



MENTAL ILLNESS ISSUES AT SCHOOL

Valerie J. Samuel, Ph.D.

WHAT IS MENTAL ILLNESS?

- *Mental illness* is characterized by changes in a student's behaviors or thoughts or feelings that interfere with the student's ability to function in the school or home environment.
- Mental illness is not the result of personal weakness, lack of character, or poor upbringing.
- Remember that children's mental illnesses are real, common and treatable.
- Mental illness will not go away unless treated by a professional.
- *Mental health* is the catalyst for good thinking and communication skills, learning, emotional growth, resilience, and self-esteem. These ingredients allow each student to successfully participate in their school, and community.

WHAT CAN A TEACHER TO DO?

- Share your concerns with the parents and provide families with a list of local services. Refer the student to a school psychologist, counselor or other mental health provider.
- Remember that a mental health diagnosis does not automatically indicate that a student is in need of or eligible for special education services.

TREATMENT

Treatment for mental health problems depends on the diagnosis, age of the student, developmental level, and family involvement. However, some of the most commonly used forms include psychotherapy and medication.

- **Psychotherapy.** This consists of the student talking face-to-face with a therapist. There are different types of approaches available to decrease emotional and behavioral problems in students. The modalities include interpersonal, family, behavioral, cognitive-behavioral, art, and group therapy. The mental health clinician working with the student will decide the best approach based the specifics of the case.
- **Medication.** Medication can be beneficial to some children with certain behavioral or emotional disorders. Medication must be taken in the prescribed dosage and at the times decided upon by the psychiatrist. Teachers and other educators should monitor children on medications daily and report immediately any problems noticed with the drugs.