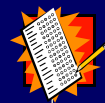




## Module 2

### *Mental Health Needs of Youth in Foster Care*



## Test Your Knowledge

- Trauma that a child in foster care experiences is due to his or her life stressors prior to entering foster care. **(T/F)**
- All children and adolescents in foster care should be referred for more intensive mental health services. **(T/F)**
- Children in foster care are at the same risk of mental health problems as other children in high-risk family situations, such as those living in poverty. **(T/F)**
- Before addressing mental health concerns, it is important to give children time to adjust to their new foster home placement **(T/F)**.



## Learning Objectives

Participants will be able to:

- Understand the affect of stress and trauma on children and adolescents in foster care.
- Identify at least five signs and symptoms of mental health problems in children and adolescents.
- Name three mental health disorders that are prevalent among children and adolescents in foster care.
- Understand when and how to seek mental health services for children and adolescents in foster care.



## Brainstorming Activity

- Brainstorm the different types of trauma and stresses that may be experienced by children and adolescents in foster care.

## Types of Trauma Experienced by Youth in Foster Care

- Traumatic life events that led to their foster care placement (e.g., domestic violence, drug abuse, physical or sexual abuse, neglect or abandonment).
- Placement in the child welfare system (e.g., separation from one or both parents, unpredictable contact with biological families, multiple placements, lack of control over their own lives, adjustment issues).
- Transitions across families, schools, neighborhoods and communities.

## Effects of Trauma and Stress on Youth

- Reduced sense of safety and trust
- Use of survival strategies that may be maladaptive in school or home settings. (e.g., survival strategy of self-reliance → decrease in help-seeking tendencies → exacerbates difficulties in school and in well-being).
- Poor or nonexistent coping strategies when faced with stressful situations.

\*\*\* The accumulation of such difficult life experiences (combined with a lack of adaptive coping strategies) can contribute to the development of a mental health disorder.

## Mental Health Needs of Children and Adolescents in Foster Care

- Children and adolescents in foster care are at a much greater risk of mental health problems than the general population (even when compared to other youth in high risk family situations).
- If left untreated, mental health problems can escalate and lead to negative developmental and school outcomes.
- Thus, it is important to be aware of the important warning signs and symptoms of mental health problems!



## Brainstorming Activity

- Take five minutes to make a list of ways in which mental health problems may manifest as symptoms among children and adolescents in foster care.

## Research on Mental Health Disorders in Children and Adolescents in Foster Care

- 54% of children/adolescents in foster care had at least 1 mental health problem in the past year (compared to 22% of general population)
- 25% of children/adolescents in foster care exhibited Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) within the past year – *twice the rate of U.S. war veterans!*
- Other common mental health disorders include: Depression, Anxiety, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

## Warning Signs and Symptoms of Mental Health Issues

- Warning signs can include:
  - Troubling thoughts and feelings
  - Changes in behavior
  - Loss of interest in activities he/she enjoyed
  - Change in school functioning
  - Engaging in problem behaviors
- These signs and symptoms can point to the existence of a mental health disorder.

## Thoughts & Feelings that Can Signify a Mental Health Issue

- Feeling sad and hopeless for no reason, and these feelings do not go away
- Very angry most of the time and crying a lot or overreacting to things
- Frequent feelings of being worthless or guilty
- Anxious or worried often
- Unable to get over a loss or death of someone important
- Extremely fearful or having unexplained fears
- Overly concerned about physical problems or physical appearance
- Frightened that his/her mind either is controlled or is out of control

## Behavior Changes That Can Signify a Mental Health Issue

- Declining school performance
- Loss of interest in fun activities
- Avoid friends & family
- Isolation
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Changes in eating patterns
- Daydreaming
- Unable to complete tasks
- Decline in academic performance
- Feeling of being overwhelmed
- Hearing voices
- Suicidal thoughts or feelings

## Behavior Changes That Can Signify a Mental Health Issue (Cont'd)

- Poor concentration
- Indecisiveness
- Hyperactive
- Worry about being harmed or hurting others
- Racing Thoughts
- Wash/clean things and perform certain routines
- Persistent nightmares
- Racing thoughts

## Problem Behaviors That Can Signify a Mental Health Issue

- Alcohol consumption
- Substance Use
- Dieting
- Excessive exercise
- Engaging in life threatening activities
- Fire setting
- Hurting animals
- Breaking the law
- Violating rights of others



## Case Study: Marissa

Marissa is a new 7th grade student at a local middle school and has been in the foster care system for approximately 1 year. She was placed in foster care because she was physically abused by her step-father and neglected by her mother who is addicted to drugs. Marissa can be even-tempered at times, but most of the time she is quick to anger and often has outbursts where she will yell at other and then burst into tears. Marissa often gets into trouble at school for talking back to teachers and getting into arguments with other students in her class. She is also doing poorly in school because she reports being unable to sit still and concentrate on her work. Marissa has been labeled a "trouble-maker" and was suspended three times during the year. She responds angrily to any kind of correction or criticism from adults or peers and begins to cry when she gets angry. Marissa reports feeling like she needs to establish her reputation in her new school and often seeks out physical fights with girls who make any negative comments about her. During elementary school, Marissa was reportedly a good student who rarely got in trouble. Her irritability and aggression seems to have started when she was transitioned into foster care.

## What are Marissa's Signs & Symptoms?

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## What to Do After Identifying Signs & Symptoms? Refer to a MH Professional


- When a child or adolescent is displaying warning signs of a mental health disorder, it is important that they be connected to a mental health professional so that the problems do not continue to worsen.
- Even children and adolescents who do not meet criteria for a "disorder" can benefit from prevention activities and mental health promotion.
- School mental health can provide treatment for youth in need, as well as prevention activities and mental health promotion for youth in less distress.



## Re-Test Your Knowledge

- 1) Trauma that a child in foster care experiences is due to his or her life stressors prior to entering foster care. (**False**)


Explanation: Children also experience trauma associated with their foster care placements and/or transitions (e.g., separation from one or both parents, unpredictable contact with biological families, multiple placements, lack of control over their own lives, adjustment issues).



## Re-Test Your Knowledge (cont'd)

2) All children and adolescents in foster care should be referred for more intensive mental health services. **(False)**.


Explanation: While there are many youth in foster care who do exhibit mental health problems, there are also many youth who are adjusting well. While most children can benefit from prevention and mental health promotion, more intensive services should be reserved for youth exhibiting more serious mental health problems.



## Re-Test Your Knowledge (cont'd)

3) Children in foster care are at the same risk of mental health problems as other children in high-risk family situations, such as living in poverty. **(False)**


Explanation: Children in foster care are at a *much greater* risk of mental health problems than the general population (even when compared to other youth in high-risk family situations).



## Re-Test Your Knowledge (cont'd)


4) Before addressing mental health concerns, it is important to give children time to adjust to their new foster home placement **(False)**.

Explanation: If left untreated, mental health problems can escalate and lead to negative developmental outcomes. When a child or adolescent is displaying warning signs of a mental health disorder, it is important that they be connected to a mental health professional so that the problems do not continue to worsen.



## Moving Towards Action


- Brainstorm how you might be able to put the information you learned today into action.



## Moving Towards Action (Cont'd)

Examples:

- I can share the information I learned today on warning signs of mental health problems with caregivers, teachers, or administrators.
- I can review the warning signs before I meet with a family so that I can better help the family determine if there is a need for a mental health referral.
- I can think about my current caseload and consider which warning signs of mental health problems may apply to the individuals that I am serving
- I can share this information with youth that I work with so that they can also be aware of the warning signs in themselves and in their peers.



## Practical Resources

- Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit**  
[http://www.nctsn.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=ctr\\_cwtool](http://www.nctsn.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=ctr_cwtool)  
 The Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit is designed to teach basic knowledge, skills, and values about working with children who are in the child welfare system and who have experienced traumatic stress.
- Casey Family Programs:**  
<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/MentalHealthReview.htm>  
 Published in 2006, this review surveys major findings gleaned from studies about the evidence base for mental health care and about related class action law suits. The review also outlines steps that will improve the mental health services delivered to children and youth in foster care.

## Practical Resources (cont'd)

### Casey Family Programs (cont'd)

<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/CFPYAS2006.htm>

Published in 2006, the Casey Family Programs Young Adult Survey examines the quality of life reported by youth formerly in foster care. The survey covers several areas, including mental health, education, employment, life skills, living situation, physical health/substance abuse, relationships/social support, and criminal justice system involvement.

<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/EndlessDreams.htm>

The Endless Dreams video showcases the great potential of schools to support and enrich the lives of youth in care. The video features a young woman in care and describes how life in foster care impacts her education. Casey Family Programs offers this 15 minute video upon request at no charge. For a copy of the video, please send e-mail to [contactus@casey.org](mailto:contactus@casey.org).

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