FACT SHEET: EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS IN CHILDREN

**ANXIETY INFORMATION LEAFLET**

Children, like adults, have all sorts of strong feelings about what is happening to them. It's natural for them to feel fearful or worried from time to time. However, a small group of children and young people have severe anxiety which causes a lot of distress, and can seriously affect the way their everyday lives.

**How common is anxiety?**

Anxiety is one of the common mental health problems. Lots of people, however, suffer in silence. It is important to recognise your problems and seek help especially when it starts affecting your everyday life.

**What does anxiety feel like?**

Anxiety can cause both physical and emotional symptoms. This means it can affect how a person feels in their body and also health. Some of the symptoms are:

feeling fearful or panicky

feeling breathless, sweaty, or complaining of ‘butterflies’ or pains in the chest or stomach

feeling tense, fidgety, using the toilet often.

These symptoms may come and go. Young children can't tell you that they are anxious. They become irritable, tearful and clingy, have difficulty sleeping, and can wake in the night or have bad dreams. Anxiety can even cause a child to develop a headache, a stomach-ache or to feel sick.

**What can a parent do to help ?**

A lot can be done to stop children being anxious. Parents and teachers can help by remembering that children, like adults, may get anxious about sudden change.

It helps if you can prepare them in advance and explain what is going to happen and why.

Regular routines around bedtime and getting ready for school can help very young children with separation anxiety.

There may be books or games that can help children to understand upsetting things, such as serious illness, separation or bereavement.

Children over the age of five often find it helpful to talk about their worries to an understanding adult, which could be someone outside the immediate family.

They may need comfort, reassurance and practical help with how to cope.

If your child is showing signs of anxiety, it is important that you can show them that you care and want to understand the reason why:

Think about whether there is something going on in the family that could be causing worry.

Are they picking up on your own worry?

Is something happening at school or with friends?

All families have times when they have to deal with a lot of stress and worry. At times like these, you or your child might need extra help and support from friends, family members or others

**How is anxiety treated?**

The type of specialist help offered here will depend on what is causing the anxiety. Usually it will be a form of talking therapy, like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).CBT can help them understand what causes their anxiety and find strategies for coping. Parents are encouraged to be actively involved in helping their children manage their anxiety and are advised how to do this effectively. Occasionally, they might also be given a medicine to help if their anxiety problem has not got much better. A type of antidepressant, called an SSRI, is usually used.

Anxiety problems can be really difficult to live with for both the young person and family, but it is treatable

**WHAT IS DEPRESSION?**

Feeling sad or fed up is a normal reaction to experiences that are difficult or stressful. Sometimes these feelings of sadness can go on for some time and can start to interfere with everyday life. At these times the low moods become part of an illness we call ‘depression’.

Children under stress, who experience loss, or who have problems in attention, learning or anxiety have higher chances of developing depression.

Depression is not a personal weakness or a character flaw.

Depression is treatable.

**WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION?**

Symptoms in children and adolescents differ from those in adults. If one or more of these signs persist, parents must seek help:

* Decreased interest in activities; or inability to enjoy favourite hobbies
* Withdrawal from family, friends.
* Persistent boredom; low energy
* Frequent complaints of physical illnesses such as headaches and stomach aches
* Low self-esteem and guilt
* Increased irritability, anger, or hostility
* poor performance in school or frequent absences
* Poor concentration
* Frequent sadness, tearfulness
* A major change in eating and/or sleeping patterns
* Talk of or efforts to run away from home
* Thoughts or expressions of suicide or self-destructive behaviour

**If a child or adolescent says,” I want to kill myself, or I'm going to commit suicide,” always take the statement seriously and immediately seek assistance from a qualified mental health professional**

**WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF DEPRESSION?**

A child or young person with depression can have major problems in not only how they feel, but also on how they behave. This may cause difficulties at home, at school, as well as relationships with family and friends. Some young people can struggle with other problems which can be risky. These can include self-harming like cutting, misusing drugs and alcohol, dropping out of school and suicide.

The longer the illness continues without understanding, help or treatment, the more harmful it is likely to be to the life of the young person and to their family.

**WHAT ARE THE TREATMENTS AVAILABLE?**

Early diagnosis and treatment are essential for depressed children. Depression is a real illness that requires professional help. The goal of treatment is to improve the symptoms, prevent the illness from returning and help the young person lead a normal life. Families play an important role in recognising the illness, supporting young person through treatment and also preventing the illness from coming back. It is therefore very important that you understand the condition.

Depending on how depression is affecting your child, how severe it is, they may need different treatments. When they have severe symptoms or have difficulties like having serious suicidal thoughts or other risky behaviours, they may need medications and also sometimes admission to hospital.