



# Understanding Mental Health



getting young voices heard

Empowering children and young people in public care and campaigning for change to improve their lives.

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## What do we mean by Mental Health?

It can be easier to understand mental health if we start off by thinking about physical health. Most of us know what it is like to be physically healthy, and also what it is like to feel physically ill, whether we have a cold or flu or something more serious like a broken leg or appendicitis. When people talk about their mental health, they are talking about their thoughts and their feelings, rather than about a virus or a broken leg!

If we have good mental health, we generally feel quite good about ourselves, we feel able to manage the ups and downs of life and are able to enjoy our relationships with others and to make the most of our abilities. If we are struggling with painful experiences and with difficult thoughts and feelings, it can feel so much harder to enjoy our day to day lives and to make the most of our opportunities.

“When people talk about their mental health, they are talking about their thoughts and their feelings”

Just as physical illness can cover a wide range of conditions, mental health problems are also very varied. It is a very normal part of life to be up and down with our feelings and to go through times of feeling happy or sad, angry or frightened. Sometimes our more difficult feelings can become much more intense and overwhelming, and it may feel as if they are never going to change. They may start to interfere with our ability to get on with our day to day lives, and it is then that we could say that we are having problems with our mental health.

Sometimes people have more serious mental illnesses and need a lot of special help to stay as well as possible and to get the best out of life. I will say a little bit more about these more serious illnesses later.

It can be very difficult for people to talk about their mental health because they are afraid of being judged or misunderstood. That is a real shame because mental health problems are really very common – one in four of us will have problems with our mental health at some point in our lives so it is time to get rid of all the judgements!

“One in four of us will have problems with our mental health at some point in our lives”



# What are the causes of mental health problems?

We are all different and have had our own experiences in life, so there are a number of different things that can affect our thoughts and our feelings. The following list is therefore just a start, and you may have some other ideas of your own.

## Difficult family background

We may be more likely to develop mental health problems if we have grown up with problems in our families, or if we have been looked after or locked up and have had to face even more problems when in care or in a secure setting like a prison. If you have grown up feeling frightened or unloved, or if you have been abused in any way, it can be harder to feel good about yourself and to trust that

other people are going to treat you well. Some people manage OK despite very difficult experiences, but others may really struggle. They may find it hard to cope with the day to day challenges of life because things have been so difficult for them from an early age when they needed to feel safe and supported.

“Some people manage OK despite very difficult experiences, but others may really struggle and find it hard to cope with the day to day challenges of life”

## Keeping your feelings bottled up inside

We are often encouraged to keep our feelings to ourselves and may get told off for crying too much or getting angry. It is actually very important to let our feelings out in a way that is safe for us and other people. If we keep our feelings inside they don't just magically disappear, often the opposite

happens and they get stronger and stronger until they come out in a way that may make us feel out of control and very distressed. Keeping our feelings in can also give us physical health problems like headaches and difficulty sleeping.

## Stressful life events

Even if things have been OK when we were growing up, unexpected things can happen that can make us more likely to develop mental health problems. It may be that we have had to leave our own country due to war and persecution and are having to face feelings of loss, fear and uncertainty. It may be that someone close to us has died or that we have become homeless, we may develop a serious physical illness or face the break up of an important relationship.

“Unexpected things can happen that can make us more likely to develop mental health problems”

“It is actually very important to let our feelings out in a way that is safe for us and other people”

## Genes

Some more serious mental illnesses, such as Schizophrenia, can be passed down from parent to child. This does not mean that the child will definitely get ill, but it does mean that there is a greater risk of them becoming unwell.

# Some examples of mental health problems

There are many different types of mental health problems and mental illnesses, and the following are just some examples. If you are worried about how you are feeling and the thoughts that you are having, it is always important to ask for help. Sharing your concerns with people who understand can be a great relief and very comforting. Please see the section 'Where can I go for help?' on page 11.

## Depression

Many of us feel sad and low at times and that is a normal reaction when things are not going so well in our lives. When we are more seriously depressed, the feelings are much stronger and can last for a much longer time. Depression is when we feel really down, despairing and hopeless. We may want to stay in on our own and may stop doing the things that we used to enjoy. We may find it hard to sleep, or hard to get out of bed in the mornings. Some people over-eat when they are depressed, whereas other people lose interest in food and eat less than they need. Some people feel so depressed, that they feel they no longer want to carry on living. It is very important to get help if you feel so seriously depressed and suicidal.

## Anxiety

We all know what it is like to feel nervous and unsure of ourselves at times, and this is usually for a good reason like when we start at a new school, a new placement or when we are doing something that is different and out of the ordinary. Sometimes this nervousness becomes really strong and makes us feel too

frightened to do things like go to school, talk to new people or even talk to friends who we used to feel OK with. When we are anxious, we can also have uncomfortable physical sensations like breathing very hard and fast because we are so scared, as well as difficulties with sleeping and concentrating.

## Eating problems

Eating problems are particularly common amongst young women, but are also becoming more common in young men. Many of us are worried about the size of our bodies and experiment with different diets to try to fit in with the pressures from society to look a certain way. For some people, a preoccupation with food and body size can become over-whelming. When we are feeling stressed and out of control of the things that are going on in our lives, it can sometimes feel as if food is the one thing that we do have some control over. There are a number of different types of eating problems, which are also sometimes known as eating disorders.

People with **Anorexia** are obsessed with depriving themselves of food in order to control their weight. They lose touch with the reality of their body size, and will think that they are much bigger than they actually are. They will spend much of their time thinking about food and how to avoid eating it. Anorexia is a dangerous illness, and can even result in people starving themselves to death.

People who have **Bulimia** also have a fear of food and an obsession with their appearance. They will go to extreme measures to rid themselves of food in order to keep to a steady weight and body size. Although they will allow themselves to eat, they will later make themselves sick, or use laxatives, to get rid of the food.

Other people struggle with **Compulsive Eating**. Many of us eat for comfort when we are feeling low, but when we eat compulsively, it is much harder to control this. When we are affected by compulsive eating, we are unable to stop eating even though we are not hungry and even though we may be in physical pain because of the amount of food that we have eaten. It can be easier to focus on food than on the underlying feelings that can be hard to face up to. People who eat compulsively may also have Bulimia and make themselves sick after bingeing on food.

It is very important to talk to someone, or get help from your doctor, if you feel that you have any of these problems with food.

“ People with Anorexia are obsessed with depriving themselves of food in order to control their weight ”



## Conduct Disorder

People who have a conduct disorder have difficulty managing and controlling their behaviour. This is usually because they have had to face a lot of problems in their lives and may not have had enough help to come to terms with their experiences and their feelings. Painful emotions can come out in problematic behaviour if no-one has taken the time to listen to a young person who is having a hard time. People may be told that they have a conduct disorder if they are unable to control their anger, if they act without thinking and are always getting into serious trouble.

## Self-harm

Self-harm describes the behaviour of someone who hurts themselves deliberately, for example by cutting themselves, burning themselves, pulling out their hair or swallowing dangerous objects. People self-harm in many different ways and for many different reasons. Self-harming can give you the feeling of being in control of something when you are facing a lot of problems that make you feel out of control. Some people find physical pain easier to deal with than emotional pain, and it can bring a feeling of release and relief. If we have coped with traumatic experiences by cutting off our feelings, causing ourselves physical pain can be a way to feel more connected and alive again.

“ People may have thoughts and images from the past that won't go away, they may experience nightmares and have difficulty sleeping, and have flashbacks where they relive the traumatic experience ”

## Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder describes a range of different symptoms which can occur in people who have experienced extreme trauma such as abuse, war, torture or being the survivor of an accident such as a train crash or a fire. People may have thoughts and images from the past that won't go away, they may experience nightmares and have difficulty sleeping, and have flashbacks where they relive the traumatic experience. Some people cut off their feelings and feel numb and disconnected, whereas others feel in a constant state of panic, finding it hard to concentrate on anything and often feeling irritable and distressed.

## Psychosis

Psychosis is a serious condition that causes people to lose touch with reality. They may hear, see, feel, smell or taste things that are not there. Hearing voices is the most common of these experiences. People who are psychotic may also have delusions. This is when they hold a strong belief in something that does not make sense to most of the people around them. For example, they may believe that they are being spoken about on TV or that people on the street are plotting against them. Psychosis can be very frightening, but it can be treated with medication. It is also possible for people to learn

to recognise when they are ill so that they are less likely to respond to thoughts and beliefs which are not true. People with schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder can have psychotic experiences when they are unwell. Psychosis can also be experienced in people who have gone through extremes of stress, such as torture or being in solitary confinement in prison. Some recreational drugs can lead to people having psychotic experiences and, if you already have problems with your mental health, it is important to know that taking drugs could make things feel worse for you.

## Schizophrenia

This is a serious and disabling form of mental illness. People with schizophrenia need to be on medication to control the symptoms of the illness. When unwell, they can have the psychotic experiences described in the Psychosis section. They may lose touch with reality, hear voices and have other disturbing hallucinations such as seeing things which are not there. Sometimes people hear voices that are friendly, but more often the voices are hostile and blame the person for things that they could not possibly have done. They may feel very paranoid and believe that people are plotting against them, and life can therefore feel very dangerous and unsafe. Medication can control many of the symptoms of schizophrenia, and people can stay well for long periods of time. However, at times of stress people can become unwell again, and it is therefore important that they have a lot of support to make sure that they are looking after themselves properly.

“ At times of stress people can become unwell again, and it is therefore important that they have a lot of support ”



“ Their thinking can become chaotic and they may not make much sense ”

## Bi-polar Disorder

This is a condition in which people will have extreme changes in their mood. People who are bi-polar can have times of feeling very high, manic and energetic, they may stay awake all night and make reckless and impulsive decisions such as spending lots of money. Their thinking can become chaotic and they may not make much sense. To the other extreme, their mood can become extremely low and they can experience a severe depression, sometimes to the extent of no longer wanting to live. Medication is used to stabilise these extremes of mood, but at times of increased stress, people who are bi-polar are still vulnerable to becoming unwell.

## Personality Disorder

This is a complicated diagnosis which includes many different kinds of behaviour. People are sometimes described as having a personality disorder when their behaviour, and their reactions to other people, are so extreme as to cause both them and others serious problems in day to day life. People described in this way can find it very hard to get along with others, and may have great difficulty controlling their feelings and the things that they

do. In some cases, people get into a lot of arguments, and into trouble with the police, and they find it hard to learn from their experiences. Although it can be difficult to change our personalities, it is thought that people with a personality disorder can be helped if they are supported to become aware of the difficulties that they have, and if they then decide that they want to try to make some changes.

# Where can I go for help?

There are many different people who can help you with how you are feeling, and it is important to try to find someone who you trust to talk to. You may choose a friend, a relative, a teacher, a school nurse, your social worker, a counsellor, your foster carer or your key worker.

## Advocacy

If you are looked after, or are a child in need of support from social services, you could ask to have an advocate if you feel that your wishes and your experiences are not being taken seriously. An advocate can help you to express your wishes and feelings to social services and to health services if you are not being listened to. They can go to meetings with you to try to make sure that your needs are understood and responded to.

If you are living in a children's home, a secure setting or a prison, there may be an advocate who visits on a regular basis who you can talk to about any problems that you are having, including any problems with your mental health. In prison, you could also talk to your personal officer or ask to see a doctor or nurse on the health care wing. Another possibility would be to talk to the chaplain or the imam. If you are living in a secure training centre or a secure children's home, you may want to

talk to your key worker or any other member of staff who you feel comfortable with.

If the person you have spoken to is very worried about you, or if you still do not feel any better, it is important to go and talk to your GP. Your GP will be able to refer you to other professionals who are specially trained to help children and young people with their mental health problems. You may be referred to a service called CAMHS – which stands for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, or to one called CLAMHS – which stands for Children Looked After Mental Health Service. Both these services have a team of professionals working in them, and you will be matched to the person, or people, who are most able to help you. The following explains what some of the different people in these services do.

## Psychologists

Psychologists help people to think about their feelings and about the ways that they react to different situations. They will try to help you to change reactions that are unhelpful to you. They do this by helping you to understand that it is possible to look at situations in a number of different ways and to change the ways that you think, feel and behave.

## Psychiatrists

Psychiatrists are doctors who have specialised in treating mental health problems and more serious psychiatric illnesses. They are able to diagnose what is wrong and to prescribe treatment. A psychiatrist will talk to you about how you are feeling, and the treatment they offer is usually medication. Medication can be prescribed to calm you down if you are very agitated or to lift your mood if you are very low and depressed. Everyone reacts differently to medication so it may take time for the psychiatrist to find which medication suits you best, and to decide how much you need to take to change the way that you are feeling. Many medications have side effects, and it is important to tell your psychiatrist if you are unhappy with any side effects that you notice.



## Psychiatric Nurses

Psychiatric nurses are nurses who have specialised in treating mental health problems. Some of them work in hospitals, and others work in the community and are known as Community Psychiatric Nurses (CPNs). They work alongside psychiatrists and will keep in touch with you to see how you are doing and whether the treatment you have been given is helping you. They will work closely with other people who are supporting you to try to ensure you are getting all the help that you need.

“ They will work closely with other people who are supporting you to try to ensure you are getting all the help that you need ”

## Psychotherapists

Psychotherapists help children and young people to talk about their feelings, and also help them to understand why they feel the way they do. They are likely to encourage you to think about your past and the things that have happened to you, so that you can make decisions in your current life that feel helpful and hopeful for you. Some psychotherapists work just by talking to you, whilst others combine talking with other activities such as art, music or drama.

“ Psychotherapists help children and young people to talk about their feelings, and also help them to understand why they feel the way they do ”



## Counsellors

Counsellors work in a similar way to psychotherapists but often for a shorter length of time. Because of the time limits, they are more likely to focus on trying to help you to solve the current problems that you are facing, and may spend less time talking in detail about your past.

## Family Therapists

These are psychotherapists who work with the whole family. They do this because many of our problems start at home, and from the way that family members relate to one another. We learn about relationships as we are growing up, and we get important messages from family members about how much or how little we are valued. This will have a strong effect on how we feel about ourselves. Family therapists don't just see the person with the problem as being the one who needs help, but work to support the whole family to make changes so that they learn to get on better with each other.

# What happens if my Doctor wants me to go into hospital?

If there are a lot of concerns about your mental health, your doctor might suggest that you spend some time in a psychiatric hospital so that your problems can be treated and you can be helped to feel better.

If you are aged 16 or 17, and your doctor is suggesting that you go into hospital voluntarily, you have the right to refuse to go even if your parents or social services think that this would be best for you. If you are under 16, you can also refuse to go into hospital if you are 'Gillick competent'. This means that your doctor believes that you have the maturity and understanding to make the decision as if you were over 16. If your doctor does not think that you are 'Gillick competent', then either your parents or, if you are in care, social services, will make

the decision that you should go into hospital.

You can be forced to go into hospital, by law, if it is thought that you have a serious illness that needs to be treated, or if it is thought that you are at risk of harming either yourself or another person. If you are forced to go into hospital by law, this is known as being sectioned. The law that allows you to be taken into hospital against your will is known as the Mental Health Act 1983. You can only be sectioned if three people agree that this is necessary. Two of these people must be doctors, often your own GP and always someone who is psychiatrically trained, and the third person is known as an Approved Mental Health Practitioner and is often a Social Worker.

“ If you are aged 16 or 17, and your doctor is suggesting that you go into hospital voluntarily, you have the right to refuse to go ”

## Your rights in hospital Advocacy

If you are admitted to hospital under section, you have the right to see an Independent Mental Health Advocate, also known as an IMHA. If you are worried about anything at all to do with being in hospital, it is a really good idea to ask to see the Mental Health Advocate. The role of the advocate is to communicate your wishes and your feelings to the professionals who are taking care of you. They will make sure that you understand your rights and that these rights are respected. They will also make sure that you are given a voice in the decisions that are being made about your care and treatment. The advocate can attend ward rounds and other hospital meetings with you. The Mental Health Advocates are independent of the NHS, and they are there to represent the things that you want and not to make their own decisions about what they think is best for you.

The advocate can also help you to get your case taken to the Mental Health Review Tribunal if you disagree with being in hospital under section. The tribunal will look at your case again and make their own assessment as to whether you need to remain in hospital. The advocate can help to find you a solicitor to represent you at the tribunal.

If you are a voluntary patient, and the doctors want to give you a form of treatment called Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT), you also have the right to see an advocate. ECT is occasionally given to people who are severely depressed and who have not responded to medication.

**You can ask any of the nurses or doctors how to get in touch with the mental health advocate, and you have the right to talk to the advocate in a private room.**

“ Lastly, but most importantly, don't forget that many people have problems with their mental health, and these problems are certainly nothing to be ashamed of. Although some people might think that asking for help is a sign of weakness, the opposite is actually true. Taking steps to look after your mental health, and to get the best out of your life, is a sign of great courage and great strength! ”

# Other organisations that can help with your mental health

## Voice

Helpline 0808 800 5792 – Monday to Friday 9.30-6.00pm

Email: [help@voiceyp.org](mailto:help@voiceyp.org)

[www.voiceyp.org](http://www.voiceyp.org)

Voice provides advocacy support to looked after, and locked up, children and young people, and to children and young people who are in need of support from Social Services. Voice also provides community advocacy, visiting advocacy and Independent Mental Health Advocacy (IMHAs).

## YoungMinds

Email: [enquiries@youngminds.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@youngminds.org.uk)

[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

They provide a lot of useful information about children and mental health. The website has special sections for children and young people with a lot of ideas about things that can help when you are feeling unwell.

## The Headspace Toolkit

[www.headspacetoolkit.org](http://www.headspacetoolkit.org)

This website has a lot of useful information about your rights if you are in a psychiatric hospital.

## National Self-Harm Network

PO Box 7264

Nottingham

NG1 6WJ

Support line 0800 622 6000 - Every day 7pm-11pm

Email: [info@nshn.co.uk](mailto:info@nshn.co.uk)

[www.nshn.co.uk](http://www.nshn.co.uk)

They provide information and support to people who self-harm.

## Beat - Beating eating disorders

Youthline: 0845 634 7650 Mon to Fri 10.30am-8.30pm,

Saturday 1pm-4.00pm

Email: [help@b-eat.co.uk](mailto:help@b-eat.co.uk)

They provide information and advice on eating disorders.

## Mind

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

General information line – 0845 766 0163 Email: [contact@mind.org.uk](mailto:contact@mind.org.uk)

Legal information line – 0845 225 9393 Email: [legal@mind.org.uk](mailto:legal@mind.org.uk)

Mind provides comprehensive information on all aspects of mental health.

## Childline

0800 1111 (24 hours)

[www.childline.co.uk](http://www.childline.co.uk)

A free, confidential helpline for any child or young person, up to the age of 18, who is worried about any problem in their life.

## Samaritans

Helpline: 08457 90 90 90

Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

A confidential 24 hour support service for anyone in distress, in crisis or who is feeling suicidal.

## Youth Access

020 8772 9900 – Monday to Friday 9.30am-1pm and 2pm-5.30pm

Email: [admin@youthaccess.org.uk](mailto:admin@youthaccess.org.uk)

They have details of all youth advice and counselling services throughout the UK.

## Get Connected

Freephone 0808 808 4994 – Open 7 days a week 1pm-11pm

[www.getconnected.org.uk](http://www.getconnected.org.uk)

Email: [help@getconnected.org.uk](mailto:help@getconnected.org.uk)

A free confidential phone and email service which will find you the best service to help you, whatever your problem. They will connect you to services for free and will text information to your phone.

## Youth 2 Youth

Helpline: 020 8896 3675 – Monday and Thursday 6.30pm-9.30pm

Email: [youth2youth.co.uk](mailto:youth2youth.co.uk)

[www.youth2youth.co.uk](http://www.youth2youth.co.uk)

A confidential helpline run by young people for young people, up to the age of 19, who are needing emotional support.



getting young voices heard

Written by Rachel Levy

### Advocacy Helpline for Children and Young People

Freephone: 0808 800 5792

Email: [help@voiceyp.org](mailto:help@voiceyp.org)

Text: 07758 670369

Online: [www.voiceyp.org](http://www.voiceyp.org)

If you need help you can speak to an advocate on our helpline. We are open every weekday from 9.30am to 6pm. It's free to call us from landlines and most mobiles. If you don't have much credit, just call or text us, and ask us to call you back.

If English is not your first language we can get an interpreter to help. If you can't speak on the phone we will try to arrange for you to meet an advocate in person.

Our helpline is staffed by trained advocates who are independent from Children's Services. All calls are confidential unless you or someone else is at risk of harm.

Voice, 320 City Road, London EC1V 2NZ

Tel: 020 7833 5792 Fax: 020 7713 1950

Email: [info@voiceyp.org](mailto:info@voiceyp.org)



# [www.voiceyp.org](http://www.voiceyp.org)