



Mental Health and Wellbeing in Teenagers

A guide for parents



This booklet is designed to give you some practical guidance on how to support children with:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

And other associated behaviours, such as:

- Self Harm
- Eating disorders
- Risk seeking behaviours (drugs / alcohol / sex)

Top Tips to maintain Health and Wellbeing

- Exercise regularly - exercise releases endorphins, responsible for feelings of pleasure
- Talk to someone you trust
- Try art or music therapies
- Find a way to relax
- Eat and drink properly
- Get enough sleep
- Do something for others
- Be mindful - take in what is happening in the present, do not dwell on the past or worry about the future
- Be kind to yourself
- Celebrate small victories - everything is an accomplishment, no matter how small



Getting help

The school can support referrals to the relevant health practitioners. Your GP will also be able to provide advice and guidance. We would always advise parents to share any concerns with the Year Leader and/or the Form Tutor.

Depression

If your teenager is showing signs of depression, you may find yourself wondering whether it's 'just a phase' or something more serious. On average, three young people in every classroom are affected by mental health problems like depression. Many go undiagnosed and never get the help they need.

"It's not always obvious with teenagers if they are depressed," says Dr Arthur Cassidy, psychologist at the Belfast Institute, who works with children with depression. "Retreating to their bedroom for hours can be normal, but if they are withdrawing and seem disconnected from their friends too it could be a sign of depression."

Signs of teenage depression:

- Persistent sadness
- Loss of interest in life
- Tiredness/low energy. If this has been going on for more than a week, a parent should seek help.
- Treatments can include counselling, cognitive behaviour therapy and, in more extreme cases, medication.
- Extreme moodiness, irritability and volatile behaviour
- Giving up interests without finding any new ones
- Showing a lack of interest in school and/or a marked decline in schoolwork
- Concentration difficulties
- Losing contact with friends or suddenly embracing new friendships whilst distancing themselves from family
- Obsessively wanting to keep up with peers
- Not washing or looking after themselves properly
- Eating too much or too little
- Being self critical and overly worried about appearance
- Sleeping badly or too much
- Risky behaviour, such as drug taking, excessive alcohol consumption and not being in control sexually
- Thoughts of self harm

Acknowledging your child is upset by listening and talking is really important too. Sometimes planting the seed that you've noticed they're not happy and are ready to talk when they are can set the ball rolling. If your teen is particularly uncommunicative, trying communicating on their terms through a text or email saying you think they seem down in the dumps and you're there if they need you.

Most importantly, listen to your instincts. If you are concerned, seek help from your GP.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a feeling of unease, such as worry or fear – it's an understandable reaction in children to change or a stressful event. But for some children, anxiety affects their behaviour and thoughts on a daily basis, interfering with their school, home and social life. This is when you may need professional help to tackle it before it becomes a more serious issue.

So how do you know when your child's anxiety has reached this stage? Anxiety can make a child feel scared, panicky, embarrassed or ashamed.

Some of the signs to look out for in your child are:

- Finding it hard to concentrate
- Not sleeping, or waking in the night with bad dreams
- Not eating properly
- Quickly getting angry or irritable, and being out of control during outbursts
- Constantly worrying or having negative thoughts
- Feeling tense and fidgety, or using the toilet often
- Always crying
- Being clingy all the time (when other children are ok)
- Complaining of tummy aches and feeling unwell

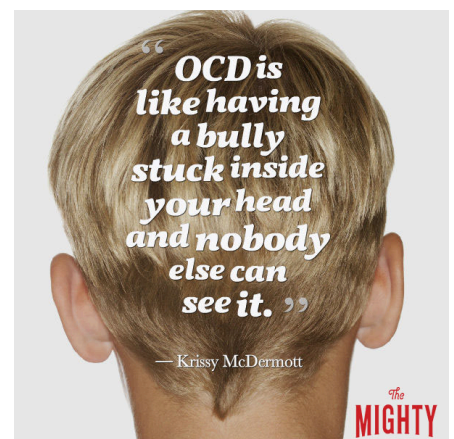
OCD

It's normal for children to become so focused on certain things that they almost seem obsessed with them. Maybe they like to spend time lining their possessions up a certain way, or twist or chew their hair. Some habits are a natural, healthy part of growing up, but if they start to interfere with a child's life or cause them distress or harm, they can be classed as compulsive.

Why do compulsive habits happen?

Compulsive habits can occur at any age. They reflect a change in your child's life that confuses or scares them and makes them want to regain control. Examples include:

- Moving school
- Moving home
- Bereavement
- Friendship problems
- Bullying
- Parents splitting up



How to cope with compulsive habits

- Stay calm rather than showing frustration or irritation
- Don't intervene every time you see the compulsive habit – it may increase your child's anxiety
- Praise your child when they do something good, rather than criticising the habit
- Give your child the chance to tell you how they're feeling – they may realise that chatting about the habit is a better way to deal with anxiety
- Sit down as a family once a week to discuss how things are for everyone

Every child is different

If your child has compulsive habits that none of their friends have, don't assume there's a problem. "It's about you as a parent knowing your child, rather than 'one size fits all,'" If you're in doubt, it's best to see your GP.

Self Harm

Cutting the arms or the back of the legs with a razor or knife is the most common form of self-harm, but self-harm can take many forms, including burning, biting, hitting or taking overdoses.



A young person may self-harm to help them cope with negative feelings, to feel more in control or to punish themselves. It can be a way of relieving overwhelming feelings that build up inside, when they feel isolated, angry, guilty or desperate.

Though self-harm is rarely a failed suicide attempt, it is a sign that the person doing it is coping with very difficult feelings, and probably needs some help. Self-injury can also lead to infection, permanent damage and even accidental death. It is therefore important to seek professional advice if your child is self-harming.

Start by going to see your GP. You can see the GP yourself if your child does not want to go. You should also ask your GP what to do if your child's cuts get infected. You can also look for counselling for your child - this is available in school, please contact your Year Leader for further information.

Eating disorders

Children and young people's appetites may change at different ages and this is normal. Some people eat a lot or eat anything, others are more particular. Most of us have tried out different diets at some time in our lives, whether to slim a little or put on some weight, or to improve our health. None of this should usually be a cause for concern.

However, problems with food can develop if the child is going through worry or stress. Children who feel under pressure may lose their appetite. They may turn to food for comfort

and eat even when they are not hungry. Their worries about food may be related to their size or body shape, or can be more about their emotions and self-esteem.

Eating problems and disorders often become established during adolescence and should be taken seriously.

It can be hard for parents to know if a young person has an eating problem or disorder. Below are some signs of difficulty which need to be taken seriously:

- Regularly skipping meals and obsessively counting calories
- Eating only low calorie food
- Showing a keen interest in buying or cooking food for others
- Wearing very loose clothes to hide the body
- An obsession with exercise
- Dramatic weight loss or gain
- Disappearing from the table directly after meals (in order to make themselves vomit)
- Saying they are unhappy with their body
- Food missing in large amounts from the kitchen



Despite these signs, however, many young people may deny they have a problem. They may try to keep it a secret, and find it difficult to accept they need help.

If necessary, a GP should be able to refer the young person to a mental health professional specialising in this area.

Internet and Mobile Phone Use

Using the internet and mobile phones has many benefits for children and young people including:

- Listening to music and watching films
- Learning about the world around them
- Having fun
- Sharing interests with others
- Help with homework
- Keeping in touch with family and friends



- Staying safe when out and about

However, many parents and carers are worried about the time their children spend online or on their phones. Parents may not understand what their children are doing online, and may feel their children are spending too much time on the computer but not know how to stop them or reduce their time.

Some of the problems associated with children's computer and phone use include the following:

- Wanting to spend all the time on the computer
- Getting addicted to online games or sites
- Seeing inappropriate content – violence, pornography or gambling sites
- Social networking with adults or other young people who might exploit or abuse them
- Giving away personal information to strangers
- Posting, sending or receiving inappropriate pictures
- Becoming victims of cyber-bullying
- Sleep problems
- Lack of involvement in family life

It is natural for children to want to push limits, explore, and express themselves, but it is important for parents to set clear boundaries for their children and help them learn to keep safe.

You should seek help by asking a GP or the school counselling service for advice if you are concerned.

Useful websites:

- www.youngminds.org.uk
- www.nspcc.org.uk
- www.familylives.org.uk
- www.parenting.co.uk