

PROMOTING POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH

FOCUSING ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AT KING ALFRED'S ACADEMY



Mental health is a key focus at King Alfred's Academy (KAA) and involves input from professionals, students and parents to ensure the right strategies and interventions are put in place to support our children and young people. This booklet has therefore been produced for everyone to utilise with the help and expertise of:

- Parents
- The Educational Psychology Service
- The School Nurse Service
- Public Health Oxford
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (Oxford)
- The KAA Counselling Service
- KAA Staff

Alongside this, our pastoral team work tirelessly with students, parents and outside agencies to ensure needs are addressed and met and, more importantly, appropriate support is provided for our children and young people. Throughout this work, numerous questions are often raised which are shared in this booklet and have been answered by appropriate professionals.

WHAT IS POOR MENTAL HEALTH AND WHAT ARE THE TRIGGERS?

Mental health is a state of well being, and when it is going well you can achieve your goals, feel happy, take pleasure out of life, cope with changes and problems, be resilient and take life's ups and downs in your stride. It does not mean you are happy every day, but it means you have balance, experience happiness and may feel appropriately sad during difficult times (this is healthy and a normal response to stress). Poor mental health is when you do not have a good balance, feel sad too often, feel controlled by your thoughts, feel unable to cope, anxious, constantly stressed or depressed.

WHAT SIGNS/SYMPTOMS SHOULD A PARENT LOOK FOR IN THEIR CHILD WHICH MIGHT INDICATE POOR MENTAL HEALTH? WHEN DO NORMAL FEELINGS OF SELF-DOUBT, ANXIETY CROSS THE THRESHOLD TO THE POINT OF 'FORMAL' SUPPORT BEING REQUIRED.

It is really normal to have some episodes of sadness, to be quiet and reflective sometimes, be angry or upset, and also feel a bit low sometimes; this is particularly true if it is in response to a difficult event, and we would see that as a normal response and healthy. However, if these feelings are not passing, and if you are not getting a reasonable balance of happiness too (this can vary but you will know what is normal for you), then you may feel you are no longer having a healthy response to a difficult situation, or a normal 'undulating' mood pattern.

Things to watch out for are prolonged sadness, loss of sleep, excessive crying, inability to cope with a bad day or a difficulty (all of these are normal in short bouts but if prolonged this may indicate a problem). If you have an inability to feel comfortable with yourself and this prevents you socialising or going out, this may be a problem. We do all have days where we think we look or feel horrible but if you cannot move past that it is worth seeking help. If you find you are becoming very obsessive about things, the order in which you do things, neatness, cleanliness, rituals of behaviour etc. then challenge yourself to try changing that need to follow a pattern. If you really can't, then it is worth talking to your parents, the school health nurse, GP or teacher/counsellor/student support staff about getting some further help.

If you feel the need to cut yourself or cause yourself physical pain or harm in order to cope with anxiety and stress, then you should seek support from your parents, the GP or from the school health nurse, counsellor, or a teacher who you trust to talk to. Any professional can make a referral to CAMHS or can talk to the school counsellor, school health nurse or in reach worker from CAMHS if there is a concern. The GP can also be of support and refer.

WHERE CAN YOUNG PEOPLE GO TO INITIALLY ACCESS SERVICES TO DEAL WITH ISSUES, BEREAVEMENT, DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY?

It is always important to talk about all health issues and our mental health is no exception. In school a student can talk to any member of staff especially:

- Tutors
- Student Managers
- Counsellors
- School Health Nurse

Outside of school your doctor is someone who is interested in all of your health needs and if necessary can refer you to other services.

Websites and looking up health worries on the internet can be misleading. Though this is tempting it is always best to talk to people about how you are feeling rather than diagnosing yourself through a website or App. Websites that are suitable and helpful to young people are:

- Youngminds.org.uk – UK's leading charity for the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people
- Action for Children
- Seesaw.org.uk – Grief support for children and young people in Oxfordshire

WHERE SHOULD I GO FOR HELP IF I'M FEELING DEPRESSED? WHAT'S MY FIRST POINT OF CALL IF NOT MY PARENTS?

It is normal to feel down sometimes. Life is not simple or plain sailing and we all have times when things go wrong and it gets us down.

Talking with people whom you can trust is an important thing to do throughout our lives.

Our families are often a great place to start and they normally know us well. Friends are a great source of support too and it is normal in a friendship for people to share worries, dreams, plans, hopes, fun etc.

Feeling depressed is quite different from feeling down. The only people who can diagnose depression is a doctor.

MY CHILD WOULD BE RELUCTANT TO SPEAK TO ANYONE AS HE DOESN'T THINK TALKING TO SOMEONE WOULD HELP. HOW CAN WE ENCOURAGE THEM TO TALK?

The way to encourage our young people to talk is by talking with them. Don't be afraid to ask your child how they are. When we do talk about our feelings we don't always need someone to give us an answer or fix it for us. It is valuable just to listen and empathise rather than getting into problem solving. As parents we of course want to make things better for our children, and sometimes this can make it hard to listen well (we can get caught into getting involved " Well I'd tell your friends to"....or "don't put up with it....." or "I'd tell them if I were you, would you like me to talk with them/parents/teacher".

Listening can help people find their own way of dealing with issues and gives people space to start to work out what they want to do. Often trying to persuade someone (especially teenagers) to do something just makes them more determined to not!

Try sharing why you think talking with someone would/might help and perhaps talking about the times when it's helped you is a way to encourage someone to think through the option.

HOW CAN I SUPPORT MY CHILD AT HOME?

It is important to have time to talk to your children every day, albeit briefly (10-15 minutes is enough if you are sincere, attentive and reliable about listening). If you have a concern they will be much more able to talk to you if they find this a normal thing to do. Therefore don't wait until there is a problem; start the process of laying down the foundations; it's never too late, but you will need to build up that trusting, listening and empathetic relationship before you can 'dive in' and expect them to open up.



If you have a lower level concern:

Ask open questions, ensure the time is taken every day to listen to how they really are, push a little about how they feel (don't assume you know, listen to how they say they feel, it may be different to what you are expecting) as well as what they are doing; don't worry if you don't get huge responses as it takes time to recognise our own feelings and then time to feel of about talking. They are learning this skill and you can help be a part of that education.

Hopefully you have noticed early any changes, and you can use a gentle Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) approach that allows them to describe and understand how they are really feeling, and then see the link between the feeling they have, and how they are behaving. When we talk about CBT, we take the stance that the feelings directly affect the behaviour so to make any changes we first need to think about what we are feeling, then how it is making us behave in a certain way, and lastly what we might choose to do differently to change it. That may be enough to turn a corner, but it won't happen over night so stick with it.

Ensure they have time to look after themselves. Young people need to work and socialise, but they also need a balanced diet, enough sleep, time to relax and time to process the day. It will be really helpful for you to help them learn how to develop these coping strategies, and how to effectively put them in place; they will be skills for life.

If you have a more serious concern:

If you think they are able to, suggest they talk to the Student Manager, school health nurse, a trusted teacher, or school counsellor. Any of these professionals can be accessed as required. The school nurse and counsellor in particular can assess the severity of any concerns and decide whether a referral to CAMHS may help. They can also decide whether this needs to be made urgently.

You should talk to your GP; they are fully able to give first line interventions, and have access to the referral process. You do not need to go to the GP to get a referral, and often the best person to make that referral is the person who knows your child best (you and a teacher or someone they have spoken to at school) but the GP is always there if you find that a better option.

Out of hours you can call 111 and they can direct calls. These would either be picked up via non urgent routes in working hours, or they would have access to the on call cover from CAMHS if it is needed.

Self harm:

Any concerns regarding self harm should be discussed with the GP, or in an emergency please contact 999, or seek medical advice from 101.

If a young person is cutting, drinking or eating toxic/poisonous or harmful liquids, or tempted to take excessive amounts of medications then you will need to seek medical advice immediately. Remove any objects from the home that could cause harm (empty medicines, remove knives or blades, including sharpeners) and ensure that those responsible for their care during the day are aware of the need to be vigilant and supportive (e.g. Teachers, parents or friends, any childcare providers etc).

Disordered eating:

For disordered eating, body dysmorphia, and diagnosable eating disorders, you should be mindful and observant of foods eaten, but not obsessive or over bearing in watching young people eat.

You can take them to the GP who will weigh and measure them. This will ascertain their BMI and this can be helpful for medical staff (when used in conjunction with other factors) in understanding the severity of any possible problem, although it can also be misleading especially in pre-pubescent children. If a GP is concerned they can check your child's blood to see if the body is suffering any duress, and they can then discuss this with CAMHS.

There is a specific pathway for eating disorders and their treatment in CAMHS, so referrals should be made promptly and when necessary; do remember though that many young people become a little faddy with their eating at some point, but this is normal and should pass. Try not to pay too much obvious attention and reactions to this or it can make it worse. However, instead use it as an indicator that something may be wrong. Go to the approach we talked about before where you use "side on" conversations to try and understand what's actually going on, and see if you can listen, make them feel heard and understood, as well as contained; then they may well find things just get better. Try and avoid talking about weight loss, diets, bulking up, etc. and talk about the body's need for fuel, healthy eating, how sleep or lack thereof can affect how your body processes food, and try and encourage them to have a healthy relationship with food as a necessary and enjoyable fuel, not a thing they obsess about or misunderstand.

It is worth thinking about whether your relationship with food might be affecting them, sometimes as adults we are too busy to eat properly, or we don't have time for family meals together where we can learn to enjoy food as a social experience.

ARE THERE ANY SUPPORT GROUPS? ARE THERE ANY CHILD OR 'TEEN' FRIENDLY EXERCISE GROUPS AROUND SUCH AS YOGA?

- The Council run Gyms tend to allow young people access from a much younger age than private gyms, so this is worth exploring in your local area. This can be very useful and the gyms report good uptake from young people but please check locally. There is also some access to personal training support and guidance for free in these gyms. In addition, I would encourage you to think of attending as a family if at all possible; this allows you to spend time together in a gentle way, and also develop shared interests that start to build up discussion points and bonds within the family. This will mean that when a young person does have a need, they are much more likely to be able to open a conversation about something with you, and the process will feel very natural and normal.
- There is a locally run youth group in Wantage and this supports the School and the Community very well: The Sweatbox on Facebook
- Abingdon Bridge is a freely accessible community based counselling and support service for local teenagers
- NHS Website is a good to look on to ensure any advice that has been given remains sensible and healthy
- There are many apps available, some free and some with a cost. Young people are very good at accessing and using these apps on their phone and they often enjoy these more than the traditional approaches we grew up with so do explore those (e.g. meditation , relaxation, healthy eating, yoga, fitness programs, Zumba, PlayStation dance games etc,) Some examples are (all free at the time of checking):
 - Digipill – relaxation and very good for young people
 - Headspace – relaxation and meditation – wide variety available within app
 - Calm – choose which topic (sleep, stress, improve focus, increase happiness, reduce anxiety etc
 - 5 minute pilates Yoga Down Dog – home Yoga app



HOW DO YOU GET ANXIOUS/DEPRESSED/WORRIED TEENAGERS TO FOLLOW THE EAT WELL, TALK, TAKE EXERCISE ADVICE?

Lives are very busy these days, and there are so many demands on families that it is incredibly hard to maintain the core family functions that help us have firm foundations when we really need them. However, the tougher the times, the more you need the foundations.

So, understanding that it is very hard to do and to maintain, the key thing to being able to reach out to teenagers in any situation is having some form of quality of relationship and trust with them. The earlier you can start this the better, but it is never too late. If a young person is very anxious worried or depressed, you may want to talk this through with their CAMHS worker, the school health nurse or school counsellor as well to ensure the application is specific for their needs, but these principles apply to all situations:

1. Gentle, reliable and regular availability for them

Don't sit them down for an interrogation when they or you get home, try and avoid direct, face to face conversations as that is too much for many young people. Instead sit next to them (side to side), let the TV be on perhaps (you can use it to your advantage here) but also talk to them, or perhaps talk over dinner, or whilst walking the dog or going to the shops. Start small, but aim to get up to a 15 minute 'how are you today' conversation in every day at some point. The tough bit is keeping this in the day when you are very busy and tired, but even if it is only 5 minutes it is highly valuable.

2. Listen

As parents and carers we do have to direct our children, and we have to be authoritative, and we must make them feel safe, but we also need to make them feel heard. You may agree with very little they say at times, and that is fine, but take time to listen anyway, it is the listening that really counts as you are making them feel heard, and that means you care and they feel valued.

3. Solutions, not stagnation/disempowerment

Once you have established the first two steps, you can then ask them to start thinking about what they can do with all their thoughts, feelings, views, reactions and responses to each day. You can start helping them define a little more about what this all means (this is them getting to know the person they will become through this process of gradually becoming an independent and successful adult, and you are sharing in it). The questions should be very gentle (not direct) and allow young people to explore for themselves the connection between how what they are feeling influences what they do and their behaviour. Try not to prompt the answer, it is better to wait and let them define their own answers, but you can help if they are stuck and if they ask for it; allow them to start exploring in a safe way with you what they feel and what they might feel inspired to do with that, and what changes that may then bring to their world. This also prevents them in the future being driven by reactive behavioural responses to emotions, as they will have learned that their feelings influence their behaviour, and they have the skill to control that.

4. Healthy choices

If you can do the above steps, this is when you may happily find that the young person concludes for themselves that the healthy lifestyle message is one that makes some sense. You may find you do not need to do much at all to prompt this and it comes quite naturally under their own steam, job done! If it is less clear to them, you can ask slightly probing questions that may prompt in the direction of healthy choices, or ask young people to consider how well known sports people balance the pressures they must have, (stress, anxiety, fatigues etc.) and remain healthy, and whether they can think of anything that you as a family could copy and do together, but do try and remain patient so they chose to follow that path rather than you tell them to.

An example of probing questions in a possible conversation is shown at the end; it is just an example of how you might probe and guide a conversation but may help. What you should avoid at all costs is telling them they should do it. It won't work and will possibly push in the other direction. If you can listen to them and understand what any barriers may be for them you can help find ways round these barriers together; for example, they may not know how to relax properly so sleep is difficult, they may be worried about something, they may feel anxious walking into a gym or a class for yoga or hockey or football, they may not have fully understood the link between food groups and health and how they work together if used properly. There are two key stages to implementing change, the one we often do well is setting the goal, but we don't always do the next one so well, which is to think about the detail of how we will work to that goal. A better approach is to work towards a goal the young person has set for themselves (maybe with a little gentle guidance), and then get them to make daily targets for getting one step closer to the end goal.

TRENDING ISSUES

There is much in the press and social media about mental health. We have increased the PSHCE work that we do relating to social media and the aim of this work is not to respond to each latest issue, but to educate students on how to make sensible decisions to look after themselves. We do this through assemblies, tutor time, external visitors, as well as regular articles in Academy Focus for parents which share information and resources.

The following summary from the Mental Health Foundation website identifies signs of when social media may be affecting mental health: ·

Low self-esteem.

- Feeling low when you see other people's images and lifestyle.
- Envy of others people lives - wishing your life was like someone else's.
- Finding social media as your first and only choice of activity done for enjoyment.
- Not having as many face to face conversations with your relatives and friends and feeling disconnected.
- Being unable to do anything without feeling you need to share it online

We continue to raise awareness with students on a regular basis and signpost support within school. We are increasingly trying to share with parents how support can be given, particularly around managing social media and responding to issues presented by social media, at home.

MENTAL HEALTH IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS

Most of the time those feelings pass, but sometimes they develop into a more serious problem, and this could happen to any one of us

- Unfortunately, stigma can be attached to mental health problems.
- But it's healthy to know and say how you're feeling.



EXTERNAL SUPPORT SERVICES: USEFUL WEBSITES

Youngminds.org.uk – UK's leading charity for the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people

- Action for Children
- NSPCC www.nspcc.org.uk
- Childline www.childline.org.uk
- Seesaw.org.uk – Grief support for children and young people in Oxfordshire
<http://www.seesaw.org.uk/>
- NHS Website
- CAMHS <https://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/camhs/>
- Family Directory OCC
<https://fisd.oxfordshire.gov.uk/kb5/oxfordshire/directory/youth.page?youthchannel=0>
- For help on Autism: www.autism.org.uk
- Be Free Young Carers www.befreeyc.org.uk
- Cruse – bereavement services www.cruse.org.uk