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### How to Improve the Mental Health of your Children

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# HOW TO IMPROVE THE MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUR CHILDREN

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BY ALINA BALTAZAR

## THE TEXTS

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Philippians 4:6-7

“Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” John 14:27

“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” Matthew 11:28-30

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this seminar is to review the mental health challenges children, and adolescents are facing in modern times and what parents can do about it. This seminar is from a Biblical perspective and has an application of the Health Message.

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## **MATERIALS NEEDED**

Laptop, Power Point software, and a projector. This seminar will probably take around 1.5 hours.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Parents have so much to worry about these days. It is good you are concerned about your child's mental health. In addition, teachers and youth pastors are increasingly needing to address the mental health challenges of children in their work. Unfortunately, mental illness is increasing in our children/adolescents. In fact, 10-20% of children and adolescents have a diagnosable mental illness (CDC, 2019a). Half of all mental illness will begin before the age of 14 and 75% by the age of 25. Suicide rates have been increasing for more than a decade. You may think that Seventh-day Adventists are protected from these problems. However, in a recent survey of SDA college students, 24% (1 in 4) were experiencing moderate to severe depression, and 19% (1 in 5) were experiencing moderate to severe anxiety (Baltazar, Dessie, & Smith, 2019).

This may seem overwhelming, but mental illness is preventable, treatable, and manageable. It is best to catch it early and get intervention that fits the problem. There are multiple ways mental health can be improved. The most common methods are lifestyle changes, social support, counseling, and medication if needed. The biggest issue is to get past the stigma. The stigma is real and makes it hard to get the help your child needs. A majority of individuals dealing with mental health challenges don't get treatment. Parents play a vital role in recognizing when there is a problem, getting help, and helping in the recovery process.

This seminar will review the mental health challenges our children/adolescents are facing, why rates are increasing, the harm of social media, how the health message can be used to address these concerns, what role you play as a parent, and where to get help. There will be discussion and application exercises in order to help you better understand and apply what you are learning in this seminar. Where to find available resources will be shared at the end.

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## **DISCUSSION QUESTION**

What are your fears and concerns regarding mental health in children/adolescents (you don't need to share personal information)? Discuss in a group and then with the class.

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## **SUICIDE**

After holding steady or decreasing in the years 2000-2007, suicide rates have increased in children and young adults by 56% since then. Suicide is the second leading

cause of death for children and young adults aged 10-24 (CDC, 2019b). One out of five teens has thought about suicide.

Youth are experiencing more isolation and hopelessness than in previous generations. The role of social media will be explored in-depth later. Hopelessness is at the heart of suicide. Multiple issues trigger hopelessness in youth. Though the great recession is no longer an immediate crisis, our youth have concerns about their economic future and their ability to be financially independent and raise a family. Substance use is considered a risk factor that can trigger depression and anxiety and lower inhibition to commit suicide.

These issues are magnified by what is going on in the adolescent brain. Adolescents experience more intense emotions, have greater difficulty managing their emotions, are more impulsive, and have a harder time figuring out how to address their problems than adults (Pandey & Dwivedi, 2012).

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## DISCUSSION QUESTION

Are these statistics scary to you, or do you think it won't happen to your child?

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## DEPRESSION

Depression is a very common mental illness in all ages and is estimated to occur in 1 out of 5 teen girls per year and 7% of teens boys, according to Geiger and Davis (2019) of the Pew Research Center. These rates have increased about 60% (66% for girls and 44% in boys) over the past ten years (2007-2017). Girls are more likely to be diagnosed with depression than boys. Though boys who are depressed are more likely to show anger, and girls are more likely to exhibit sadness (Khesht-Masjedi, Shokrgozar, Abdollahi, Golshahi, & Sharif-Ghaziani, 2017). A boy's display of anger is often labeled as a behavioral problem, not a mental health problem. A vast majority of children/teens (60%) don't receive any treatment, though girls are more likely to get help than boys.

Experts cite academic and social pressures as contributing to these trends (Geiger & Davis, 2019). With an increasing expectation to complete a college degree in order to find financial security and the cost of college outpacing inflation, there is an expectation to get good grades (as reported by 60% of teens) in order to get into a good college and be able to secure scholarships.

This disorder can be frightening for parents due to its close relationship with suicide. It is often hard to know if the symptoms of depression are a phase or a serious problem that needs treatment. Look out for emotional and behavioral changes. If you aren't sure, tell your child about your observations and find out if it is more of a phase or something

serious. Don't be afraid to get professional help, even if your child is resistant. There are concerns about suicidal ideation increasing in teens who take anti-depressant medication. Though it is something to watch for, anti-depressants can be very helpful in decreasing depression symptoms.

## ANXIETY

Though not as common as depression, anxiety starts earlier in young children due to the nature of their vulnerability in society and brain development. Anxiety takes many forms in children and teens (American Psychiatric Association, 2013):

- Separation anxiety – Excessive fear of being separated from the primary caregiver
- Phobias – Fear of a specific object or situation
- Social anxiety – Fear of certain social situations in which the child will be exposed to possible scrutiny by others
- Panic attacks – An abrupt surge of intense fear and intense physical discomfort that peaks within minutes.
- Generalized anxiety – Excessive worry that affects the body and ability to function.

These disorders can be frustrating for parents, but very real for children. It may be tempting to minimize or push your children to “get over” their fears. Exposure to what we are afraid of then finding out it isn't so bad does help, but it should be done in a gentle, understanding way.

Development also helps to address many childhood fears. Separation anxiety is very normal for children aged 9 months to 2 years. They don't completely understand that you will be back like you say you will. That comes in time. Staying until they feel more comfortable is the best approach for this situation. This may take time, but it decreases distress in your child. Children in the preschool years have very imaginative minds where any number of scary situations seem real. Eventually, they realize monsters don't exist, but until then, night lights and staying nearby while they fall asleep are good ways for parents to help manage these fears. Some children are more naturally shy and fearful of others. Being involved in extra-curricular activities your child enjoys can help address social fears. Still, your child should not be pushed too much because it could actually worsen their fears if they are ridiculed.

## ADHD

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder is one of the most common mental disorders affecting children. This condition can continue into adulthood. It affects 8.4% of children and 2.5% of adults. The symptoms are indicated in the name of the disorder;

inattention (difficulty maintaining focus), hyperactivity (excessive movement that isn't appropriate for the setting), and impulsivity (hasty actions that occur without thinking that lead to unintended consequences) (Parekh, 2017). Children can have more problems with inattention or hyperactivity or both.

Due to development, all children have difficulty paying attention and sitting still, but children with this condition have greater difficulties compared to their peers, and it hurts their functioning. The disorder is typically recognized when children start school and aren't able to sit still and concentrate on and complete their school work. It is a brain disorder where there is less activity in the part of the brain that manages these types of behaviors. ADHD has a tendency to run in families (Parekh, 2017).

This disorder is manageable, and the symptoms can improve with time. Children with this disorder need to learn organization and time management skills. It helps to structure the classroom and the home in such a way to decrease distractions and allow greater amounts of physical activity. Consistent and immediate rewards can increase motivation and concentration. Counseling may address the emotional side of having this disorder for the child and family. Behaviorally oriented therapy can specialize in behavioral adaptations that make the symptoms more manageable at home and school. Medications can address many of the symptoms associated with ADHD but may decrease appetite, make it more difficult to fall asleep, significantly reduce activity, and can cause depression.

Some research has found changing diet to decrease symptoms (Harvard Medical School, 2009). Avoiding certain artificial preservatives and food dyes, consuming more omega-3 fats, and taking specific vitamins and minerals can help some children. Though poor diet has not been found to be the cause nor a healthy diet a cure for ADHD except in a small percent of cases.

## EATING DISORDERS

Eating disorders are another scary and frustrating disorder for parents to manage. Food is often a battleground between parents and children from day one. Some children are just pickier than others. Other children are so active they don't want to sit down to eat. Children also may get great joy out of eating, thus turn to food as a way to cope with life's stresses. As children reach the teen years and start worrying about what others think of them, there are increasing concerns about appearance and maintaining a slimmer figure. These tendencies can develop into disorders that can be deadly.

Anorexia nervosa is the most deadly of these disorders with up to 20% of those who don't get treatment dying from the disorder. Anorexia is characterized as severely restricting food intake, having an intense fear of gaining weight, and having a distorted view of body size and weight (APA, 2013). This leads to severe weight loss and malnutrition that harms the body. Individuals with this disorder may also binge then purge out of fear or guilt so

may be closer to a normal weight. Individuals with this disorder need a team approach of a doctor, nutritionist, and counselor who specializes in treating anorexia. Medication can help, but should not be the only treatment.

Those with bulimia nervosa are out of control with binge eating, then purge or use laxatives to lose weight they gained. There is an exaggerated view of themselves based on his/her size (APA, 2013). The purging and use of laxatives can cause permanent damage to the body. Healthy eating and working through underlying emotional issues is the best approach in treating this disorder. Medication can also be helpful.

Binge-eating is now recognized as a disorder. Children/teens are diagnosed with this disorder who binge out of control and are embarrassed about their behavior but don't purge or use laxatives to eliminate the food quickly (APA, 2013). These children/teens are likely to gain an excessive amount of weight and are drawn to sweet or salty foods to binge on thus this disorder is harmful to the body. Medication to address the compulsiveness and underlying emotional disorder and/or counseling to improve coping without food are the best treatment options.

## AUTISM

Autism spectrum disorder has a major impact on families. Those with autism have two main characteristics: deficits in social communication and interactions and restricted, repetitive behavior, interests, or activities that have been present since early childhood (APA, 2013). This disorder ranges from severe to mild. Rates have been increasing either due to better detection or more parents having children later in life (a known risk factor). In 2004 1 in 166 children were diagnosed. In 2018 1 in 59 were diagnosed (Autism Speaks, 2019). Boys are 4.5 times more likely than girls to be diagnosed.

Diagnosis and intervention need to begin as early as possible. Children with this disorder struggle socially and often academically. They need to learn how to develop social skills and function in a society that thinks differently than they do. There is no known cure, but there are treatments that can minimize the symptoms and maximize abilities. Most people with autism respond best to highly structured and specialized programs (National Institute of Mental Health, 2011). Intervention options include behavior therapy, school-based interventions, medication, nutrition, occupational, speech, and physical therapy, and social skills training (National Institute of Health, 2017). The families also require support and encouragement from extended family and the community.

## TRAUMA

Many children are exposed to traumatic life events. Traumatic events include sexual, physical, and verbal abuse, domestic violence, parental divorce or abandonment,

neglect, community and school violence, medical trauma, motor vehicle accidents, acts of terrorism, war, natural and man-made disorders, suicide, and others. These events take a negative emotional and physical toll on children. The more traumatic events children experience before the age of 18, the more physical and psychological harm that will occur long into adulthood (Felitti, Anda, Nordenberg, Edwards, Kloss, & Marks, 1998).

Parents frequently have difficulty helping children who have experienced trauma in their lives. This is especially true for parents who foster or adopt children with trauma histories. Exposure to trauma changes the structure of a child's brain; thus it impacts a child's behavior. This can frustrate parents and lead to problematic parent/child interactions (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014). See Role of Parents for more information on parenting a child who has experienced trauma.

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### EXERCISE

How many of you or someone you know has a child who has dealt with these issues? What are some of the struggles you or someone you know have experienced in relation to mental illness in children/adolescents?

*Remind participants that confidentiality is not guaranteed, but is requested.*

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### HARM OF SOCIAL MEDIA

This generation, known as Generation Z or iGen (those born 1995-2010) is the first generation to spend their entire adolescence in the age of the smartphone (Twenge, 2017). Social media and texting are replacing time with friends in-person. We don't know for sure the rise in smartphone use is the actual cause of the increasing depression and suicide rates, but we do know that depressive symptoms increased by 33% and suicide rates for girls increased by 65% between 2010 and 2015 (Twenge, Joiner, Rogers, 2017). Smartphones were introduced in 2007, and by 2015 92% of teens and young adults owned a smartphone. This is a strong correlation.

Social media does allow individuals to keep in touch better with friends throughout the day, connect with others when you don't feel like you fit in, and with friends who have moved away. Still, it also has a tendency to replace in-person, which is much more emotionally satisfying. As a result, this generation is more socially isolated than ever before. In addition, when teens compare themselves to their peers' social media posts, they find themselves not measuring up. Those who use social media at higher rates report feeling anxiety, depression, and worry about their body image (Geiger & Davis, 2019).



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## EXERCISE

Where in your body do you feel the following emotions: Anger, Fear, Stress, and Happiness? How can you be more aware of when you are feeling those emotions in your body?

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## APPLYING THE HEALTH MESSAGE TO MENTAL HEALTH

### REST

Our bodies were not meant to push ourselves in ways modern society demands. Mental illness is telling us something has to change. There are many ways to rest the body that improve our mental health.

- Sleep isn't just for the physical body, but also the mind. Children with ADHD like symptoms may actually not be getting enough sleep. Turn off those screens at least one hour before bed and have a consistent nighttime routine.
- Breathing slowly and intentionally is a powerful tool when emotionally distressed. Take a few minutes to slowly breathe in through your nose, hold your breath for a few seconds, then slowly breathe out through your mouth like blowing through a straw. An easy way for kids to remember is to pretend they are smelling a piece of pizza in their hand and then blow on it because it's too hot! It's called Pizza Breathing.
- Relax your muscles when you notice them tightening from emotional distress. Focus on the area of tension and feel it relax when you breathe out. A fun activity for kids is to pretend they are a wet noodle to relax their muscles.

### DIET AND EXERCISE

We all know a healthy diet and exercise are good for our physical health, but it is also essential for our mental health. Though diet and exercise alone aren't a cure, they are vital in improving and maintaining emotional health. Eating a diet rich in whole grains, fruits and vegetables, healthy fats, low-fat protein, and high in fiber, as well as avoiding sweets and highly processed food makes the body and the mind feel good. Having regular family meals together improves everybody's nutrition and they have a powerful impact on your child's overall mental health.

Exercise should be a regular part of our lives. Regular exercise is as powerful as anti-depressant medication in some people (Harvard Medical School, 2013). Going for brisk walks gives you fresh air and sunlight, a change of scenery, a chance to connect with your Creator, and opportunities to talk with those you walk by. Get your kid outside to play basketball, toss the ball or a Frisbee, or go for a walk together. It is a great way to improve the parent/child bond as well.

## **SOCIAL SUPPORT**

Modern society is increasingly isolating. We were created as social beings. Arrange play dates for your kids when young, invite their friends over, get to know your kids friends, get your child involved in church youth activities, encourage extra-curricular activities to build self-confidence and meet like-minded individuals, and urge your kids to connect with adult mentors who have similar interests (make sure there are appropriate boundaries).

## **SPIRITUALITY**

Even Christians suffer from mental illness. It is often when we are at our lowest we feel disconnected from God and think He doesn't care. That is when we need Him the most. Trusting that God loves us unconditionally can help us through difficult times that will inevitably come into our lives. There are multiple Bible verses and promises that can help sustain us. Prayer is a powerful way to unburden our concerns and connect with an all-powerful Creator. Though He may not answer our prayers the way we want, we can trust His way is best, and He will be there for us in our struggles.

There are things you can do to encourage your child's spiritual development. Take him/her to Sabbath school and church, encourage personal devotional time when older, have regular family worship and be a good role model yourself. Be willing to discuss your child's spiritual struggles in an open way. They are going to have questions along the way.

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## **EXERCISE**

How do you and your child cope with emotional distress? What new activity that you learned about today can you implement for yourself and your child?

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## **ROLE OF PARENTS**

As children age into adolescence and peers become more important, you may think you are no longer an important part of your child's life. That couldn't be farther from the truth! Developmentally teens have a greater awareness of what you have been teaching them and how it applies to their current and future lives. They will still struggle and argue with what you have to say, but they are listening more than you realize. Here are some tips that you can follow in order to help improve the emotional health of your children and yourself.

- Increase awareness. Do some research on the warning signs of mental distress and when to get professional help. Educate yourself on the unique struggles your child/ adolescent is facing in today's society.

- Monitor and limit social media usage. Research has found that kids who spend more time with non-screen activities (in-person social interaction, sports/exercise, homework, print media, and attending religious services) had lower rates of depression, so get them out there (Twenge, et al., 2017). Though you don't want to overschedule their lives, which can be just as destructive. Make sure there is enough time for play.
- Support. Listen and avoid lecturing. Look for opportunities when your child is more willing to open up. Put your screen away when your child comes to you with a problem. Your child will come to you with the big stuff if you are there for the little things.
- Stay calm. If you stay calm, your child will stay calmer during discipline. If you notice you are about to lose it, take an adult time out until your heart rate has returned to normal and you can think more rationally.
- Spend time together and have fun! It is normal for them to want to be with their peers more as they age. Look for service activities you can do together. You may have to be creative in looking for opportunities to connect, but don't give up!
- Be a good role model. Your kids are watching how you handle emotional distress. Demonstrate healthy coping and turning to God when you are suffering.
- Take care of yourself. Raising a child is the most difficult thing you will do in your life. You can't take care of your children if you aren't taking care of yourself.
- Single parenting has unique challenges. Try to be civil with your child's other parent. Counseling can help the two of you learn how to co-parent together. If there isn't another parent involved, look for an adult mentor who can give your child a different perspective and another adult who cares for him/her.
- Get help! You don't have to do this alone. In modern times we have lost our extended families. We were never meant to raise our children on our own. Connect with other parents or those who are retired and don't have family nearby.

For those who are raising children who have experienced trauma in the past, research has found ways to help heal the brain (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014):

- Meet physical needs
- Provide stability
- Be consistent and predictable
- Identify trauma triggers
- Stay calm! When you notice your child becoming distressed, take a break, and relax using the tools mentioned before.
- Give your child choices and control as appropriate
- Spend quality time where you provide encouragement, make eye contact, mirror what your child is doing to build attachments, and give frequent affectionate touch (as your child is able to tolerate it).

There are special parenting courses for those who are raising a child who has experienced significant trauma in his/her life. Contact your local department of child and family services to find one in your area.

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### **EXERCISE**

What have you found that you do that helps your child's mental health?

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### **GETTING HELP**

All children and adolescents go through periods of emotional distress. When that distress lasts more than a few weeks and affects his/her functioning (academics, socially, or hygiene), it is time to get professional help. If there is any talk about not wanting to live and if your child mentions how he wants to end his life, call your child's doctor right away or take her to your local emergency room for an evaluation. It is okay to ask if your child is suicidal if you aren't sure, you won't be putting the idea in her head.

Professionals are needed to treat mental illness. To find a local counselor, ask your child's doctor or pastor. Check out websites in your area, meet with the counselor first, and be willing to try different ones that you and your child are comfortable with. Some mental health disorders are best treated with medication or in combination with counseling. Your child's doctor is the best judge of that, but do your own research as well. You don't have to do this alone!

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### **EXERCISE**

How can we get past the stigma of mental illness within the Christian/SDA community?

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## RESOURCES

### GENERAL

- Kids Health <https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/eat-disorder.html>
- National Alliance on Mental Illness <https://www.nami.org>
- National Institute on Mental Health <https://nimh.nih.gov>

### ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

- Anxiety and Depression Disorder Association of America <https://adaa.org>

### ATTENTION-DEFICIT/HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER

- Attention Deficit Disorder Association <https://add.org/>

### AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

- Autism Speaks <https://www.Autismspeaks.org>
- National Autism Association <https://nationalautismassociation.org/>

### EATING DISORDERS

- National Eating Disorders Association <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org>

### SUICIDE

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/> or 1-800-273-8255

### TRAUMA

- Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/preventingACES-508.pdf>

### COUNSELORS

- Substance abuse and/or mental health professionals <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>.

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