

Food Allergies and Mental Health

Learning To Navigate The Social And Emotional
Consequences Of Having a Child With Food
Allergies



Food Allergies – The Game Changer

- Expectations of parenthood altered
 - Food-related expectations
 - Change is usually abrupt



Common Mental Health Issues – Depression

- Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities
- Insomnia or hypersomnia
- Poor appetite or overeating
- Low energy or fatigue
- Poor concentration or difficulty making decisions
- Feelings of hopelessness

Common Mental Health Issues - Grief

- Denial – “I feel fine”, “This can’t be happening to me (my child)”
- Anger – “Why Me (my child)?!” “It’s not fair”, Jealousy, Resentment
- Bargaining – “I will give my life savings if”, “I will take my child’s place if...”
- Depression – “I’m so sad, why bother with anything”
- Acceptance – “It’s going to be OK”, “I can prepare for this”

Common Mental Health Issues - Anxiety

- Excessive worry, occurring more days than not (6 months to be diagnosed)
- Difficult to control the worry
- Symptoms
 - Restlessness
 - Difficulty concentrating
 - Irritability
 - Easily Fatigued
 - Panic – pounding heart, sweating, trembling, dizzy, feeling like you can't breathe, faint, chest pain
 - Specific phobia – clinically significant anxiety provoked by exposure to a specific feared object or situation

Some Ways Symptoms Can Impact Diagnosed Child

- Isolation/Avoidance
 - Too sad, low-energy (depressive symptoms)
 - Too scared (anxiety symptoms)
 - Social Impact
- Anger
 - Behavior issues – Home/School/Social
- Denial
 - Not incorporating “allergic” into sense of self
 - Forgetting
 - Risk-taking (teen years especially)

Some Ways Symptoms Can Impact Diagnosed Child, cont'd.

- Inflexibility
 - Vigilance carried over into other areas of child's functioning
- Food-Allergy anxiety generalized to other areas of functioning
 - Very common

Food Allergy's Impact On The Parent

- Isolation/Avoidance
 - Depression - sadness, low energy, other depressive symptoms
 - Anxiety
 - Isolation of self – Fear of exposure and/or reactions
 - Isolation of child – Fear of exposure and/or reactions
 - Avoidance of challenging settings
 - Anxiety – Will others get it right?
 - Depression – Energy needed to protect child
 - Isolation for fear of alienating others

Food Allergy's Impact On The Parent, Cont'd

- Grief
 - Parents are impacted at all stages
 - Denial's impact on risk taking

Food Allergy's Impact On The Sibling

- Resentment/Anger
 - Resulting behaviors
 - Angry affect
 - Negative attention-seeking
- Confusion
 - Sorting out Mom's/Dad's emotions
 - Can affect allergic child as well
- “Over-Caretaking”

Food Allergy's Impact On The Marriage

- Conflict over different approaches
- Blame for mistakes made
 - Forgiveness....
- Attention on child = less attention on each other
- Mental health issues

What Can We Do? – Practical Ideas

- Preparation and Practice - Practice your way to expertise
 - Most important way to decrease anxiety, desire to isolate/avoid
 - Acceptance stage of grief
 - Incorporating “extra tasks” as part of every day life - D
 - Annual tasks
 - » Ex. -Scheduling yearly check-up, reviewing Action Plan, reviewing 504 plan
 - Monthly tasks
 - » Checking expiration dates on medicines
 - Daily tasks
 - » Making sure all meds are with child before leaving the house
 - » Checking pants pockets for Auvi-Qs before washing ;-)
 - Special tasks
 - » Field trips, birthday parties, eating out
- Organization
 - Choose a system
 - Manual
 - Technology

What Can We Do? Helping Our Food Allergic Children

- **EMPOWER!!!!!!!!!!!!**
 - Giving child a working vocabulary that builds over time, starting when child can speak (!)
 - Age-appropriate practice
 - Involvement in daily tasks – Partnership to independence
 - Planning for outings, restaurant trips, play dates together, cooking together
 - Show your child where he/she can create change
 - Food Allergy Community
 - Community At Large

What Can We Do? Helping Our Food Allergic Children

- Empowerment increases a child's comfortable "Allergic Sense Of Self"
 - Acceptance cuts through denial
 - Decreases risky behavior
 - Increases healthy behavior
- Model Calm
 - If we are OK.....

What Can We Do? Siblings and Couples

- Siblings
 - “Conscious attention”
 - Time away from the food allergy
 - Emotional processing
 - Not just for food allergic child
 - Process “Over-caretaking”
- Couples
 - Focus on active partnership
 - Active listening – listen more than you speak
 - Primary parent - resist “taking over”
 - Nurturance of relationship outside the food allergy
 - Do NOT underestimate....

What Can We Do?

- Support Support Support
 - Compassion - “Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.” — [Leo Buscaglia](#)
 - Information – reduces fear, anxiety. Work your way to expertise
 - Community – You are not alone
 - Professional Help – If symptoms interfere with daily functioning (you/food allergic child/sibling/marriage/family)

What Can We Do? Therapeutic Techniques

- Anxiety/Calming Toolbox
 - Different for everyone
 - General wellness practices important
 - Some common tools
 - Deep breathing – underestimated
 - Meditation – Critical now more than ever
 - Creative visualization
 - For children – “worry chests/time slots”
 - For children - Calm down choice cards/rewards

Let's Take A Few Minutes....



Bibliography

- Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. *On Death and Dying*. New York: Macmillan, 1969. Print.
- *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994. Print.