

**A Parents' Guide to
Supporting your Child's
Wellbeing**

Farlingaye High School

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Supporting young people's wellbeing at Farlingaye: an overview

According to government figures, one in ten young people aged 5 to 16 has a clinically diagnosed mental health disorder and around one in seven has less severe problems.

This booklet is a user-guide to managing some of the mental health and wellbeing issues that parents may come across.

This is not an exhaustive treatment manual or a scientific report. However, it uses some of the current thinking to provide a strategy for parents to support their child.

Mental health issues may be:

- Short-term, issue-based, eg exam anxiety, or based around a specific, temporary circumstance;
- Long-term, issue-based, eg bereavement, the effects of physical health problems or disability or bullying;
- Long-term, deep-rooted, eg complex psychological disorders that need professional intervention.

These often interlink or overlap and may be serious or moderate, short- or long-term. Any or all of these may be noticed by parents or may be disclosed directly by the young person or their friends or teachers.



What you might see

Wellbeing issues come in a variety of shapes and sizes and you often hear a lot of quite scary words in the media. These may include: anger, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, OCD, psychosis, self-harm, stress and suicidal thoughts. While these are all things that young people – and adults – may experience at different times, there are many different shades and grades of feeling. The most useful thing we can do to support our young people is to not ‘catastrophise’ their feelings, while at the same time being sure to take them seriously.

Teenage years are very stressful and turbulent times, from the physical changes that they are going through, to the social pressures and psychological explorations of belonging and finding out who they are. On top of this they have the external pressures of exams, often entering the world of work, taking more responsibility at home and a widening awareness of the social and political world beyond. An emotional response to this is inevitable and all young people will experience some forms of anxiety, low mood, anger and stress during their teenage years. Supporting this with understanding, patience and compassion goes a long way to helping our young people through these turbulent times.

However, sometimes these feelings become more severe or last longer and begin to have a profound impact on the young person and the choices they make. Signs and symptoms that your child may be suffering include:

- Anger and a ‘quick fuse’
- Apathy
- Changes in eating patterns
- Crying
- Extreme obsession with appearance
- Frustration
- Isolation
- Lack of interest in appearance
- Long sleeves on hot days
- Losing or gaining weight
- Panic attacks
- Perfectionism
- Reckless behaviour
- Repetitive and ritualised behaviour
- Rituals around food
- Scars or marks on the arms, legs or other parts of the body
- Sleep problems
- Shaking
- Spending lots of time in bed
- Withdrawal

Of course, some of these symptoms can also be normal teenage behaviours! But they may become overwhelming, intense or go on for a long time, at which point it is worth letting your child know that you are available if they want to talk.

However, these can be difficult conversations and it is all too easy to take a young person’s revelations personally – especially given that young people are not always considered or tactful about what they have to say!

So it’s useful to have a strategy of how to manage that conversation.

What you can do

It is quite possible that your child may not want you to be the person they talk to, and this can be very upsetting. Try to accept this as part of the young person's need to assert their own independence, but reassure them that you are there if they need you.

Establishing that they have *someone* to talk to – even if it's not you – can be reassuring to both of you. Being emotionally available and willing to talk – without trying to push it – will certainly make it easier for them to talk to you moving forwards.

If they do want to talk to you, setting up the right time and place to have a conversation is very important. Like all of us, young people will be very sensitive to the feeling of not being listened to, so make sure you give them your full attention. Having said that, they may find it easier to talk to you on a walk or a car journey, where there is less eye contact and the opportunity for natural pauses and silences. Or they may prefer not to talk at all but to write their feelings down. Let them know you would be happy with any of these.

Some revelations come in the middle of an argument and it can be difficult to control your own emotional responses. Equally, sometimes your child will spring the conversation on you right at the most inconvenient moment, but if at all possible, try to go with it.

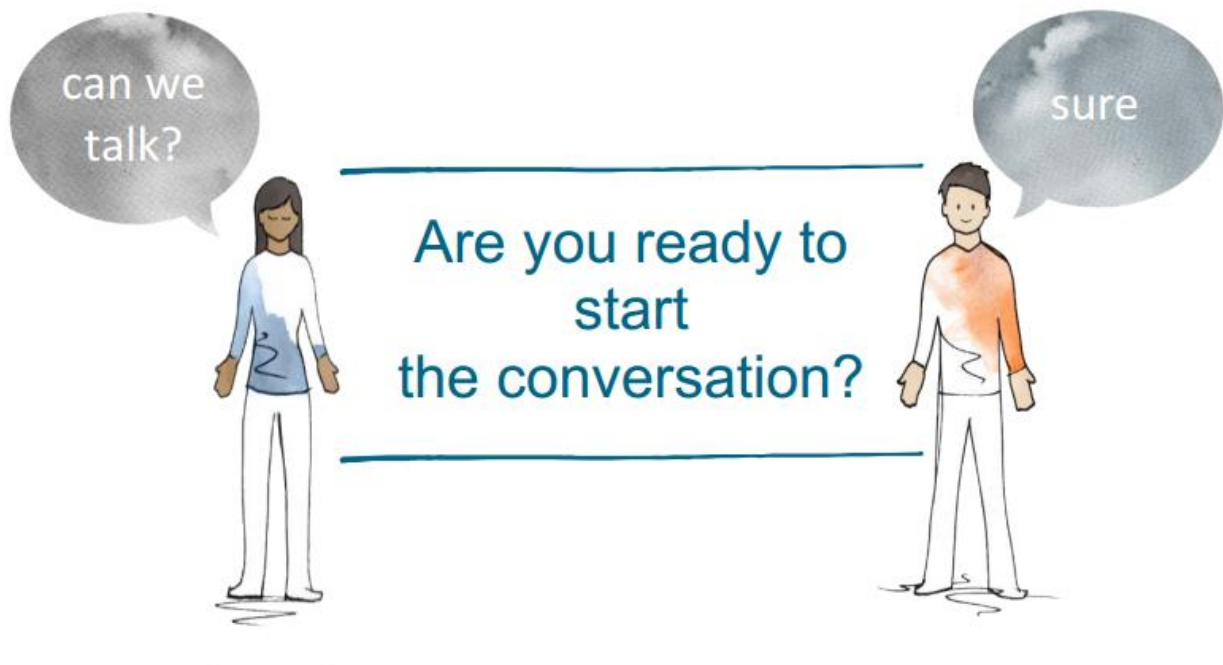
A conversation model

The CARES model below is a triage approach that can help with those first encounters, whenever they come, and is a useful and hopefully memorable acronym for action.

- **C** Calm listening, non-judgemental.
Staying calm will help enormously if a young person is in distress. A calm manner (even if you are faking it) will help the young person to 'come down' and will also reassure them that you are taking them seriously. It is important that you respond non-judgementally, however difficult this feels. Try to put your own feelings aside and just listen in the first instance.
- **A** Ask open questions and assess
It is essential to assess the risk that the young person presents and this can be done by asking open questions and showing genuine interest in what they have to say. Don't give up if they don't answer straight away. Give them thinking time and continue to show your interest and concern, without forcing them to talk if they don't want to.
- **R** Reassure and give information
Reassurance is NOT telling them that everything is going to be ok. It is showing that you understand that they are in a difficult place and that talking to you is a helpful thing to do. It's useful to acknowledge that it must have been very difficult for them to come to you. At this point you can tell them that there are other people who can help. Don't be afraid of saying you don't know what to do or say, but reassure them that together you can work on next steps.

- **E** Encourage self-help
Referring to the GP and/or to school can help the young person on the path to feeling better, but there is a lot they can do themselves. Self help is not 'pulling yourself together', but is about finding genuine things that make things easier. See the NHS Five Steps model in this booklet and the range of other groups who can offer support or advice.
- **S** Seek support
This is for your protection and is where you have someone to talk to if you are worried or if the situation impacts upon you. See also the section about looking after yourself. Coming across some wellbeing situations may trigger your own issues and it is essential that you have the appropriate support to manage this.

If in doubt, refer on – your GP or the school are good places to start. We cannot solve or fix these issues, but being aware of how they manifest and what to do when they do will help our young people get the help they need as quickly as possible.



Other things that can cause mental health problems

There are many other issues that affect teenagers (and adults) that can have an impact on their mental health. Some of these are particularly prevalent in teenage years due to the physiological and psychological evaluation of identity and self that takes place at this time. They can both cause and exacerbate mental health issues and potentially be exacerbated by them.

- Abusive relationships – young people are exploring what it means to be involved in a relationship. Some of them end up in abusive relationships. These do not just refer to ‘romantic’ relationships as friendships may also be abusive. Sometimes these take the form of physical abuse but more often it is to do with control and manipulation. Modelling healthy conversations about what is acceptable, what consent means and avoiding peer pressure can all be useful. If you think a young person may be involved in an abusive relationship the best first resource is that young person’s head of year.
- Gender/sexuality issues – exploring and discovering identity is a key part of the teenage years and there is a strong correlation with gender and sexuality issues as one of the triggers for mental health issues. This is particularly the case where a young person feels, rightly or wrongly, that they don’t have support of friends and or family or may feel unfairly judged or discriminated against. If a young person discloses concerns about their own gender identity or sexuality it is important to listen non-judgementally and supportively. Childline (www.childline.org.uk) has some useful information that you can refer young people to if you don’t feel you have sufficient knowledge to offer specific support.
- Poor self-esteem – this is at the root of many mental health issues, either as an underlying cause or an effect – or both. Fostering positive self-esteem and emotional resilience is something we can all do through effective role modelling and being emotionally available.
- Substance abuse – again, this can be a result of a mental health condition or a cause of one. Using or misusing drugs or alcohol has a physiological effect on the brain and can therefore impact on our mental wellbeing. If you are concerned that a young person may be using drugs then seek support from your GP.

Finally, remember that we are not experts or expected to know, solve or manage these conditions. Mental health and wellbeing is a vitally important part of all our lives and a non-judgemental and supportive awareness of it throughout society can help people manage their difficulties. However, ultimately, wellbeing issues need to be addressed from within – you cannot ‘fix’ anyone, but you can provide the signposts, support and empathy that can enable young people to find the path to ‘fix’ themselves.

Looking after yourself

“Compassion for others requires caring for oneself” – The Dalai Lama

To effectively support young people with or without mental health problems, it is important that we all look after ourselves and role model good self-care. Self-care is often misrepresented as ‘doing what you want’ – which can mean indulging in ‘me time’, poor diet and excess alcohol! While cake and a glass of wine may help us feel better occasionally, it is not a route to effective self-care.

Looking after yourself involves three core ingredients:

- Making healthy life choices;
- Talking and listening to other people;
- Being self-aware about our own lives.

Healthy choices involve trying to eat well, exercise appropriately, get enough sleep, have time for ourselves and our own relationships and getting a good work-life balance.

Talking and listening to other people keeps us in touch with the lives of others and allows us to forge loving bonds, offer and receive compassion, and maintain perspective on our lives. If you can do this with a healthy dash of self-humour this is all to the good.

Being self-aware means recognising where we have control on our lives... and where we don't. One of the most useful reflections is the Serenity Mantra and it is worth trying to develop **serenity** to accept the things that cannot be changed, **courage** to change the things that can and, crucially, **wisdom** to know the difference.

If you are worried about your own mental health then remember there is help available and it comes in all different shapes and forms. Recovery is not a straight line, but it is possible. Use the references in this booklet to help yourselves as well as others and by role modelling good mental health you will inspire others.

WEEKLY WELLBEING CHECK-UP

Try using this list each week to check in with your mental health

#ADDRESS YOUR STRESS




Where's my mental health today?

How do I feel today?

Mentally? _____

Physically? _____



Looking after my wellbeing

Am I drinking enough water and eating a balanced diet? _____

How did I sleep last night? _____

Did I feel rested when I woke up? _____

Is there anything I can improve? _____



How's my thinking today?

How are my thoughts making me feel? _____

Am I having unhelpful thoughts? _____

For free resources on spotting and challenging unhelpful thoughts, visit getselfhelp.co.uk or moodgym.com.au



My Stress Container

How full is my container? _____

Am I using helpful coping strategies? _____

Are they working? _____

Learn about your Stress Container at mhfaengland.org/mhfa-centre/campaigns/mhaw2018



MHFA England

There are simple steps you can take to #AddressYourStress. Check out our resources at mhfaengland.org

The NHS Five Steps model



The NHS five steps is a good basic approach and backdrop to promoting wellbeing for all. Focusing on these steps – for yourselves and your children – will help us all stay healthy:

- **Connect** – connect with the people around you: your family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. Spend time developing these relationships.
- **Be active** – you don't have to go to the gym. Take a walk, go cycling or play a game of football. Find an activity that you enjoy and make it a part of your life.
- **Keep learning** – learning new skills can give you a sense of achievement and a new confidence. So why not sign up for that cooking course, start learning to play a musical instrument, or figure out how to fix your bike?
- **Give to others** – even the smallest act can count, whether it's a smile, a thank you or a kind word. Larger acts, such as volunteering, can improve your mental wellbeing and help you build new social networks.
- **Be mindful** – be more aware of the present moment, including your thoughts and feelings, your body and the world around you. Some people call this awareness "mindfulness". It can positively change the way you feel about life and how you approach challenges.

Read more at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing/>

Further reading

- A range of useful downloadable self-help guides: <https://ntw.nhs.uk/pic/>
- A series of useful webinars aimed at schools covering a variety of issues: <http://www.cwmt.org.uk/webinar-list>
- Anxiety UK: www.anxietyuk.org.uk. Self help and contacts for those with anxiety disorders.
- Beat: www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk The UK's leading charity supporting those affected by eating disorders and campaigning on their behalf.
- Campaign against Men Living Miserably (CALM): www.thecalmzone.net. Targeted at men aged 15-35 – helpline: 0800 585858 Saturday-Tuesday 5pm-midnight
- Charlie Waller Memorial Trust: www.cwmt.org Awareness, information and resources for those who are depressed.
- Childline: www.childline.org.uk. 24-hour helpline: 0800 1111. Information, advice and support for young people.
- Cruse: www.cruse.org.uk. Bereavement care. They have a specific website for young people; www.rd4u.org.uk
- Government advice on mental health: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/252660/33571_2901304_CMO_Chapter_10.pdf
- Marie Collins Foundation: www.mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk UK charity enabling children who suffer sexual abuse and exploitation via internet and mobile technologies to recover and live safe, fulfilling lives.
- Mind: www.mind.org.uk. Offering a range of material on all aspects of depression. Helpline Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm: 0300 123 3393.
- Mindfull: www.mindfull.org. An online service for people aged 11-17 providing support, information and advice about mental health and wellbeing.
- No Panic: www.nopanic.org.uk. Helpline for anxiety disorders and panic attacks: 10am-10pm every day: 0808 138 8889
- OCD Action: www.ocdaction.org.uk. Information and support for OCD and related disorders such as Body Dysmorphic Disorder.
- Papyrus: www.papyrus-uk.org. Organisation looking at the prevention of young suicides.
- SelfHarm UK: www.selfharm.co.uk. A national project to support young people impacted by self-harm.
- Stamp Out Suicide: www.stampoutsuicide.org.uk. Points of contact for those feeling emotionally vulnerable.
- Stem 4: www.stem4.org.uk Teenage mental health charity aimed at stemming commonly occurring mental health issues at an early stage.
- The Samaritans: www.samaritans.org. Telephone 116123 for emotional support.
- www.depressioninteenagers.co.uk. Self-help strategies for those with depression and/or their friends.
- Suffolk Young People's Health Project: www.4yp.org.uk
- Suffolk Mind: www.suffolkmind.org.uk
- Young people against Depression: www.youngpeopleagainstdepression.org. Information and help for anyone feeling depressed, aimed particularly at young people.
- Youth Health Talk: www.youthhealthtalk.org. video interviews with young people's experiences of depression.