

Understanding Mental Illness in Children and Adolescents

BY DR. STAN KUTCHER

Only recently has our understanding of child and adolescent mental health and mental illness become strongly informed by scientific thinking and scientific research. Previously, much of what was accepted as “truth” was based on theory or observations that were highly influenced by group or individual bias and often driven by opinion or consensus thinking, rather than the critical application of rigorous research methodologies.

Additionally, much of that theory existed in a vacuum. That is, there was little understanding of the fundamental importance of brain development and how the functioning of the brain in health and in disease was related to mental health and mental illness.

Things have changed dramatically since we have been applying scientific methodology and analysis to the study of children and adolescents, and gradually this new information is making its way into the public domain.

There are three major scientific frameworks that

have led and continue to lead this new and much more valid understanding.

First was the application of epidemiological techniques and long-term outcome study designs. This provided us with the first solid evidence of the amount of mental disorder in young people, and clues as to what its causes might be. In addition, we now have a much better understanding of how early life experiences can interact with genetic endowment to lead to specific outcomes in adulthood. This knowledge alone makes it much easier for us to plan how we may be able to better promote mental health or even possibly prevent some mental illnesses. This knowledge has also challenged us to change the way we think about and deliver mental health care to young people and their families.

The second framework is the knowledge of how our brains develop over time. This has been informed by scientific research from the laboratory (including genetic studies, hormone studies and other similar approaches) and from new technologies such

as magnetic resonance imaging which have enabled us to study how the brain grows and matures and also how problems in brain growth and maturation can lead to mental illness. This huge advance in knowledge is helping us better understand the complex interplay between genes and the environment and we are even now better able to understand how our treatments may work by the manner in which they influence brain function. One important outcome of this research has been to relegate the non-productive debate on which was more important—nature or nurture—to the dustbin of history. Both are important and both interact with each other to promote health or to establish illness.

The third framework is the application of rigorous randomized control experimental research designs to help us determine the effectiveness and safety of our treatments and the impact of other types of interventions (such as mental health policies or programs). This approach has resulted in the development of a

large body of therapeutic knowledge that can now be used by health professionals worldwide to best decide how to prescribe treatments or how to create better policies and programs. This approach has enabled us to practice evidence-based medicine, to the benefit of patients, families and communities alike.

Scientific thinking and scientific research is in the process of revolutionizing how we understand child and adolescent mental health and mental illness. The rate of new discoveries is enormous. Our current challenge is making sure mental health care, the training of health providers and the community at large is properly informed by this knowledge.

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