

Supporting Young People with Their Mental Health: a Guide for Parents.

There is no doubt that growing up is an emotional rollercoaster. Many young people face a whole host of highs and lows during childhood and adolescence, which can be related to different parts of their lives including school, friends, family, sexuality and puberty. In addition, developments in technology and demands on young people to be better at school or look a certain way, mean we must ensure that those growing up have good emotional health to help them through some potentially turbulent years. In this guidance is discussion of some common mental health issues, and tips for parents on how to look out for and after the mental health of the young people.

Mental health in young people

According to statistics, the number of young people struggling with a mental health condition is high:

- Approximately 1 in 12 young people (aged 12-24) are known to self-harm.
- Around 3 children in every class suffers from some form of mental health condition.
- 1 in 10 young people aged 5-16 years old have some form of mental illness.
- More than half of adults with mental health problems had their diagnosis in childhood. However, less than half of these had appropriate treatment.

Parents and teachers often spend a lot of time looking after the physical health, safety and wellbeing of the children they care for, which means the emotional health of our young people may be overlooked.

Parents – how can you help?

As a parent, it's important that you are able to talk to your children about how they are feeling, and encourage them to be aware of their emotions and express them in a healthy way. We need to ensure that children know they will be supported, as and when difficulties arise. The old adage *prevention is better than cure* has some relevance with regard to mental health, however the stresses of modern life such as friendships, social media, academic performance and family with the additional complication for many of living in a different country away from family, friends and the familiarity of home mean that there are many unavoidable risk factors.

How parents can help (these are also part of the holistic curriculum at BIST):

- Teach children how to understand emotions and model expressing them in a healthy way.
- Foster positive, trusting relationships with them; this will help them to feel supported.
- Help them to develop good, supportive friendships.
- Encourage them to take up hobbies that help them to relax.
- Practise internet safety and teach them to be cautious about how they use social media.
- Spend time with children playing as a family and studying together.
- Talking as a family and making time for this is essential.
- Talk to classteachers or mentors at school about wellbeing issues.
- Be aware of the risk factors and the early signs of mental health issues.

The mental wellbeing of a child is just as important as their physical health. However, many young people suffering from mental health issues may not get the help they need. One reason for this could be that the young person may try and hide their feelings, and the signs can be difficult to spot.

Depression and anxiety in young people

Two of the most common mental health complaints that are seen in young people are depression and anxiety. Both of these conditions can have a negative effect on how a child thinks, feels and behaves on a daily basis, and can ultimately have a detrimental impact on their health, wellbeing and quality of life.

What is depression?

Depression is a serious illness causing such intense low moods that any ability to function on a daily basis is impaired. Debilitating feelings of sadness can lead to a reduction in motivation which have an impact on mental, physical and emotional wellbeing, as well as behaviour both at home and at school. This [Guide on Depression](#) outlines what it can feel like for teenagers, signs to look out for and steps you can take to support your child.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a common mental health condition that is characterised by persistent and overwhelming feelings of fear, panic, worry or unease. It's important to recognise that we can all feel anxious or worried from time-to-time. However, for some young people, these emotions can be so intense that they make it difficult for them to engage in daily routines at home and school, and can have a detrimental impact on their health and wellbeing.

What are the signs and symptoms of depression and anxiety in young people?

Young people may experience depression and anxiety separately or at the same time. The most common signs and symptoms of depression and anxiety in young people include:

- Low mood most of the time, which has been consistent for more than two weeks.
- Sleeping excessively or struggling to sleep.
- Social isolation and a lack of interest in activities that they used to enjoy.
- Expressing a sense of hopelessness about their future, and not wanting to have discussions about this.
- Talking very negatively about themselves, and appearing sensitive to comments that people make, perceiving them as negative and personal.
- Constant worrying about something negative, with worries often disproportionate to the situation.
- Crying more than usual and becoming emotional for no apparent reason.
- Becoming angry for no apparent reason and taking this out on family, friends and others.
- Unexplained physical complaints such as headaches and digestive problems.
- Changes in appetite leading to weight loss or weight gain.
- Self-harm or suicidal thoughts and/or comments.
- A change in how they choose to spend their free time; they may spend more time on their own or be less interactive with their normal friendship group.
- A decrease in focus at school and perhaps a deterioration in academic performance or effort.

Eating disorders in young people

Another common mental health issue that is seen in children and young people are eating disorders.

What are eating disorders?

Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses that cause young people to develop an obsession with their appearance, weight and body shape, resulting in severe disturbances in their eating habits. A young person with an eating disorder will typically become preoccupied with controlling their weight, which can lead them to make unhealthy choices about food. This can have a negative effect on their physical and psychological wellbeing, and can even be fatal. Eating disorders are also associated with symptoms of other mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, stress, self-harm, panic attacks and anger management issues.

What are the signs and symptoms of eating disorders in young people?

There are several different types of eating disorders that young people may struggle with, each with their own unique signs and symptoms. These include:

Anorexia nervosa – young people with anorexia have a preoccupation with being as thin as possible, a drastically distorted body image (causing them to believe that they are fat), and an overwhelming fear of gaining weight. Anorexia sufferers usually try to achieve their low body weight by engaging in a range of harmful behaviours such as starving themselves, making themselves vomit, abusing laxatives, and exercising excessively.

The most common symptoms of anorexia in young people include:

- Significant weight loss over a short period of time.
- Abnormally low body weight and an unwillingness to gain weight.
- Controlling food and limiting the amount they eat and drink.
- Trying to control their weight using harmful methods such as making themselves vomit, abusing laxatives or exercising excessively.

For more information, please visit this [symptoms of anorexia](#) page.

Bulimia nervosa – bulimia is a complex eating disorder that is characterised by individuals regularly eating excessively (known as binge eating), followed by engaging in harmful ‘purging’ behaviours, such as abusing laxatives or making themselves sick after meals, in order to try and control their weight. These binge-purge cycles can be triggered by hunger, [anxiety](#), or [stress](#), and because the cycles do not result in drastic weight changes, young people with bulimia often appear to be a ‘normal’ size, which can make this eating disorder difficult to spot.

The most common symptoms of bulimia in young people include:

- Binge eating followed by purging.
- An obsession with food and calories.
- Going to the toilet straight after meals to make themselves sick.
- An overwhelming feeling of guilt after binge eating.

For more information, please visit this [symptoms of bulimia](#) page.

Binge eating disorder (BED) – BED causes young people to regularly eat huge amounts of food in one sitting (binge eating), even when they are not hungry. However, unlike bulimia, BED sufferers do not engage in purging after their binges, and therefore, these individuals are likely to gain weight as a result of their constant overeating.

The most common symptoms of BED in young people include:

- Binge eating even when they are not hungry.
- Eating lots of junk food such as crisps and chocolate.
- Chaotic eating habits e.g. not eating all day and then binge eating at night.
- Lack of fitness and general ill health as a result of unhealthy diet.

For more information, please visit this [symptoms of BED](#) page.

Other specified feeding or eating disorders (OSFED) – also known as ‘atypical eating disorders’, are characterised by some of the features of anorexia, bulimia and BED, but they do not meet the exact requirements that are needed for a diagnosis. A young person may have OSFED if they display the following symptoms:

- Having a low body weight, but one that is not low enough to be diagnosed with anorexia.
- Binge eating and/or purging happens infrequently.
- Having an obsession with weight, appearance and body shape, but no other symptoms.
- Being extremely underweight as a young woman, but menstruation (periods) still take place.

What you can do next

If you suspect that a young person may be showing signs of depression, anxiety, or an eating disorder, there are outlined below a number of steps that you can take as a parent, to help.

Talk to the young person – if you are concerned, sit calmly with your child and explain that you are worried because they do not seem to be themselves lately. It is important to try and find out how they are feeling and what is troubling them, and let them know that you are always there to talk. If the young person does not want to talk to you, encourage them to speak to another adult they trust, such as another family member or a teacher. Do not be upset if a young person does not want to open up on this topic with a parent - this is a common reaction.

If a young person becomes wary of talking at length when the conversation is focussed on school achievements or what events are planned into their daily routine, try to find out more about how they feel. Try asking them what they have enjoyed or not enjoyed during the day. This can provide a glimpse into how they feel about their daily struggles, including relationships with peers and how they view themselves.

Be open and listen – if a young person wants to talk to you about their problems, it is important to be open with them and listen to what they have to say. This lets them know they are not alone and it is OK to talk about how they are feeling.

Take them seriously - if you have never experienced depression or anxiety, it can be difficult to understand how a young person is feeling. Something that does not seem to be an issue to you could be a major problem for them. Similarly, without personal experience, it can be difficult to understand why someone with an eating disorder behaves the way they do. Some of their issues around food may seem irrational to you, but could be a major source of distress for the young person. This is why it is important to take them seriously and avoid being critical or judgemental.

Learn the symptoms – not only will this will help you to empathise with the child, but will also mean that you are able to spot the warning signs and lets them know that you care and are there to help. It can also help you to manage expectations, and understand that it is possible for things to get worse before they get better.

Give them their own space and avoid punishment - as a parent, if you find out your child has been behaving poorly in school or has been keeping something important from you, it will benefit their wellbeing if you respond calmly. Becoming angry or issuing a punishment will not help you find the cause of their mental health issues long-term. Responding compassionately can help to build an understanding of what might be troubling them.

Remember - its OK not to be OK!

BIST - an emotionally intelligent school

For the past three years, BIST has been dedicated to *becoming an emotionally intelligent school*. The school invests time in developing awareness and providing practical advice for staff on mental health issues and on developing the concept of mindfulness. Through our pastoral system and our PSHE programme we are engaging with the student community on the issue of mental health at an age appropriate level. Classteachers, secondary mentors, our students services team and counsellor, our safeguarding team and leadership are always available to students for personal conversations and aim to ensure the whole wellbeing of our students is cared for and supported.

If you have any concerns with regard to mental health and other such wellbeing issues, please do not hesitate to contact your child's classteacher or mentor.