



Mental health guide
for children and teens

This leaflet is for those under 18 years old. If you are a parent or carer, please consult our other leaflet on mental health in children and teens.

Mental health problems are not uncommon in children and teenagers. It has been estimated that 10% of those under the age of 18 will be affected at some point¹. That's why it's important that as a child or teenager you know that having a mental health problem is nothing to be ashamed of. While many people avoid treatment due to fear of stigmatisation, we hope that these information brochures will help to reduce the stigma around mental illness and ensure that sufferers get the help they deserve.

It is estimated that 70% of sufferers do not receive the help they need at an early enough age². This leaflet will outline some commonly occurring mental health problems that affect children and teenagers, and discuss why some people may be affected. We will also discuss things you can do to help protect yourself from mental health problems.

Most importantly, this guide will advise how to seek the help you deserve, and give you advice on how to handle a friend asking for help. Overall, we hope that this leaflet will better equip you as a young person when it comes to mental illness.

What are some commonly occurring conditions?

There are a great number of mental health conditions that affect adults, and for the most part they all can affect children and teens too. However, there are some conditions that are more common in children than others. It can be scary when you are feeling unwell and hear people talking about different disorders using terms you do not recognise. To try to relieve some of this worry, we will briefly explain some of these common conditions here. This is not an all-inclusive list, so please don't feel disheartened if your condition is not mentioned here.

Depression – Depression is when a person experiences a low mood or feels sad for a long time, usually weeks or more. While it is normal to feel sad or down occasionally, depression goes further than this and impacts a person's day-to-day life. It also causes a person to lose interest in things they previously enjoyed.

Self-harm – Self-harm is when a person intentionally hurts themselves, often to deal with unwanted emotions or stress. Whilst a person may not intend to end their own life, this can happen unintentionally and it is therefore important to report any self-harming behaviours as soon as possible.

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) –

Anxiety is a feeling of uneasiness or fear. Whilst in many situations it is normal or even beneficial to feel like this, those with GAD experience these feelings most or all of the time and this greatly affects their day to day lives.

Eating Disorders – This term covers a number of different disorders. These include Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa and

Binge Eating Disorder. Eating disorders involve unhealthy behaviours around food, such as eating too much when not hungry, restricting foods when you are hungry, or causing yourself to be sick after eating.

Conduct Disorder – Conduct disorder is where a person behaves in a way that breaks rules or goes against what society expects of them, often at school or at home. These behaviours can cause a person to get in trouble at school. Behaviours can include being aggressive, being destructive, breaking rules and being deceitful.

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Why do some people develop these conditions?

There are many different reasons why someone might develop a disorder. There are parts of a person's biology that can make a person more at risk of mental illness. Environmental and social factors may also play a role. Generally it is thought that these factors overlap, as not everyone will develop the same condition following the same life events. Often it is when a number of these factors occur at the same time that the chance for developing a condition is highest.

Here we will list some factors that may make a person more susceptible to developing a disorder. It is important to remember that if you read this section and see something you have experienced, that doesn't mean you will definitely develop a condition because of it. Some factors include:

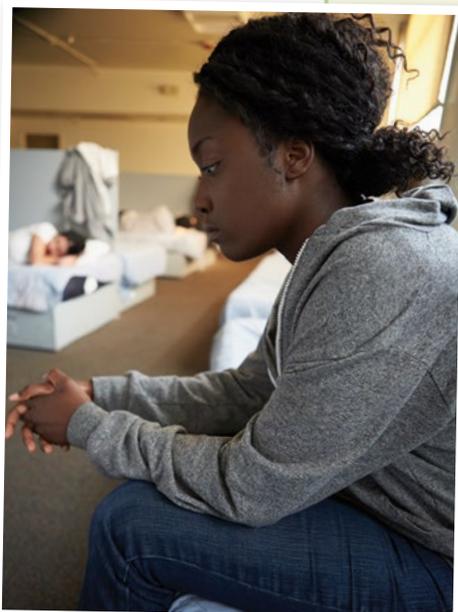
Bullying – It is likely that everyone who is reading this will attend, or has attended, a school that has different programmes to prevent bullying. It is important that schools and students get involved with them and try to help reduce bullying. Being the victim of bullying can massively affect a person's mental health, as can being the bully themselves. If you are at school and notice bullying, it is important to report this as you may be helping to protect the long term mental health of all involved.

Abuse – If you, or a child or teen that you know, has been physically, sexually or emotionally abused, we strongly encourage you to report these abuses to the authorities as soon as possible. Not surprisingly, being the victim of physical or other types of abuse can lead to poorer mental health going forward.

Losing a loved one – At any age, we are all saddened by the loss of a loved one. When this happens, we experience a number of emotional and behavioural changes known as bereavement. In some cases bereavement may cause a person's mental health to go downhill, especially if it involves the loss of a close relative such as a grandparent or parent.

Substance abuse – Although some children do use substances, teenagers are far more likely to have issues with substance abuse. Going through the teenage years and transitioning into early adulthood can be tough, and it can cause a strain on a person's mental health. Some turn to substances such as drink and drugs to help them get through. We strongly advise against this, as using substances during the teenage years can inhibit some developmental processes and can negatively affect many areas of your life. Substance abuse can also be a disorder of its own. If you are struggling with substance use we strongly advise you to see your doctor straight away.

Divorce – It can be a very hard process when a person's parents are separating or divorcing. Divorce can result in a child being away from one parent for an extended period of time, and most often the family setting is changed forever. This can be very traumatic for a child or a teenager and can lead to a number of mental health problems.



How can I protect myself against developing these conditions?

Much like with physical illness, nothing you can do can ever completely guarantee that you won't develop a mental health condition. However, there are a number of things you can do to help to ensure that you maintain a healthy mind. Doing some of the following things may help:

Eating well and exercising – While you will have often been told that eating a balanced diet and exercising is good for your physical health, you may not have realised that this also benefits your mental health. Eating well and staying fit helps all round.

Making time to have fun and socialise – What you find enjoyable may change with age but it is important to make time to relax and have fun. This is especially important when you feel overloaded with school work. Making time to play or go outdoors, not just inside, is also good.

Taking part in activities – Not everyone is into sports but it is nice to find a local group or club for something that does interest you. This could be a school club or one in the local community and it may involve anything you enjoy, such as games, books, or crafting. Being part of a club not only is not only fun, but it also is another opportunity to make friends and socialise.

Avoiding self-criticism – It can be very easy to be hard on yourself, especially if you don't get the grades you want in school. It is normal to be disappointed, but if you can avoid being self-critical, and instead focus on how you can improve next time, you will help maintain your mental health.

Avoiding bottling up emotions – We all bottle up our emotions at some time but it is often healthier to talk these emotions and problems through with a close friend, even if this is a day or so later. You never know, your friend may be able to offer another point of view that helps you see your problem in a new light!



What should I do if I think I am suffering? How can I get help?

Feeling that you may be suffering from a mental health problem can leave you feeling isolated and alone. In many cases people feel ashamed or embarrassed, but we want you to know that that is the last thing you be feeling. It is not shameful to be unwell. We doubt that you would be ashamed about breaking an arm or developing appendicitis, so when you look at it like this, you should not feel shame about suffering from a mental health problem. We do appreciate that there is, unfortunately, a stigma surrounding mental illness, but we hope that this does not put you off finding the help you deserve.

Before we discuss what to do in general we must first address suicide risk. If you feel you are at risk of attempting to take your own life, or if you have made plans to do this already, then we encourage you to tell somebody immediately. This might be a family member, a local emergency medical line or a charity helpline. If you have taken action already, then we encourage you to seek medical attention immediately using your local emergency facilities. It is important to deal with any suicide attempt extremely seriously and you need to seek medical attention now.

If you do feel you are suffering from a mental health condition then the best first step to take is to talk to somebody about this. The idea of doing this may be quite frightening, but talking to somebody you can trust is, in some cases, enough to relieve some of your milder symptoms you are experiencing. Most people don't want to burden others with their problems, but I'm sure you'll agree that you would always want a friend to turn to you if they needed help. It's important to remember, then, that your friends and family feel the same way about you and will want to help.

Some people might want to confide in a parent, and others might choose to talk to a teacher, school counsellor or close friend. Others might decide they want to talk to a community leader or medical professional. These are just some examples, but you it's entirely up to you and you can choose who you feel most comfortable talking to. If you can't think of somebody you would want to talk to, then you may find confiding using a helpline is the best option.

You might feel more comfortable telling someone your problems over the phone or over email rather than in person. That is absolutely fine. The key is being able to share your concerns with somebody. It is important to keep some things in mind when asking for help, such as:

Timing and location – It is important that you choose to open up in a time and place where you can discuss your problem in detail if you need to. For example, telling a teacher as class begins may not be as good an idea as staying behind after class to talk things through. You don't want to feel rushed when talking about such a personal thing, and you don't want to feel like you're being overlooked or ignored if the other person can't listen to you fully at the time.

It may not go as planned – Unfortunately, on rare occasions you might not get the reaction or support that you hoped for. While this can hurt, it might just be because the person you're confiding in doesn't have much of an understanding of mental health. Please try not to take this personally and do not let it put you off talking to somebody else. In time the first person may learn more about your condition and will be able to support you. There will always be someone out there who understands and it's important to keep trying.

What do you want from the conversation? – It is important to think about what you want when you are confiding in somebody. Will you be expecting them to give you advice or just to listen? It's a good idea to let them know why you are telling them; can they help you find more information or do you just need them to simply be there for you?

Once you have opened up to somebody about how you are feeling, you may feel more confident about talking to other people. For example, if you tell one parent, you might then feel better about telling the other. You might decide you only want to tell one person – either way, both options are completely fine. If you are really struggling, your friend or family member might ask you to confide in someone else as well as them, as it can be a lot for one person to take on board. Try not to be offended by this, as the person is simply trying to look out for their own wellbeing while still being there for you.

Some people might need professional treatment for their condition. This might be a daunting feeling but it is important to remember that all those involved in treatment will be looking out for your best interests. Depending on your age, a lot of the treatment arrangements will be made by a parent or guardian and their involvement in the process will depend on a number of factors including risk and treatment severity. Depending on your location and your age you can sometimes ask that only limited information is shared with your parent or guardian. In many cases though, depending on your situation, the more involvement they have the more likely they are to be able to help you.

Whilst we won't go into all the potential treatment paths that are available, as these will generally change depending on your age, where you live and your condition, we can say that in most cases your first medical contact will be with a general practitioner (a GP – your family doctor). They will be able to assess you and decide whether they may be able to provide some treatments, or if you need to be referred to a specialist. If you are referred to a specialist you may see a psychologist, a psychiatrist or another mental health professional. They will work with you to help you get better and may use a combination of medications and talking treatments.

In some cases you may require a short stay in hospital to help you get better. Many countries have staff and facilities that specialise in treating children and teens and so everything will be adapted to suit the age range. Lots of people are fearful of hospitals, psychologists or workers in this field, maybe due to old television shows and films. But it's important to remember that a lot has changed over the years and scary hospitals seen on television are no longer anything like real life.

What should I do if a friend confides in me?

As a child or teenager you might feel a whirlwind of emotions when a friend tells you they are feeling mentally unwell. You may feel honoured that they have chosen you, concerned about their wellbeing and also scared about the pressure that this puts on you. It is important to take time to reflect on what you have been told and to think about what you can and can't offer your friend.



This person has confided in you because they need support, not because they think you are an expert. For this reason, you don't need to know everything about their condition. It might be useful to do some light research, but since you won't be treating them, don't feel pressured to know everything. The most important thing to do is listen. Listen to how they are feeling, what they want to do and how they think you can help them. Offer them emotional support and try to make yourself available to talk things through. Importantly, avoid language that might be offensive and avoid minimising how their problems or how they feel. Telling somebody who is down to 'get over it' or 'just cheer up' is not going to be helpful for them. When you are mentally unwell, it's not possible to do that.

You might also be able to help your friend find a way to get the right treatment. If you feel you're able to, you might be able to go with them to the doctor or wherever it is they can go for help. If they are not open to treatment then try not to keep pushing this point, as it may lead to confrontation. Instead, wait for another occasion to bring this up again when they are less distressed.

However, if you feel a person is a risk to themselves then you may not be able to delay treatment, especially if you are concerned that they may harm themselves. These situations are difficult, but you might have to seek help on their behalf and contact a medical professional. This is also the only time where you could consider sharing your friend's problems. In all other situations, you should keep what they have told you to yourself, unless they ask you otherwise, and avoid gossiping with friends. Breaking their trust could be detrimental for both of you.

This doesn't mean you can't ask for support from others if you feel you need it. In fact, we encourage this as you need to look after your own wellbeing as well. But if you do choose to do this, you should make sure you avoid giving out any details which might identify the person who has put their trust in you. If you do find that providing support is too much for you then you will need to discuss this with the sufferer so that they can use other helpful resources as well as you.

If you are interested in learning more about mental health then please visit our website: www.shawmind.org where we have lots of information regarding mental health, as well as a section dedicated to information for children and teens.



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www.shawmind.org

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