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A photograph of two young women with long hair, smiling and hugging each other outdoors. The background is a bright, sunny field with trees, creating a warm and positive atmosphere.

MENTAL HEALTH IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS OR CARERS



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Children and young people's mental health is currently being discussed a lot in the media and positive steps have been taken to raise awareness of mental health issues. Campaigns such as 'Heads Together' aim to reduce the stigma and have highlighted the importance of people speaking out about their mental health. However, sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish between normal adolescent behaviour and a mental health problem. This short information sheet therefore aims to offer advice and guidance (for if you have concerns about your child), assisting you with knowing what to do and who to contact if you think your child is suffering from a mental health problem.

Important Things to Remember

Everyone has mental health just like we all have physical health. Mental health can be thought of in terms of how we feel about ourselves and other people around us, our ability to make and keep friends and relationships, as well as our ability to learn from others and develop psychologically and emotionally. Being mentally healthy is also about having the ability to overcome life's challenges, having the confidence to make decisions and believe in ourselves.



It is quite normal for young people to feel anxious, worried or upset at times. However, sometimes children and young people struggle to cope and may experience a range of mental health difficulties. Common mental health problems found in children and young people include the anxiety disorders, depression and eating disorders.

Self-harming behaviour is frequently linked with mental health problems in young people as it is often used as a way of coping with difficult emotions. Try not to be alarmed if you discover that your child is self-harming but encourage them to talk about their reasons for doing so. Young Minds provide some really useful information for parents around self-harm and this can be accessed on their website (see useful resources).



Adolescence is a time of significant growth and development inside the teenage brain. In adolescents, the prefrontal cortex is remodelled last- the prefrontal cortex is the decision-making part of the brain, responsible for your child's ability to plan, solve problems, control impulses and think about the consequences of actions. Changes in this part of the brain continue into early adulthood.

Because the prefrontal cortex is still developing, teenagers might rely on a part of the brain called the amygdala to make decisions and solve problems more than adults do. This part of the brain is associated with emotions, impulses, aggression and instinctive behaviour- and might help to explain some of the behaviours seen in teenagers!

The Rise of Mental Health Problems in Children and Young People

Children and young people's mental health problems are a lot more common than you think. Although statistics argue that 1 in 10 children or young people suffer from a diagnosable mental health problem, more recent figures on the prevalence of mental health problems in young people have estimated that rates are actually higher.

The reasons for the rise in the number of children and young people experiencing mental health problems are varied. However, young people these days face increased pressures compared to when we were younger. Not only through increased academic pressures, but also pressures to look and act a certain way, especially given the advent of social media. An argument also exists that there has been an increase in bullying, both off and online.

Encouragement and Support

With the right help and support most young people will recover from their mental health problem, but they have a much better chance of recovery if their problems are identified early. It is therefore important to talk to your child as soon as you recognise that something may be wrong. It is important not to dismiss or play down your child's mental health problem as this may make them think you don't care or see their problem as insignificant.

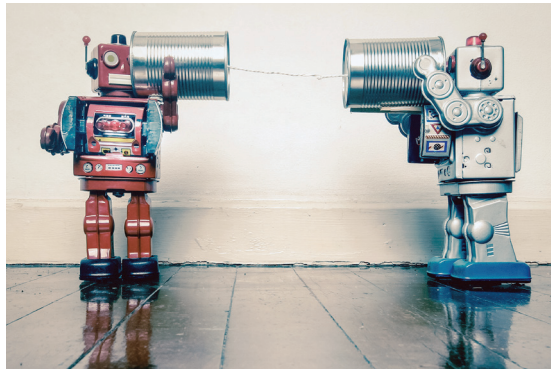
It is helpful to encourage your child to see their mental health problem as just a difficult period in their life which they can and will get through. Many children manage to overcome their mental health difficulties with only a little help and guidance, and without receiving any specialist support. However, some young people will require various levels of mental health support and further information concerning what support is available is detailed at the end of this information booklet.

It can be difficult trying to support your child to overcome their mental health problem therefore it is essential to look after your own mental health. You cannot be there to help and support your child if you are not feeling well yourself, and this includes looking after yourself emotionally as well as physically. Talk to someone about how you are feeling, making sure you reach out for help when this is needed.

Children and young people will often take out their frustrations on those closest to them, meaning as parents or carers you will be on the receiving end of this upset and anger. Please try to remain calm and remind yourself that your child is struggling and will not choose to act this way. This is their way of communicating to you how distressed they are feeling.

Having the Conversations

Asking your child how they feel can often be difficult, but it is important to do so. If they are adamant they do not want to talk then don't push them. They will speak to you when they are ready, however it is important that they know you are always there for them. It might be beneficial to send them a text message to let them know this, especially given this is often young people's preferred method of communication.



Although different mental health problems have differing signs and symptoms, there are some common characteristics you can look out for in your child which may suggest they are struggling. Some examples of general factors you may observe include changes in appetite, sleeping patterns, personality, mood, behaviour, unexplained physical symptoms, performance at school, withdrawal or avoidance of situations, as well as lack of self-care. Your child might begin to spend a lot more time alone in their room as this is usually their private space and you may not always be welcome. If you notice changes in your son or daughter over a couple of weeks, then it is important to have a conversation with them about how they are feeling.

It will be helpful to note down any concerns you have as you may need to refer to these later if you have to attend any health appointments. This will also be useful to highlight any patterns to the problem, as well as record the intensity and frequency of symptoms.

Before having the conversations with your child think about what you want to say and ask open questions which will allow your child to explain. Don't let your child see how worried you are as they may be reluctant to open up to you in the future. Be calm, supportive and do not judge how they are feeling.

Respect your child's privacy by not openly discussing their problems with other people who do not really need to know. Talk to your son or daughter about who does need to know about what is happening but discuss with them beforehand what is going to be said.

If your child struggles to talk about how they feel or has difficulties with communication then encourage them to write things down, draw or use music to express how they feel. It is important for them to find ways to manage their emotions which are helpful for them.

How You Can Help

As a parent or carer of a child with a mental health problem it is important to try to obtain as much information as possible about the problem to allow you to gain a good understanding about what your child is experiencing. Researching the mental health problem will enable you to understand how to help with their recovery and prevent relapses in the future. Ensure you look on reputable websites for information, such as those listed at the end of this information sheet or in the Mental Health Support Directory mentioned below.

Be mindful that there are some unhelpful websites out there, which shockingly encourage mental health problems in young people. It is therefore important to monitor what your child is accessing online. Some websites will offer peer support and the opportunity to read stories about other young people's experiences of mental health. Often this can be helpful because suffering from a mental health problem can make a young person feel very alone.

Information and self-help materials are available, so it is useful to encourage your child to access these. The use of self-help materials will allow your child to develop practical strategies to help them overcome their problems, as well as answering any questions they may have. In addition, linking your son or daughter to information they can read and use at their own pace will allow them some privacy and the opportunity to do this in their own time.

We want children and young people to be able to create their own imaginary 'wellness toolbox', which contains effective coping strategies and 'tools' to make use of during challenging times. Encourage young people to make sure they have a balance of activities in their life which give them a sense of Achievement, feeling Close to other people and which they Enjoy (ACE activities).



It is important to encourage your child to look after themselves by eating healthily, exercising and getting enough sleep each night. How they feel physically will have a significant impact on their emotional health. Often young people's sleep is affected by numerous factors, such as the overuse of technology, social media and melatonin production (young people only naturally start to produce melatonin later at night). It is therefore essential to encourage your child to have a wind down period at least an hour before bed, which involves switching off all technology and doing something which makes them feel relaxed.

Try not to focus only on your child's mental health problem. Think about all their qualities and what they do well, inspiring your child to do the same. Praise them and encourage them to try out new activities to help to build their confidence and increase their social interaction. Plus, whilst they are struggling don't focus too much on the trivial things, such as a messy bedroom or being a bit late home. Focus on what's important instead.

Remember to ask your child themselves what they think will help them as often they will have ideas that you are unaware of. Ensure you talk to your child's other parent about your worries when your child is not around as they may have a different take to what is going on. Try and deal with the problems together so that you are using the same approach and can back each other up.

Getting Further Help

If your child is struggling with their mental health, it is sensible to let their school know. If your child is in secondary school tell their tutor or head of year as they will then inform your child's teachers so that support can be put in place. Many schools now offer counselling and other means of supporting a young person's emotional needs, so this is something you could inquire about when you inform staff in school.



If you think more specialist help is required, it is important to take your child to their G.P. Your doctor will then be able to make a referral to Child and Young People Mental Health Services (CYPMHS) if they believe it to be necessary. Some schools can also refer directly to CYPMHS which is another reason it is important to keep them informed.

CYPMHS are NHS run teams of professionals from a range of backgrounds who are experts at working with children and young people. CYPMHS will be able to offer different talking therapies to help your son or daughter to overcome their mental health difficulties. However, please be aware that many CYPMHS teams

across the country have long waiting times because of the considerable number of referrals they receive. Not every treatment or therapy might be right for your child therefore it is important to find one which is helpful to them.

If you think more urgent care is needed or that your child is at risk of harming themselves then it is important to take them straight to A&E.

It is important to remember that whilst receiving help there are likely to be setbacks along the way. Try to view these as experiences to learn from, rather than thinking your child is returning to how they originally felt. A useful way of viewing it like dropping a stitch on a line of knitting, as when this occurs it can easily be picked back up again.

Summary

You might find it hard to accept your son or daughter has a mental health problem because there is still so much stigma surrounding mental health. Remind yourself that this is just a challenging time which your child is going through and with the right help and support they can and will feel better.

If your child is having problems, please do not be too hard on blame yourself as it is not your fault. The only thing you can do is be there for your child and help them wherever possible. Continue to give them affection and show them how much you care but remember to get help for yourself too if you are struggling.

As we know the emotional wellbeing of children and young people is just as important as their physical health. However, just like with physical illnesses recovery can often be a lengthy process and will not occur overnight. You need to be patient because it may take your child a while before they start to feel better again.

Although it is hoped this guide will offer you advice and information, it is not a definitive guide and if you are concerned about a child or young person then you should seek specialist advice.

Useful Resources

www.youngminds.org.uk

www.minded.org.uk

www.nhs.uk

Young Minds Parents and Carers Helpline: 0800 802 5544

A full list of available websites, telephone lines, tools and apps for children and young people is outlined in the Mental Health Support Directory for Young People: <https://www.charlottelowepsychologicalservices.co.uk/files/charlotte-lowe-support-directory-final.pdf>

I offer a wide range of mental health support to individuals and organisations, including individual and group Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Mindfulness and Compassionate Based Approaches, Couples Therapy, Educational Support for schools and Mental Health Awareness Training for professionals.


Contact me for a free consultation to discuss how I can help you and the mental health support you require.



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