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Contact April T. Glasgow
Telephone (284) 852-7875
Cell (284) 442-4507
Email aglasgow@vinhi.vg
Website www.vinhi.vg

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YOUR CHILD'S MENTAL HEALTH

Interview with Dr. Michael A. Turnbull

NHI: What should we know about a child's mental health?

MT: It's so important that our kids are emotionally well because research shows that emotionally healthy kids have a higher rate of success, not only academically, but as an overall adult professional when they grow up.

NHI: How can we help children achieve success this school year?

MT: [In addition to parents ensuring] that kids have meals and books, [it's important that] they talk to them about what to do if they feel sad, the expectations of their behavior; also, for parents to use this opportunity as a fresh start. Although the kid may have had some difficulties last [school] year, us this opportunity to refresh them and give them expectations – not rules. You want to speak in [the] positive, give them expectations of what behavior they would like to see displayed in their life. Also, parents [should] build a great relationship with the school and [their] child's teacher. So now the child has a protected area where the parent is on board, the teacher's aware, and the child knows that they are working as a team to make sure that they're successful not just academically, but socially and emotionally as well.

Parents can set a routine which involves talking to their children to ask them how the child is doing, how did their day go, or what happened in school. Also, taking time to pay attention to children to ascertain how they are feeling.

NHI: What are signs of poor mental health?

MT: A drastic change in behavior. Like the child is acting like him or herself. If they were a bubbly kid, they're now sad. They're changing moods and angrier. With anger outbursts, parents don't understand that kids who are depressed don't manifest sadness and depression like adults. Kids will become angry and agitated and have more temper tantrums. You might be thinking that they're misbehaving, but it could be an actual sign that they're depressed or sad. You also want to look at

changes in their routine. Are they staying in their room more? Changes in their diet, energy levels or sleeping patterns? All of those are indications to look out for when trying to assess whether your child is functioning in an emotionally healthy way.

NHI: After noticing the signs of poor mental health, what can parents do to help?

MT: The first thing to do is to create an environment, where your child feels open and willing to talk and make it a routine – not just when something is going wrong. But you make it a routine of being able to ask your child what is going on, and your children feel open and welcome that they could come to you. And when a child comes to talk to them, [parents have to] put down their phone and give them the most attention that they can. Let the child know they are concerned and that they care. For a child who doesn't want to talk, parents can say, "Listen, I know whatever you're going through is really difficult, but whenever you feel like you're ready to talk, I'm going to be here". The key is, when that child comes to the parent, ready to talk, and wants to open up to you, you have to be willing to listen. Listen first and be very slow to judge. If you get mad or angry about what the child is saying, it's going to stop them the next time from coming to you about anything because they feel like they can't talk to you. If parents feel it's too much to handle, they can enlist the help of guidance counsellors or other mental health professionals.

NHI: What are some common mental health issues for children?

MT: Depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Recently, we've been seeing children with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, due to last year's passing of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. So, children may be a bit more hyper-vigilant, scared, having panic attacks, having trouble eating or sleeping. If it's a year later, and you still see patterns of this in your child, that's something you want to pay attention to. There's also kids struggling with Oppositional Defiant disorder – kids who are breaking rules, not listening, being disruptive. We also have more learning or what we call neuro developmental disorders like ADHD. Or some kids that have specific learning disorders in reading and writing – all these [affect] their well-being.

NHI: You mentioned a change in grades as a possible sign that there's something wrong, but how do we know if a child is overwhelmed with school work versus there being something overtly wrong?

MT: You can look at whether a child is having an issue outside of just the grades. Grades is an indication, but also look at the sleep pattern and eating. Also, look at their temperament. A child withdrawing and not talking is also an indication. Then you follow up with a conversation. If it's a bit difficult for a parent, then maybe someone else can help. It's important to know if you've reached your limits and know when to reach out for help.

Follow *National Health Insurance of the Virgin Islands* on YouTube to watch the full interview along with exercise demos. See direct link – <https://youtu.be/b5Ofrs2lj64>

For more information, contact Dr. Michael A. Turnbull at The Wellness Centre via telephone 1-284-496-0838 and website - <http://www.twcbh.com/>.

The National Health Insurance of the Virgin Islands is working in tandem with healthcare providers to fulfill the vision '*Towards a Healthier Virgin Islands*'.

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NOTES TO EDITOR(S): Photograph is attached.

Caption: Dr. Michael A. Turnbull, Clinical Psychologist