

Mental Health: Deepening Understanding

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Session objectives



- Understand what we mean by 'mental health'
- Understand factors that can influence mental health
- Recognise what good and poor mental health look like
- Know how to support your child's positive mental health as they grow and develop
- Know how to support your child if they are experiencing poor mental health

What does good mental health look like for an older child?



Feel good

Able to regulate emotions

Feel that life is going well

Able to cope with life

What does poor mental health look like?



Changes in behaviour, emotions or school performance

Physical signs

Less interest in things they usually enjoy

Increased social isolation

Not developing as well as they were previously

Low mood, or tearfulness

Does my child or young person need mental health support?



- It's normal to feel angry, sad, worried or stressed sometimes.
- However, if they're struggling to cope with those feelings, they might need support. Look out for:
- Sudden changes in behaviour
- Negative thoughts and low self-esteem
- Arguing and fighting
- Sleep problems
- Avoiding school or staying with you all the time
- Aches and pains

How Can Mental Health Present



- Anxiety
 - Children can feel anxious about different things at different ages. Many of these worries are a normal part of growing up.
 - Anxiety becomes a problem for children when it starts to get in the way of their everyday life.
- Low Mood
- Issues linked to eating

What are the signs of anxiety in children?



- Lack confidence to try new things or seem unable to face simple, everyday challenges
- Finds it hard to concentrate
- Has problems with sleeping or eating
- Has angry outbursts
- Has a lot of negative thoughts, or keep thinking that bad things are going to happen
- Start avoiding everyday activities, such as seeing friends, going out in public or going to school

How to help an anxious child



- Talk to your child about their anxiety or worries. Reassure them and show them you understand how they feel.
- Explain what anxiety is and the physical effects it has on our bodies. It may be helpful to describe anxiety as being like a wave that builds up and then ebbs away again.
- As well as talking to your child about their worries and anxiety, it's important to help them find solutions.
- For example, if your child is worried about going to a sleepover, it is natural to want to tell them not to go. However, this could mean your child feels that their anxiety will stop them from doing things.
- It's better to recognise their anxiety and suggest solutions to help them, so they can go to the sleepover with a plan in place.

Other ways to ease anxiety in children



- Teach your child to recognise signs of anxiety in themselves
- Encourage your child to manage their anxiety and ask for help when they need it
- Children of all ages find routines reassuring, so try to stick to regular daily routines where possible
- If your child is anxious because of distressing events, such as a [bereavement](#) or separation, look for books or films that will help them to understand their feelings
- If you know a change, such as a house move, is coming up, prepare your child by talking to them about what is going to happen and why
- Try not to become overprotective or anxious yourself
- Practice simple relaxation techniques with your child, such as taking 3 deep, slow breaths, breathing in for a count of 3 and out for 3. You'll find more guidance for helping children with anxiety on the [Young Minds website](#)
- Turn an empty tissue box into a "worry" box. Get your child to write about or draw their worries and "post" them into the box. Then you can sort through the box together at the end of the day or week

How can I help my child?



- If you're worried about your child and they refuse to talk to you, you may need to open up other channels of communication.
- Avoid persistent direct questioning as this can make them feel threatened.

How can I help my child?



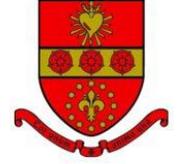
- Be honest and explain that you're worried that they're going through something difficult
- Point them towards websites or helplines that can give them information on depression, drugs and self-harm so they can find out the facts themselves
- Do not blame yourself for any problems they're having and try not to take it personally – this will not help the situation
- Tell them you'll be there for them when they do want to talk
- Let them choose where to go for help, which may be a GP, a family friend or school counsellor
- Help your child think for themselves – encourage them to think through the pros and cons of their behaviour, remind them what they're good at and what you like about them, and help them think critically about what they see and hear

Do not judge your child



- Start by assuming they have a good reason for doing what they do. Show them you respect their intelligence and are curious about the choices they've made.
- If you do not pre-judge their behaviour as "stupid" or "wrong", they're more likely to open up and explain why their actions made sense to them.

Try not to assume you know what's wrong



- Do not assume that you know what's wrong. Rather than asking "Are you being bullied?", try saying "I've been worried about you. You do not seem your usual self, and I wondered what's going on with you at the moment? Is there anything I can help with?".

Be clear you want to help



- If you suspect your child is using drugs or drinking excessively, be gentle but direct. Ask them, and let them know that you'll help them through any of their difficulties.

Help your child think for themselves



- **Help them think critically about what they see and hear.** "So Paul said X: is that what you think?"
- **Help them feel that they can deal with life's challenges.** Remind them of what they're good at and what you like about them. This will give them confidence in other areas of their lives.
- **Help them think of ways they can respond and cope.** "So, when you feel like that, is there anything you can do to make yourself feel better?"
- **Encourage them to think through the pros and cons of their behaviour.**

Try not to react to angry outbursts



- Children often hit out at the people they most love and trust, not because they hate you, but because they feel confused.
- Do not think that they mean the bad things they say ("I hate you!"). They may just feel confused, angry, upset, lost or hormonal, and they do not know how to express it.

Help your child feel safe



- Children often worry that telling an adult will just make things worse. You need to be clear that you want to help them and will not do anything they do not want you to.
- This may be particularly important with bullying. If your child opens up to you about bullying, explain that it is unacceptable. Listen to their fears and reassure them it's not their fault.
- Help build up their confidence by reassuring them that you'll face the problem together.

Ask your child the right questions



- Sometimes you'll find out more about your child if you ask open questions. If they have an eating disorder, for example, asking confrontational questions like "What did you eat for lunch?" or "Have you made yourself sick?" may mean you get a dishonest answer.
- Sticking to open questions such as "How are you?" or "How has your day been?" helps your child talk to you about how they're feeling.

Prepare yourself (as a parent) - it's okay to be worried too



- It can feel hard to let your child go into an environment that you don't know well and that you have less control over.
- Children can often pick up this feeling of anxiety from you so try to find ways to manage that. For instance, talking to other parents and relaxation techniques. Looking after yourself will help you be there for your child.
- You are not alone: the first years of secondary or high school can be difficult for families. Young people may explore their identity by trying new things, taking risks, breaking rules and putting their friends first. Talk to someone you trust about how you feel.
- Remember that your child still needs you and relies on you, and boundaries are needed to keep them safe.

What can I do at home?



- **Find time to talk, just the two of you** – ‘Check in’ with them while you’re doing things together, so they get used to talking about their feelings.
- **Be a role model** – Show how you cope with difficult feelings and look after yourself.
- **Access support** - speak to your child's head of year, take them to the GP, access support from mental health charities and organisations.
- **Promote positivity** – encourage relaxation techniques, exercise, and positive sleep patterns. Work together to set boundaries that will limit time on screens and social media

Where can we get support?



- Family life - Family Lives (support on any aspect of parenting and family life. Freephone) | 0808 800 2222 | askus@familylives.org.uk | familylives.org.uk
- Samaritans (free) | 116 123 | jo@samaritans.org | samaritans.org
- Mind (calls charged at local and network rates) | 0300 123 3393 | info@mind.org.uk | mind.org.uk
- Young Minds Parents Helpline (free) | 0808 802 5544 | <https://bit.ly/3p8kpDp>
- Your GP