



MONTHLY MENTAL HEALTH NEWSLETTER

Presented by the Gwinnett County Sheriff's Office Mental Health Task Force

In This Issue: Reactive Attachment Disorder



What is Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD)

RAD is a rare but serious condition in which an infant or young child doesn't establish healthy attachments with parents or caregivers. RAD may develop if the child's basic needs for comfort, safety, nutrition, affection and nurturing aren't met and when loving, caring, stable attachments with others are not established during their early development.

The Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM-5) list RAD as a Trauma and Stressor related disorder. For a proper diagnosis "Autism Spectrum Disorders" must be ruled out first. Affected children have difficulty forming emotional attachments to others, show a decreased ability to experience positive emotion, and cannot seek or accept physical or emotional closeness.

Symptoms of RAD include:

- * Unexplained withdrawal, fear sadness or irritability.
- * Sad and listless indifferent appearance.
- * Not seeking comfort or showing no response when comfort is given.
- * Failure to smile when a smile would be expected or appropriate to the situation.
- * Watching others closely but not engaging in social interaction.
- * Failure to reach out when picked up. Not holding on as most children would.
- * No interest in playing in normal age appropriate activities with others.
- * Behavior problems such as acting out with out provocation or refusal to follow directions preferring to not acknowledge request from adults or peers.
- * Failing to seek help in circumstances that most children instinctively seek help, even if they feel frightened.

Living with RAD

Normally young children form healthy relationships when their basic needs are consistently met. Providing those basic needs is the foundation for trust building between the child and their caretakers. If a child's physical and emotional needs aren't being met, they are at risk of developing RAD.

Children with RAD are aware of what happens around them, however they generally do not respond with emotion to what's going on. They can be seen as aloof and even uncaring by others. They typically will not show or seek affection from caregivers or others and prefer to be alone. This can be hurtful to the caregiver that does not know what is really going on with the child. It is for this reason that symptoms of RAD may at first be seen as simple shyness or avoidance and even typical disobedience. These misinterpretations of their behavior only serve to delay the seeking of proper treatment for the child and prolong the affects of the disorder.

Causes and Treatment for RAD

There is no consensus among researchers as to the exact cause for RAD. Studies suggest that there could be several factors that contribute to a child who doesn't form a bond with their caretakers. These factors may include:

- **Abuse or neglect:** The child feels abandoned or alone or fearful of physical abuse.
- **Food insecurity:** The child's basic needs aren't being met and they may go hungry often.
- **Safety:** The child fears that they are in danger.
- **Lack of hygiene:** The child sits in soiled diapers for hours at a time without being changed.
- **Multiple caretakers:** The child doesn't know who to trust.
- **Inconsistent caregiving:** The child's needs are only being met some of the time, particularly if they don't know when to expect their caregivers to reward or console them.

Treatment

RAD is typically not treated with medications, but is treated with psychotherapy. The most successful treatment will include the entire family and all caregivers. The types of therapy needed will include family therapy, and individual therapy for the child. The school may need to be included via special education and/or school counseling programs. The course of treatment may be long and require multiple treatment modalities.

REFERENCES

The G.C.S.O. Mental Health Task Force encourages you to utilize the sources listed below and the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\) at www.samhsa.gov](#) to learn more about this and other important mental health topics.

[Diagnostic Statistical Manual –5](#), American Psychiatric Association, Washington, DC. June 2013

<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/17904-reactive-attachment-disorder>

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/reactive-attachment-disorder/symptoms-causesyc-20352939>

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