Noticing Signs of Mental Health

It is normal to experience emotional ups and downs. Life events affect everyone, and some of us are more vulnerable to experiencing mental health challenges. Autism is not a mental illness; however, the individuals you serve may have experienced mental health challenges in the past or may be currently experiencing difficulties. You can help by teaching individuals to recognize changes in their own mental health and supporting them in getting the services they need.

Common Signs:

- Sudden changes in behavior
- Withdrawal
- Lethargy
- Shutdown
- Increased repetitive behavior
- Agitation
- Poor self-care
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Loss of communication
- Increased sensory challenges

During a Crisis

In a crisis situation, work to guarantee the immediate safety of the individual and others involved. Use calm and concrete language, without speaking a lot. Find out what the person needs to feel calm, and if they can't respond, provide a known calming tool or strategy, or consider removing them from the situation. It might be necessary, following the crisis, to refer the individual to other professionals or co-workers for more in-depth care and decision-making. If you are uncertain, ask your supervisor for guidance.

Challenges

Possible mental health challenges might include:

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD),
- Anxiety/panic disorder,
- Bipolar disorder,
- Depression, or
- Schizophrenia.

It is not your job to diagnose these, but knowing how to identify the signs can be helpful to both you and the individual you serve.

What Can You Do Now?

1. **Notice and document changes.** If you see sudden changes in someone's behavior, write down what happened, where it happened, how often it occurs, and anything that may have triggered it. Share this information with the appropriate team members.
2. **Make calming tools available.** If you know what activities, items, or strategies help someone feel calm, make sure they can access them when needed. Family members and co-workers who know the individual may be able to suggest helpful strategies.
3. **Talk when the person is calm.** Choose a time when the individual feels relaxed to talk about what helps them when they feel overwhelmed, anxious, or sad. This can help you better understand their needs and how to support them.
4. **Ask for help.** Contact your supervisor or co-workers when needed. You do not have to manage challenging situations on your own.

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