MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT TEAM

NHS
Humber Teaching
NHS Foundation Trust

Supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing

Parent/carer Guide

Introduction

This guide will help you consider signs that a young person may be struggling with their mental health. Mental health is a state of wellbeing that we all have, so this guide applies to all young people. It aims to walk you through signs of poor mental health in children and young people, strategies for helping them, and techniques for looking after yourself so you can look after your young person. Whether you're a parent/carer or somebody in a professional capacity interacting with young people, this guide is for you.

You might be the only adult in a young person's life who recognises their emotions and how they are feeling. While this can certainly feel like a daunting responsibility, it also presents a wonderful opportunity to make a meaningful impact.

We know that no two young people are the same but in providing this guide we hope to give you a series of practical tips that sit alongside the variety of experience and backgrounds you have, as well as the natural skills and instincts you already possess when helping young people.

Mental health is a state of wellbeing that we all have, think about your interactions with all young people, not just those who may have been diagnosed with a mental health condition.

Signs that a young person may be struggling with their mental health

Changes in behaviour

The first thing to consider about challenging behaviour is that a need for support can present differently in everyone. One key aspect to highlight, which is often misunderstood, is that ‘challenging behaviour’ is almost always an expression of an unmet need or a way of seeking safety. More often than not when a child misbehaves, there are consequences. So consider how you can balance addressing their behaviour while also supporting their mental health.

Withdrawal

In addition to challenging behaviour, which we refer to as externalising, some young people turn inward when struggling with their mental health, something known as internalising. Signs of this may include withdrawal, avoidance, tearfulness, or irritability.

At times, young people might not have the words to express how they feel and may simply say, "I'm fine, I'm just tired." If you sense there's more going on, trust your instincts. There's no harm in offering a chat or letting them know you're there for them.

Strategies for helping young people with their mental health

Emotional regulation

Our past experiences influence the way we experience situations in the here and now and play a role in shaping our interpretations, emotional responses, behaviour and even the way our brain works.

Emotion regulation is the ability to manage our emotions. There are lots of emotions that we all experience such as happy, sad, and angry. We experience these emotions in response to our thoughts and feelings and because of what is happening around us. We are all different so the same thing could happen to two people and yet they could both feel totally different emotions.

Regulating our emotions is a skill. Emotional regulation can be learnt by having people around us who recognise and respond to our emotions in validating way. It is also important to remember that at times everyone struggles to manage their emotions.

When supporting your child to regulate their emotions, you need to be aware of; your own emotions, your reaction to these emotions, and how they may affect your child's emotions (also known as co-regulation).

Younger children will need your support to regulate their emotions. This can also be true of older children, particularly in times of crisis.

Before trying to reason with young people or talk about their feelings, an important first step is to help them 'turn down the heat' on their emotions. This means taking the time to help them relax a bit. You could start by being with the child, naming the feeling and providing validation.

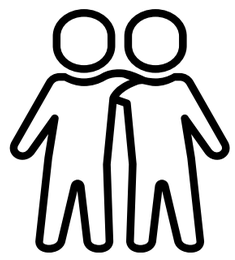
See steps for offering co-regulation on the next page.

Steps for offering co-regulation

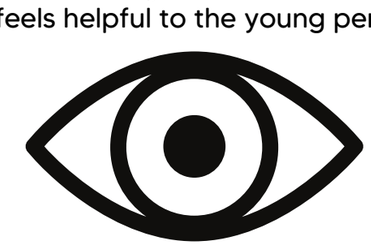
Using your presence and calm to reset your young person's distressed brain.

1 Regulate yourself

2 Get close
(If this feels helpful to the young person)



3 Make eye contact
(If this feels helpful to the young person)



4 Listen

5 Be curious and look to understand

6 Show empathy

7 Name the emotion and offer validation

8 Offer affection
(Try not to take it personal if they're not ready for that right now)

Separating the behaviour from the young person

If we understand that changes in behaviour often signal something deeper, try using this simple yet powerful approach: separate the behaviour from the young person. This allows you to maintain boundaries while also supporting the young person in feeling seen, heard, and safe.

For example, you might say: “Your behaviour today wasn’t acceptable, and there will be a consequence, but I really want to understand how you're feeling and what happened.” This sends a clear message to the young person: You are not defined by your behaviour. You can make mistakes, and I still value and see you as a person.

It is possible (and important) to set limits and maintain boundaries whilst understanding and being curious about possible ways of understanding the behaviour. By adopting the belief that all behaviour makes sense–whether it reflects an unmet need or a search for safety–we foster more curiosity and empathy in exploring what’s behind it for each individual young person.

Talk to your young person

When young people are deeply distressed, the discomfort this creates in us as adults can sometimes drive us to try to fix, change, or offer solutions. While this can be helpful at times, there are moments when the best thing we can do is simply listen and validate their feelings. Giving our children and young people opportunities to open up is one of the biggest things we can do as parents and carers to support their wellbeing. It can be easy to forget the simple power of sharing what we’re going through and feeling heard. Phrases like, “That really does sound hard,” or “I understand why you feel so [angry, upset, scared] about that,” can go a long way.

This response communicates to the young person that you are a safe space for their emotions - you are not overwhelmed by them, and you accept them. Over time, this kind of validation and the ability to hold space for overwhelming feelings will help young people learn to do the same for themselves, building their tolerance for uncomfortable emotions.

If you notice your young person struggles to open up, and you suspect something is going on, here are some things you could ask to get the conversation started:

“How are you feeling?”

“If you could start today again, what would you do differently?”

“Is there anything that you need from me?”

“Do you want to talk about what’s going on?”

In addition to questions you can simply offer phrases of encouragement such as:

“I love you, nothing can ever change that.”

“You can talk to me, I’m here for you.”

“If you need to talk to someone else, that’s okay.”

“Even if I don’t understand, know that I want to.”

“We’re in this together.”

What not to say

“You’ll be fine.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s no big deal.”

These are phrases we often use to comfort others, and while they can sometimes be soothing, they frequently communicate “I’m not truly hearing or acknowledging how this feels for you.” This can leave young people feeling confused and isolated in their emotions, thinking, “My body is telling me this is terrifying, yet I’m being told everything is fine.”

Look after yourself so you can look after your young person

Supporting distressed young people can be mentally exhausting which will also play a part in physical exhaustion, making it hard to be completely nurturing and understanding all the time. It's important to be kind to yourself and make sure you're in tune with what your own needs are as much as the young person you're supporting.

You may think understanding and nurturing your own emotions is selfish, it is quite the opposite. When your mental health and wellbeing is cared for, you'll be far better placed to help others. Not forgetting you'll be setting a good role model for what it looks like to listen, understand and respond to your wellbeing in a healthy and positive way.

Just like young people you should have your own go-to strategies for helping you cope. Deep breathing and grounding techniques can be practised anytime and in doing so often will better equip you to use them when you need them most.

Parent-led CBT courses

We offer a six-week workshop, delivered to a group, in a local health centre, to support you in managing your worries and anxieties, and provide you with the tools to support your child or young person.

During the sessions you will have the opportunity to rehearse key skills with the practitioner and get advice on how to problem solves issues that arise.

You can approach your Senior Mental Health Lead and emotional wellbeing support within your school setting for further information or contact the MHST Coordination Team direct on 01482 205205.

Support services

Local Support

Hull & East Yorkshire Mind
01482 240200
heymind.org.uk

Hull Thrive
howareyoufeeling.org.uk

Young Healthy Minds
eastridinghealthandwellbeing.co.uk

National Support

Samaritans
116 123
samaritans.org

Young Minds
Parent Line
0808 805 5544

Anna Freud
annafreud.org

Kooth Podcast
Free, safe and anonymous support for CYPs