



for Scotland's mental health

# SUPPORTING MY CHILD'S MENTAL HEALTH

A SAMH guide  
for parents  
& carers



## About this booklet

This leaflet has been designed to help you understand a little bit more about mental health and wellbeing, and how you can support your child with theirs, while also looking after yourself.

It can be hard being a child or young person dealing with everyday life and coping with all the different - and sometimes difficult - emotions, pressure, and stress that it brings. This can also be difficult for you as a parent and can cause a lot of worry and stress when thinking about how to support your child.

This leaflet offers advice on how to support your child through life's challenges and how to respond when you are worried that they are experiencing poor mental health.

DID YOU KNOW?

1/4

of us will experience a mental health problem at any given time

3

children in every class will experience a mental health problem by the age of 16

50%

of mental health problems in adulthood start by the age of 14



## WE ALL HAVE MENTAL HEALTH

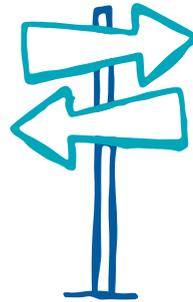
Mental health is something that we all have – not just those of us who are experiencing a problem. Experiencing good mental health means being able to think, feel, and react in the ways we want and need to live our lives.

Good mental health doesn't mean experiencing only positive emotions. It's normal to feel sad, angry, stressed, worried, or low sometimes. If these feelings last a long time, won't go away, or are becoming overwhelming and affecting everyday life, then it is important that we get help and support.

It is likely that those of us experiencing mental health problems will recover, particularly with the right support. For some of us, this means that the problem goes away completely. For others, although the problem is still there, or it comes and goes, we know how to manage the tougher times and care for our mental health and wellbeing.

Mental health problems do not have to be diagnosed by a doctor – anyone can experience a problem with their mental health at any time.

## IT IS NORMAL TO EXPERIENCE CHANGES TO MENTAL HEALTH



Our mental health is not set in stone. It can change - sometimes daily - depending on what is going on around us, and what we are going through. Sometimes our mental health can even change for no reason at all.

This is especially true for children and young people who are facing many different changes, pressures, and a lot of stresses as they grow.

Common issues affecting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing include:

- Body image and self esteem
- Puberty
- Gender identity and sexuality
- Bullying and peer pressure
- Life events, loss and change (such as moving school, family breakdown or bereavement)
- Relationships (including family, friendships or romantic)
- School, study and exam stress
- Social media
- Drugs and alcohol

*"There is a lack of understanding around what mental health issues are, which is really debilitating and affects the wider family."  
- Parent*



## RECOGNISING CHANGES IN MY CHILD'S BEHAVIOUR

You know your child best and are in a good position to notice any changes in their behaviour, demeanour, or presentation, and to recognise this in the context of what is happening around them.



Is your child having a bad day?



Has something happened that is causing a difficult time for them, like a fallout with a friend at school?



Is there something serious going on that is impacting their mental health long term?

Sometimes it is difficult for parents or carers to know if your child's behaviour is "normal" for their age - but "normal" doesn't really exist. You know your child best, and know what sorts of behaviours might be usual for them. It's useful to ask yourself:

How often is it happening?

How severe or long lasting is it?

Is it out of character?

Is it affecting their ability to go about their day?

A change in your child does not automatically mean that they are experiencing a mental health problem. However, it can be useful to look out for certain changes, and you might want to speak to your child if you notice:

- They are losing interest in activities and spending less time with friends and family
- A change in eating and sleeping habits
- Signs of low self-esteem like making negative comments about themselves
- They are feeling overwhelming emotions, or continually feeling low, anxious, upset or angry
- Any unexplained cuts, bruises or burns
- They tell you they are thinking about hurting themselves or having suicidal thoughts

# HOW CAN I SUPPORT MY CHILD?

The pressure of growing up can be difficult and confusing for any child or young person, and being able to talk about mental health and wellbeing will help them to notice and be better able to manage any changes in how they are feeling.

We know it can be hard to know where to start. Sometimes you may feel like you are up against a brick wall when figuring out when to have a conversation about mental health, what to say, and what to do next. Here are some suggestions:



## Make the time & create a safe space

Set aside time when you can talk without interruptions. Create a safe space where your child can openly talk about mental health, and encourage conversations with them on a daily basis, as well as when you notice a change or a problem. If having a sit-down chat is hard, try talking while on a walk or in the car when you are side by side. Or you can ask your child to call, write, text, or voice note you instead. If they find it hard to speak with you, explore with them the idea of speaking to another trusted adult such as a teacher, family member, or even a helpline like Childline.

*"Sometimes it's hard to talk to family and friends but you just need that one person who takes the time to listen." - Young Person*

*"The power of listening is often overlooked, but it's often one of the most important skills someone can use when trying to support someone struggling with their mental health." - Young Person*



## Be patient

Let them know that you are there for them. Be patient and actively listen to what they are saying. It's no one's fault if your child is not ready to talk today. It may take a few attempts before your child feels willing and comfortable to open up, or feels comfortable talking, so keep trying.

*"A 'no' to chat today is not a 'no' to chat tomorrow. Young people have told us that even though they may not take you up on a first offer to talk, you should make the offer again. It might take more than one - or even two or three - invitations before they open up." - YoungMinds*



## Learn together

Research answers together. For instance, information about mental health, what having a mental health problem means, or what might help them to manage how they are feeling.



## Listen to hear & understand, not to fix

Sometimes just talking about the problem and feeling really listened to can make a world of difference. However, it may be that your child wants further support. Ask what you can do to help. Spend time with them to understand their problem fully so you can help them explore and get the right support for them.



## Make self-care important

Role model how important it is to take care of both our physical and mental health, and make time and space to include self-care activities as part of individual and family life. Try self-care activities like breathing exercises, yoga, or grounding techniques together with your child, so they can help themselves in times of stress. Establish good sleep routines and breaks from social media and the news if this is overwhelming for them.



## Get help

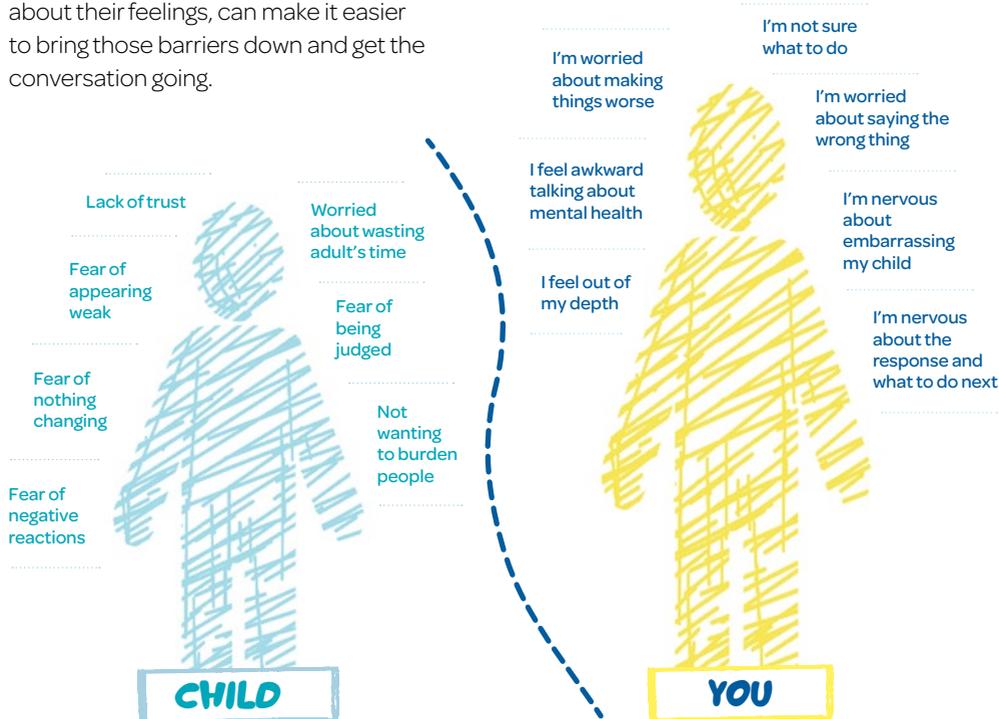
Seek professional help and speak to your child's GP, teacher, or a guidance teacher at school. Your child has the right to be informed and involved in who you speak to, and where possible, they are best to explain how they are feeling. Your child may be worried about what other people will say, or feeling embarrassed or judged. Remind them that what they are experiencing is normal and communicate hope that things can be better for them.



# BARRIERS FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Talking about mental health can sometimes be uncomfortable or feel awkward for both adults and children, and this can create a barrier between you and your child.

Recognising our own worries about this, as well as understanding the worries your child may have about opening up about their feelings, can make it easier to bring those barriers down and get the conversation going.



"Parents are not the experts in mental health. We don't know what language to use or what we can do to help our children cope. But we can be there for them and listen when they need us."  
- Parent

# HAVING A MENTAL HEALTH CONVERSATION



**1.** Here are some things you could ask to get the conversation started:

- What was the best bit of your day?
- How are you feeling?
- What did you do today that made you proud?
- Is there anything you are struggling with that you want to talk about?

**2.** If your child is having a hard time, you can try to find out how they'd like to be supported by asking gentle questions like:

- Do you want to talk about what's going on?
- How can I support you through this?
- Is there anything you need from me?  
Space, time to talk, time to do something fun?

**3.** Offering your child reassurance and encouragement can help them feel at ease and more able to open up:

- That sounds really hard for you, thank you for sharing that with me.
- You can talk to me. I'm here for you.
- If you talk to me about what's worrying you, I can do my best to help.
- We'll get through this together.

# LOOKING AFTER YOUR OWN MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

When supporting your child, it is especially important to look after yourself too. We can do this by practising self-care, paying attention to what we eat, how much exercise we get, and establishing good sleep routines.

There are lots of things we can build into our daily routine to support our wellbeing. The New Economic Foundation suggests five ways to better wellbeing. You can find more about these on the next page.

## If you need help

If you need further support for yourself or for your child please contact any of the organisations below.

### Parents & carers:

- **Breathing Space:**  
www.breathingspace.scot | 0800 83 85 87
- **Parentline**  
www.children1st.org.uk | 08000 28 22 3
- **Samaritans**  
www.samaritans.org.uk | 116 123

### Children & young people:

- **Childline:**  
0800 1111 | www.childline.org.uk
- **The Mix:**  
0800 808 4994 | www.themix.org.uk
- **YoungMinds:**  
www.youngminds.org.uk
- **Young Scot - Ayefeel**  
0808 801 0338 | www.young.scot/campaigns/ayefeel



If your child is in crisis and immediate danger, seek medical attention by **calling 999**

## CONNECT

Staying in touch with loved ones can make us feel happier and more secure. Often just having a chat can help to lift our mood.

## BE ACTIVE

Being active isn't just good for our physical health; it's also proven to have a positive effect on our mental health and wellbeing.

## TAKE NOTICE

Whether you're spending time with friends or taking a moment for yourself, try to stop to take notice and be aware of the present.

## LEARN

Learning enhances your self-esteem and confidence, and can be a great way to meet new people.

## GIVE

Giving can be very rewarding. In fact, people who report a greater interest in helping others are more likely to rate themselves as happy.

# SAMH INFORMATION SERVICE



0344 800 0550



info@samh.org.uk



[www.samh.org.uk/information-service](http://www.samh.org.uk/information-service)

*Got a question about mental health or wellbeing?  
We can help. Contact us Monday to Friday from 9am to 6pm.*



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for Scotland's mental health

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