

What are the signs and symptoms of poor mental health?

There are many signs and symptoms to look out for that may indicate a child or young person is struggling with their mental health. This resource looks at how to spot the signs that a young person is struggling with mental health and also includes some guidance about how to make a difference.

Treat everyone as an individual

There are many signs and symptoms to look out for that may indicate a child or young person is struggling with their mental health. Every young person is different so it is important to think about each as an individual.

If we ask ourselves 'what are the signs that would worry me or make me want to find out more?', we will come up with a list that often comes down to a change in behaviour from what is 'normal' for that particular young person. For example, a child who is usually very well behaved and quiet then becomes loud and aggressive, or a child who is usually very sociable and contributes a lot, becomes withdrawn and isolated.

Some signs and symptoms

- Not taking care of their appearance and/or hygiene
- Absence from school (or sickness – often in adolescence, young people will experience physical symptoms of anxiety or stress before they can necessarily articulate the issue; for example, being sick before coming school)
- Socially isolated and/or withdrawing
- Erratic behaviour or mood swings
- Risk taking behaviour
- Anger and aggression
- Not being able to concentrate and seeming distracted
- Avoiding friends and avoiding activities they used to find fun
- Missing regular appointments
- Seeming jumpy or nervous for no obvious reasons
- Panic attacks
- Tired in school
- Change in appetite
- Lack of aspiration or not being able to predict positive things happening in the future

Behaviour is communication

One of the most important things to remember is that all behaviour is communication. All young people's behaviour is a communication of an underlying issue that they need help with. Until they get help with the underlying issue, the behaviour will be very difficult to change. This is particularly important with issues such as conduct disorder and self-harm.

It is vital to create a safe and non-judgemental environment for young people to talk about, and understand, their feelings. One of the main things that young people worry about is being judged by their peers, their teachers and the wider community. So it is important to reassure young people that they are free to talk about anything they are concerned about, in an entirely judgement free environment.

How to make a difference

Here are some of the things that young people have said that they want people to know, and some of the things 'YoungMinds' have found to be the most important in making a difference for children and young people.

- Build relationships. Spotting the signs and symptoms of possible mental health issues relies on having a relationship with that child, so that you can notice when their behaviour is different from what is normal for them. The more relationships a child has, the better, because it is more likely that they will feel safe and comfortable enough to speak up when they are struggling.
- Observe (with ears as well as eyes).
- Be emotionally available.
- Create a climate where children feel able to access resources.
- Reflect not react.
- Understand behaviour is communication.
- Make information available.
- Signpost.
- Be prepared to take the first step.
- See the world from their perspective – it might look very different.
- Value appropriate opportunities for a child to take decisions and responsibility.
- Hang on in there – it might be a long and rocky ride.

What can you do?

- Create a positive culture where everyone is helped to understand the positive impact they can have on young people's mental health. All staff can be empowered to create safe and nurturing spaces and relationships with young people, making the most of all interactions. Very like safeguarding, the mental health and emotional wellbeing of children and young people is everybody's business.
- Listen non-judgementally.
- Acknowledge the child or young person's emotional distress.
- Encourage the young person to identify their own support network and encourage them to access other types of support.
- Recognise your limitations and refer to appropriate services when necessary. Often staff may feel that there is no point referring young people to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) via appropriate local pathways, as there are often long waiting lists and high thresholds. However frustrating this may be, it is vital to refer young people as early as possible to get the help and support they need.

Explain to young people what is going to happen next.

Make sure that you have time and space to reflect and look after yourself too. Dealing with complex behaviour and young people struggling with their mental health can be draining, upsetting and exhausting. It is important to debrief with managers or peers to ensure that you are well supported.