

# Childhood trauma or mental health disorder?

The traumatic effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and symptoms of mental health disorders can often look alike.

Institute for Child  
and Family Well-Being



## Mental Health Diagnosis



Attention Deficit/  
Hyperactivity  
Disorder



Oppositional  
Defiant Disorder



Anxiety Disorder  
(Social Anxiety,  
Obsessive-Compulsive  
Disorder, Generalized  
Anxiety Disorder or phobia)



Major Depressive  
Disorder

## Overlapping Symptoms

Disorganized and/or agitated activity;  
difficulty sleeping, poor concentration,  
hypervigilant and impulsive behavior.

Angry and irritable outbursts; argumentative  
with adults; refusal to comply with rules;  
reckless/spiteful/vindictive behavior.

Feeling on-edge; sleep disturbance;  
intrusive thoughts; irritability;  
Avoidance of feared stimuli,  
repetitive behaviors.

Decreased energy levels and  
interest in activities; withdrawn;  
sleep disturbance.

## Childhood Trauma

### Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

- Physical, emotional or sexual abuse
- Separation from/ loss of parent
- Physical or emotional neglect
- Witnessing violence
- Living with a parent with untreated mental health disorder(s) or who abuses substances



### Mitigating Factors

- Nurturing, protective caregivers
- Early detection and intervention

**What can you do?** Provide screening for ACEs: <https://uwm.edu/icfw/tools-and-resources>