and support training can be arranged for him/her
- Initiate contact with the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), class teacher, the School Guidance Team or school social workers for arrangement of appropriate support services

My child is assessed to have MI...

- Cooperate with healthcare professionals in undertaking the suggested treatment plan to make sure that my child receives the treatments he/she needs and takes medication as prescribed (if applicable)
- Take the initiative to provide the school with the information about my child's special educational needs as early as possible, including passing his/her psychiatric report to the school for arrangement of appropriate support services
- Maintain communication with the School Guidance Team or school social workers, SENCO, Student Support Team, class teacher and subject teachers to understand my child's learning and adjustment condition; and jointly discuss appropriate support strategies if necessary
- Adjust your requirements and expectations towards your child based on his/her abilities

- Make use of the following communication skills to help your child regulate his/her emotions:
 - Listen patiently, encourage your child to express his/her emotions, put yourself in his/her position to understand his/her feelings and thoughts and accept them, so that your child can feel that you are his/her companion
 - Explore and affirm your child's strengths, praise his/her progress, and help him/her build a positive self-concept
 - Teach your child how to deal with emotions appropriately, e.g., take deep breaths, do relaxation exercises, etc.

- Make suitable arrangements at home to establish good living habits, e.g.:
 - Encourage your child to adopt a healthy lifestyle. Eat a balanced diet every day, have enough rest/sleep, and regularly participate in relaxing activities or exercises
 - Work out a realistic and practicable timetable with your child so that learning activities and leisure activities can be carried out alternately to relieve his/her nervousness
 - Help your child focus and reduce stress. You can help break down tasks into smaller steps so that he/she can complete them one by one
 - Encourage your child to engage in social interactions. Encourage him/her to participate in healthy leisure activities with friends or family members to help him/her keep in touch with others and get social support

For further information on supporting children with specific type of MI, parents may refer to the “Caring for Children’s Mental Health” Parent Education Series – Pamphlets” (uploaded on the websites “SENSE” and “Mental Health@School” of the Education Bureau) (see back page for the links).

Support Measures and Strategies

In general, students with mental health problems attend normal schools. They need healthcare professionals (including psychiatrists, clinical psychologists or medical social workers) for diagnosis, treatment and

follow-up. Schools play complementary role to support these students in school settings. They will provide the following support in accordance with the needs of the students:

➤ The symptoms of MI vary. Some are mild and transient, while others are severe and persistent. If students have difficulties in adjustment due to their illness, which even affects their recovery, support and adjustment arrangements can be provided as needed to help them reduce stress, rebuild self-confidence and enhance their coping skills, thus overcoming their transient difficulties. For example, appropriate and effective support strategies can be formulated in the following three aspects:

1. Helping Students Rebuild School Life with Structures and Routines

Maintain a routine for school can help students with MI rebuild a healthy and regular lifestyle and tempo, and their positive experience in school is also conducive to facilitate their recovery.

2. Helping Students Get Along and Communicate with Teachers and Peers

At the early stage of recovery, the students' stress should be reduced as far as possible while the requirements on them can be gradually adjusted according to their progress of recovery and school adjustment so as to help them rebuild their school life. If the situation allows, the school may consider discussing relevant arrangements with students to increase their participation and sense of involvement.

3. Engaging the Students in Learning Activities

Cultivate a caring and friendly learning environment for students. Make them feel safe and being cared for, and help them adjust to school life as soon as possible; understand the cognitive difficulties of students brought by their illness, help them participate in class by adjusting teaching strategies, and at the same time, make adjustments based on their needs.

Useful Websites and Telephone Numbers for Enquiry

Education Bureau

<http://www.edb.gov.hk/en>

Hong Kong Regional Education Office	2863 4646
Kowloon Regional Education Office	3698 4108
New Territories East Regional Education Office	2639 4876
New Territories West Regional Education Office	2437 7272
General Enquiries on Special Education	3698 3957
Educational Psychology Service Section	
➤ Hong Kong	3695 0486
➤ Kowloon	3698 4321/ 3907 0949
➤ New Territories East	3547 2228
➤ New Territories West	2437 7270

“Mental Health@School” Student Mental Health Information Online

<https://mentalhealth.edb.gov.hk/en>

“SENSE” Integrated Education and Special Education Information Online

<https://sense.edb.gov.hk/en/index.html>

- Information about supporting students with MI

<https://sense.edb.gov.hk/en/types-of-special-educational-needs/mental-illness/introduction.html>

- “Parent Guide on the Whole School Approach to Integrated Education”

<https://sense.edb.gov.hk/uploads/page/integrated-education/guidelines/ieparentguide.pdf>

- Operation Guide on the “Whole School Approach to Integrated Education”

https://sense.edb.gov.hk/uploads/page/integrated_education/landing/ie_guide_en.pdf

Department of Health

Child Assessment Service

<https://www.dhcas.gov.hk/en/>

Student Health Service

<https://www.studenthealth.gov.hk/eindex.html>

Social Welfare Department

<https://www.swd.gov.hk/en/index>