

Having discussions with young people about mental health

Mental
Health
UK

INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME

Initiating conversations about emotional wellbeing can feel challenging; it may put us completely out of our comfort zone. We often don't feel equipped with the right information. This can be further compounded by a lack of confidence and fear that we might say something 'wrong'. But don't be alarmed, this guide can help you.

This guide has been developed to support you when talking to a young person about mental health and the important role resilience has to play. You may have tried conversations like this in the past and have learned that it doesn't always go according to plan, and that's fine.

Mistakes can lead to learning and growth, and that perseverance is key. You will have the opportunity to test out what works for you and we hope it will help you feel supported when you are having discussions with a young person about mental health, and you feel your role as a parent, carer or supporter of a young person is enhanced.

Young people and resilience

Young people's mental health and resilience is strengthened when they feel listened to, and when their concerns are taken seriously. Everyone's experiences are different and young people today have different stresses on them than previous generations. We can support and educate young people about how better to cope with a particular situation that may cause them stress and how to build their resilience by equipping them with the necessary tools.

If we think about how feelings and thoughts are linked to behaviour, and then how this has an impact on mental health. There are days when we feel sad and struggle, and other days when we feel stronger. We need to send a clear message that it's ok to ask for help when we need it.

Some support can come through resilience building and this is something many young people are familiar with, but sometimes confused by. When young people are given the necessary tools to build their resilience, it can play a central role in helping them to adapt to change and cope with stressful situations - all of which can support their mental

health. Resilience is an essential and learnable skill that everyone has, rather than a trait you are born with, so opening the conversation around it is the best place to start.

About this guide

This guide is based around the content of Bloom, designed and delivered by Mental Health UK, for 14–18 year olds. Bloom is focussed on young people using their strengths and encourages them to employ tools and strategies to build their resilience.

The tools we encourage you to use have been developed through research with young people. They incorporate elements of mindfulness and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) which are common therapies and techniques anyone can use.

You will learn practical tips on how best to talk about mental health, and also how you can support young people to cope with certain situations they might find challenging.

You will learn to use curiosity as a base to explore how a young person might be feeling. The guide can also help you to create an understanding of what resilience is and how it can be built, based on what works for each individual.

How to use this guide¹

Pick topics that you feel are most relevant to the young person you are talking to. There may be times when some topics are more relevant than others, for example focusing on stress around exam time. The guide

¹ You can use this guide with young people of any age, but please note that the tools have been developed for 14–18 year olds. The tools are scenario-based and young people outside of this age bracket may not find them relatable, but you may still find the advice and guidance helpful when talking to young people of any age.



provides you with a key message for each topic, a platform to get started, a top tip to support your approach and reflection time.

It is also important that you have reflection time for yourself. Most topics are accompanied with tools which will support you if you feel it would be beneficial to continue the conversation in other ways.

There may be things that arise from your discussions that you don't have the answers for. That's fine, don't worry; it's a really positive step that you have started the conversation. This may lead to you wanting to speak to the school or a GP, and please do if you are concerned.

Hints and tips if you are worried:

- **Be open:** Perhaps speak about the fact you are concerned and explain what you have noticed that has made you feel worried.
- **Normalise:** Say that It's nothing to be ashamed of. Speaking about how you are feeling is brave. Talk about the fact most people have ups and downs and open up about yourself and your feelings.
- **Listen and empathise:** Empathy helps young people connect and requires you to try and understand how they are feeling and listen to their point of view. Sometimes, it can be more helpful than giving advice.
- **Don't make assumptions:** Young people told us that one of the ways that people shut down conversations with them is to assume you know how they feel or what their issues are.

If you are still concerned please refer to the signposting document at the end of this guide and remember you can also speak to your GP or a trusted member of staff at the school or college.

Top tips for opening up the conversation



Top tips before starting the conversation:

- Think about the setting: what else are they doing or going to be doing around that time?
- Be respectful of their priorities - is now the best time?
- You aren't expected to have all the answers, you're there to listen and guide them. Try not to panic if they share something which you weren't prepared for.
- Think of ways that you can discuss things without necessarily using labels like 'mental health' or naming conditions such as anxiety or depression as this might shut down the conversation.
- Be transparent about what you are doing and why you are doing it. You might want to explain to them that this guide has been helpful for other people, and that it has ideas that you could explore together.
- Listen out for anything worrying that you might need to act on and refer to our signposting advice in this pack for organisations that can provide specialist support.
- Read the guide before you use it, if you have the chance, and make notes.
- Print out the guide and perhaps one copy for you and one for the young person you are talking to.

OK. Let's get started!

The following topics are covered:

- Exploring mental health
- The importance of curiosity
- Defining resilience (and learning to use it)
- The brain's response to stress
- Inner critic versus inner coach
- Rational self-talk
- Celebrating small steps

Reflection time – take 5 minutes!

Consider instances when conversations about difficult topics have gone well – what time of day was it and where were you? Picture the scene in detail: were you engaged in an activity together, how did you create a sense of time and space? When we reflect on examples of conversations that have gone well, we can seek to build on that experience in the future. If you can't think of an example from the past, use our top tips to visualise an instance where this could happen in the future.



EXPLORING MENTAL HEALTH

Everyone has mental health. Comparing mental health to physical health is a good way to open up and start. There are key concepts to being mentally healthy.

Getting started: Conversations about the relationship with physical health and mental health can help young people to recognise that they have the power to maintain and improve their own mental health.

A good analogy for understanding this is working out at the gym. If you lift weights consistently and you are given a slightly higher weight than you are used to, you know the form and hopefully will be able to lift the weight. However, if you don't lift weights, you may be worried about it or scared of it. In a similar way, if you look after your mental health it makes it easier to deal with difficult challenges, such as exam pressure.

Exploring the following concepts with a young person can boost their confidence in learning how to be mentally healthy.

- **Wellbeing:** the state of being comfortable, healthy or happy. It's important to highlight the transient nature of these states and how a positive mindset can be important. It's also ok to have difficult emotions when times are hard.
- **Own potential:** opening up conversations about someone's potential can be really powerful. Young people may receive mixed messages about their skills and abilities, so it's valuable for them to define these with the support of their loved ones.
- **Normal stressors:** these are things that 95% of people experience. These are often seen as universal stressors, and might mean disagreeing with people, being stuck in bad traffic, or your phone running out of battery. It's important to recognise that feeling stressed about these things is not a sign of mental illness.
- **Work productively:** working as well as possible to achieve a goal. Help them to draw on examples when they've worked at their best. How did they manage to do that? What would be the signs they were working towards that again?

What is mental health?

Mental health is defined as a state of **wellbeing** that enables every individual to:

- Realise his or her **own potential**
- Cope with the **normal stresses** of life
- **Work productively**

It affects how we think, feel and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others and make choices.

Why is mental health as important as physical health?

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Reflection time – take 2 minutes!

Why is mental health as important as physical health? Understanding this yourself will help you to feel more confident in your conversations. Poor physical health can lead to an increased risk of developing mental health problems. Similarly, poor mental health can negatively impact on physical health, leading to an increased risk of some conditions.

Ask them what they feel like when they have a cold. They might mention coughs, sneezes and other physical symptoms. Then ask them how much they can concentrate, or if they think as clearly, or how they feel emotionally when they are unwell. This reiterates that physical and mental health are linked.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CURIOSITY

Curiosity is an attitude. It is associated with having an open or 'growth' mindset, where we are open to new ideas and ways of doing things. It has an important role to play in building resilience.

Getting started: Having a curious mindset and attitude can help us to be open to different options and alternatives about our future. Once we make a decision and choose a course of action, curiosity can help us to be alert to changes, improvements and alternatives when they present themselves. It can stop us from being blinkered and set in our ways.

Curiosity is about being open to new possibilities, instead of being 'closed' to new ideas or things that don't chime with our current beliefs and values. This can help us see more options when making decisions about the future and can help us to become aware or curious about the benefits of taking one course of action compared with another.

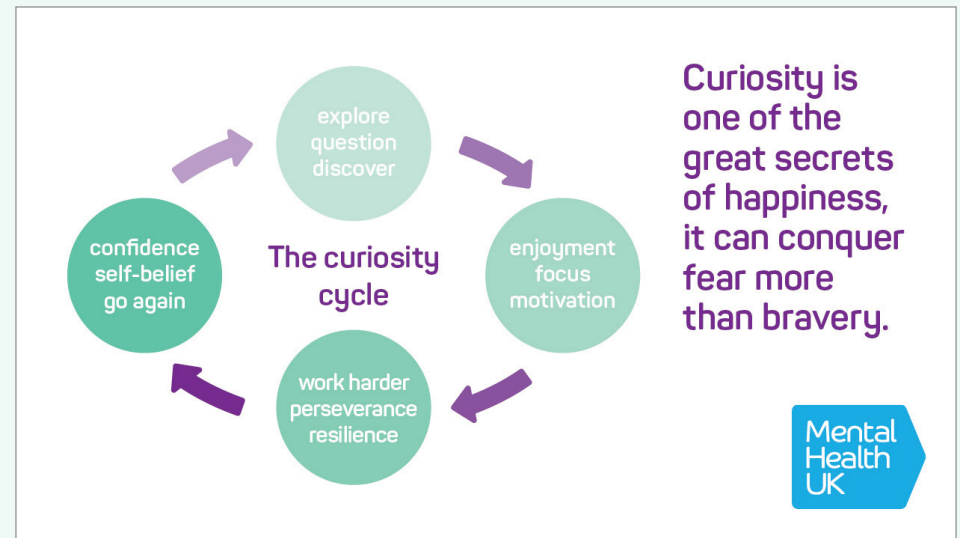
Curiosity, experimentation and wanting to discover and learn things will accelerate a young person's learning and development and open up possibilities for the future. They might also be curious about what they can achieve and how successful they can be.

Reflection time – take 5 minutes!

This might be an opportunity for you to open up a conversation about what they were curious about when they were younger, as they may not remember.

Ask what they remember being curious about when they were younger?

Some of your reflections might include that they had no sense of what was potentially dangerous or what was socially expected, for example. But they experienced this curiosity when their learning and development was growing quickly.



The 'enemies' of curiosity



Reflection time – take 10 minutes!

Explore the following questions using the curiosity cycle and enemies of curiosity diagrams. During this exercise, it would be good if both of you could share your experiences of the questions below:

- What are the enemies of curiosity?
- What reduces a person's ability to be curious?
- How has curiosity worked for you?
- Consider if there are instances where being curious led to enjoyment and motivation - how did this impact your self-esteem?
- What would be the signs of you being more curious in the future?
- What are comfort zones? What is good about them? What is not so positive about sticking to your comfort zones?

Tool: For and Against Tool

The For and Against tool supports you when making decisions. It helps to look at the positive and negative factors in any decision you have to make. To use this tool give each decision a for and against rating out of 10, where 1 is an insignificant factor and 10 is a very significant factor. For example, a young person might not know whether to 'stay in education post-16' on the 'For' side they may write 'I know the teachers and my friends are here'. On the 'against' side they may write 'I won't be earning any money'. However one of these is likely more important to them so they might say the 'For' statement is valued at a '6' but the 'Against' statement is valued at a '9'. Then add up the totals at the bottom to help you make a decision. It can be a really helpful tool when faced with a difficult decision.

Ask the young person you're with to share their For and Against Tool and discuss why they have made the judgements they have. Ask them: Why have you given this a high rating? Why is it a major factor for you? Why have you given other things a lower rating?

For and against tool

Topic:

For

☐
☐
☐
☐

☐ Total

Against

☐
☐
☐
☐

☐ Total

Ask the
young person
about their
responses



For young people's mental health

DEFINING RESILIENCE AND LEARNING TO USE IT

Resilience is very important in a young person's mental health. We need to gain an understanding of what it means and how we build it.

Getting started: Young people hear a lot about resilience. We are cautious about using an exact definition as it's a personal thing; however a great way to kick this off is explaining what resilience means to you, and then asking what it means to them.

So far, we have explored the idea of opening up conversations, being curious and encouraging curiosity. These provide a solid foundation for exploring resilience. There are many definitions of resilience and the one that we are sharing with you will help you to identify and promote existing resilience in a young person as well as to learn (or remember) how resilience can develop in an ongoing way.

Resilience is not just something to get us through the 'not-fun times' but it can help us with both the more challenging and enjoyable times too.

Some people view resilience as a bouncing ball analogy, but this isn't exactly true; resilience is so much more than that.

A resilient young person will not simply 'bounce back' or 'forward' after a stressful situation, such as parental divorce or bereavement. However, protective factors, such as having tools to support emotional resilience, can help them to work through situations and cope with difficult times in positive ways.

Resilience

- Is something we use every day
- Is a process (something we do rather than something we just have)
- Helps us get through the 'not so fun' times



Reflection time – take 5 minutes!

When have you been resilient in your own life? While we can teach some concepts and activities to support young people to build resilience, it's also important that we model resilience for them ourselves.

Are they aware of the times you've been resilient? How will they know in the future that you're continuing to be resilient? Consider sharing the times and ways you have been resilient and perhaps times when you have been less resilient.

Tool: Resilience Graph

Ask them to complete the graph for the day before or make this a feature of 'everyday reflection' by asking them on the day and completing it together. Ask them, "How did you get through difficult times?" Moving up and down through a day is normal. If we don't move up at all, over a period of time then we need to talk to someone and seek support with this. Ask the question "What do you think helps us get through the down times?"

Our days are not always perfect and there are down times, but resilience can help us get through them. You could also complete a resilience graph yourself and compare it with theirs, showing that the ups and downs are different and how we all can have different ways to get through our day.

Resilience is not...

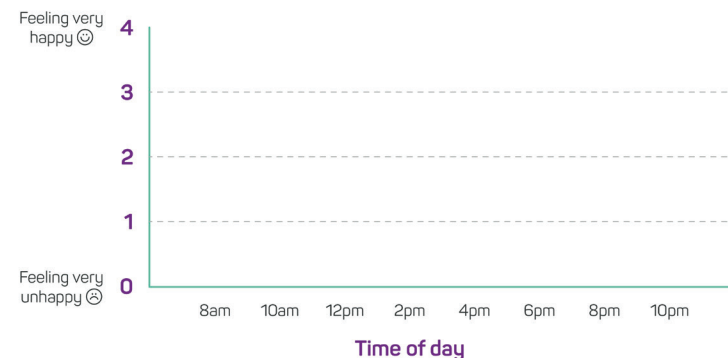
immediately
bouncing forward
after a negative,
stressful situation

a dramatic
personality
change

being invincible
or hardy (aka
Superwoman or
Superman!)

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Resilience graph



THE BRAIN'S RESPONSE TO STRESS

It is important to think about the brain. Young people are often relieved when they learn that the way our brains respond to different events relates to the way our brains are designed but is also something we have the power to change. Look at stress and our role in it and work through the stress toolkit.

Getting started: Exam stress is a big challenge. Stress can help us in many situations but too much can be unhelpful. It can close down a young person's ability to think clearly and make us forget things. This isn't great when they're faced with a set of exams for example. So, let's bust stress!

The way young people think and where they focus their thoughts can have a massive impact on how their brains are wired and connected. As well as how we think, what we do in situations also affects the way our brain is wired and how it helps or hinders us to achieve our goals. We can influence whether our brain helps us to be calm, resilient and cope with exam stress, or whether we feel out of control or anxious.

Explore the diagram and explain that when they experience extreme stress, such as just before an exam, they go into fight, flight or freeze mode. That's the brain's job. It helps us when we are in danger. The problem is, when young people are in fight, flight, or freeze mode, this is not helpful for learning, thinking, curiosity and remembering things they've learned for their exams.

Young people may seem very anxious or tell you that the information 'isn't going in' for example. This is because the primal parts of their brain are taking over and flooding their bodies with stress hormones. With the right tools – such as the stress toolkit – and practice, young people can learn to control this stress response.

Dopamine is our friend – it's a chemical which is released when we are curious, focused and calmly 'in the zone' with manageable and helpful stress. Dopamine is also released when we have learned something new or when we find an activity enjoyable. Try and link this to an activity such as playing their favourite video game, taking part in a sport they enjoy or watching a film they like.

The brain



Prolonged stress affects our ability to think, learn and remember

Ultimately our brain largely operates in the way we instruct it to act. This takes effort. Your brain can hinder your happiness, success and wellbeing, but can also be a great friend and helper in your life. It just takes practice.

Tool: Stress Toolkit

1. Attitude

Be optimistic and do your best. Adopt a 'have a go' mindset and a positive attitude!

2. Relaxation

Do whatever works for you – bath, breathing exercises, sports, music and so on.

3. Self-talk

Become aware of overly critical self-talk and be kind to yourself.

4. Focus

Choose where to focus your attention and your energies. Only multi-task if there is no other option.

5. Effort

Choose how much effort to put in – sometimes (for certain subjects or topics) you may need to put in more effort, and sometimes – less.

6. Breathing

Carry out breathing exercises (take a deep breath in slowly through your nose for a count of 4, hold for 4 and slowly release through pursed lips for a count of 6).

7. Food and drink

Drink water often to hydrate and don't drink too much caffeine, as it can make you jittery, anxious and can affect your sleep. Try to have a balanced diet.

8. Leisure time

Make sure you see your friends, do sport and exercise.

9. Visualisation (imagination)

Before an exam or a test, imagine yourself performing well and/or imagine yourself leaving the exam knowing you've done your best. Do this several times in the lead up to exams and just before. (This is much better than having looping thoughts about how bad the future will be if you don't do well or ruminating on all your past exam 'failures'.)

10. Balance

It's important that you balance hard work and intense study periods with relaxation and social interactions.

11. Revision plan and strategies

Ask for help to put together a revision plan, with breaks and rewards. Use note-making and study methods and patterns that work for you.

12. Support

Ask for help from teachers, tutors, parents, friends and others in your life. They may be able to help you manage stress or come up with helpful study strategies.

Reflection time – take 15 minutes!

Use the stress-busting tool kit to help explore strategies. What do they already use in stressful situations? What else could they try from the toolkit, which is new to them?

INNER CRITIC VS INNER COACH

Human beings feel happier when they surround themselves with people who encourage them and positively challenge their negative thinking. Unfortunately, we do not apply this positively often enough to our own thinking. Managing our inner critic and inner coach is important.

What would we do if a friend spoke to us in the same way we speak to ourselves? At times we may be less likely to be friends with that person or want to spend time around them.

Getting started: We all have thoughts that aren't based on fact. We can be really tough on ourselves and draw the worst conclusions. Young people have a lot of pressure on them to act, behave and look in a certain way. Let's challenge our inner critic and support our inner coach!

Our Inner Critic

Just like you, young people have thoughts about themselves that aren't always helpful or based on reality of their lives. Our feelings aren't always facts; we make assumptions about how others think or feel about us. We can be really harsh on ourselves, but this isn't a major problem if it happens occasionally, and if we do it with humour.

However, over time, self-critical comments can have a serious impact on our self-esteem. Remember that your critical inner voice is not a reflection of reality, and when we think about ourselves critically it can create fear, self-esteem problems, dent our confidence and stop us from achieving our goals or being curious. If left unchecked, your critical inner voice may get louder, telling you to 'stay in line' or not to take chances.



Inner critic

What would we do if 'a friend' spoke to us in the same way we speak to ourselves?

You're no good at your job...
your life's a mess... you
have no style... you are...



Oh get lost!



Inner coach

- What would I like to achieve?
- What will I do first?
- When will I start?
- How will I know when I am making progress?
- Who can help?
- What skills and experiences do I already have that will help me?
- What's in it for me?

**You can choose to listen to and believe your inner critic,
or to cultivate your inner coach**

Our Inner Coach

A supportive friend would be likely to ask questions to help us find solutions and help us see what parts of a problem we have control over. Young people's friends are likely to be their coaches too, when they discuss their problems with them. One of the best ways to build resilience is to work on building up our inner coach. Our inner coach can respond directly to the inner critic. As an example, to "I am useless at everything!" consider responding with alternative points of view such as: "I might struggle at times, but I am smart and able to do a lot of things". Thinking like this will encourage a kinder and more honest attitude to ourselves.

Reflection time

Sometimes we can fall into a reassurance trap where we are constantly feeding young people with positive thoughts. They may appreciate and become attached to our positive input. However it may also prevent them from being able to see the good in themselves for themselves. Consider ways to gently challenge negative beliefs in a way that helps someone to reduce their self-judgement and genuinely notice their own good qualities.

RATIONAL COPING STATEMENTS

Rational Coping Statements or RCS's are linked to our inner coach. A rational statement will be based in logic and reality, drawn from hard evidence, and rooted in facts rather than opinions and feelings. Being rational means you will avoid exaggeration or fantasy. So, RCSs can be important.

Getting started: Challenging these negative thoughts can be very powerful tool for a young person. This can play a central role in resilience building and become something they can use for life.

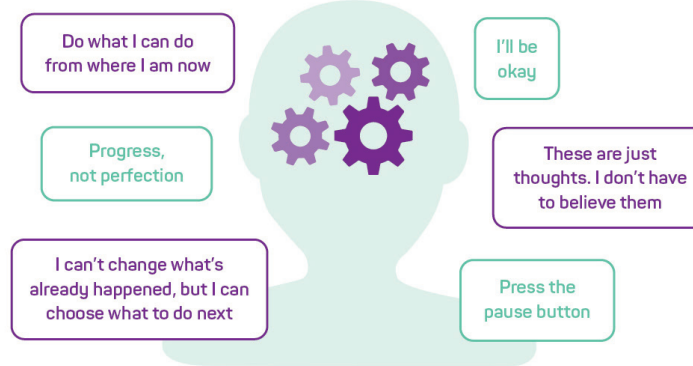
Alongside taking a few deep breaths, RCSs help us to stay calm and to respond to situations, rather than react emotionally; they help to keep us grounded.

Rather than saying or doing something (in the spur of the moment) that we might regret – e.g. panicking, losing your temper, saying something you don't really believe – using RCSs can help us take a step back and act in a more measured way.

If you feel comfortable in discussing this, perhaps be honest about a time when you lost your temper because you did not use RCSs yourself. Alternatively, perhaps you could talk about a time when you panicked unnecessarily about something because you listened to your inner critic or reacted to feelings rather than facts.

You can tell them that RCSs are in their toolkit for when the going gets tough. Help them to come up with RCSs for the usual types of unnecessary negativity brought about most often by their inner critic. Get them to write them down somewhere so they can refer to them regularly.

Rational coping statements



Reflection time – take 5 minutes!

When might you apply RCSs to a situation a young person is experiencing?

For example, if they have left studying until the final week before their exam the RCSs could be "I can't change what has already happened, but I can choose what to do next". Or if they are being very harsh to themselves and commenting negatively on their ability or their appearance then the phrase "these are just thoughts; I don't have to believe them" might help disrupt their inner critic.

CELEBRATE SMALL STEPS

Managing time can be tricky, and so celebrating small wins encourages motivation. Research has found that if you record your progress, even in some small way, it helps boost your self-confidence.

Getting started: We should encourage celebration of small wins. Start this conversation by reminding them of the small wins they perhaps haven't noticed themselves.

When you accomplish something, it activates the reward centre of our brains, allowing us to feel a sense of pride. Specifically, dopamine is released and energises us with feel-good emotions. We talked earlier about how dopamine released in the brain contributes to us feeling in control.

Celebrating the small steps

- Celebrating the small steps encourages you to work harder towards your main goal
- Dopamine (a hormone in your brain) is released when you accomplish something and that creates a feel-good feeling
- Therefore, you are more likely to work towards that bigger goal if you break it down and celebrate the small wins!



Top tips for celebrating small steps

You can support by planning small wins into their day, for example:

- **Getting them to straighten up their bed before they leave for school or college.**

This might be a hard sell, but explain that when they complete this simple task, it leads to a nice burst of dopamine first thing in the morning. This can spark the initial feeling of accomplishment and will help with relaxation when they get back at night.

- **The 'two-minute rule'.**

If they can complete a task in less than two minutes, encourage them to do it. Checking off a very small thing like this can help motivate and push them forward to accomplish much larger tasks later on. The other positive is that they will have a surge of dopamine each time something is crossed off their list, no matter how small it is..

- **Ten-minute creative time**

Taking time to reflect internally is linked with emotional wellbeing. This can support the formation of creative ideas and the consolidation of memories. Encourage them to write or doodle, create a new outfit or new setting in their favourite video game - anything that wasn't in existence before they started it. Maybe have creative time in the same room as their siblings or yourself and encourage them to tell you what they have created.

- **The power of reward**

Set a small reward for each day: having something to look forward to improves wellbeing. Ask what they are going to have as a treat, or do as their reward to themselves for going to school and achieving that day. Maybe that's some time watching their favourite box set, going to the park with their friends after school etc. When they return home ask them to take the time to pause and celebrate when they actually achieve a goal. You may want to consider some gentle bragging of your own to encourage them to celebrate their achievements.



Reflection time – take 5 minutes!

What are your small wins? This is an invitation to start noticing your own small wins and sharing them, which will be seen as being supportive.

SIGNPOSTING TO ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

In a crisis, where someone's immediate safety is at risk:

Call 999, or visit A&E

(unless the person is already in touch with mental health services and has their own direct crisis contact number for the team supporting them)

In a non-crisis situation, important first points of call are:

- Your GP
- England and Scotland: Call NHS Direct or NHS 24 on 111
- Wales: Call NHS Direct Wales on 111 or 0845 46 46 47
- NHS Choices website www.nhs.uk
- NHS 24 (Scotland) www.nhs24scot
- Northern Ireland: call the person's GP or local social services. Or the Emergency Social Work Service on 028 9504 9999 out of hours

In addition to the above, the following are a list of services that may be useful to yourself or someone you know. Mental Health UK has no official affiliation with these sites and organisations and can't take responsibility for the content, but we have found to the best of our knowledge that they are informative and will be useful. Please also note that information regarding services does go out of date, and this information was correct at the time of publishing.

www.mind.org.uk/information-support/for-young-people/

www.mind.org.uk/about-us/mind-cymru/ (Wales)

A mental health charity offering both frontline services and online information. It provides A-Z information about mental health and information for young people and their parent and carers on their website.

Info line: 0300 123 3393

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z>

Website with a useful A-Z of key mental health topics.

www.youngminds.org.uk

<https://youngminds.org.uk/shop/publications/c-23/c-70/>

Website with useful factsheets for young people, parents and carers.

Parents helpline: 0808 802 5544 (Mon–Fri, 9.30am–4pm)

Scotland

www.children1st.org.uk/help-for-families/parentline-scotland/

Children first has advice and information on their website.

Parents helpline: 08000 28 22 33

Northern Ireland

www.parentingni.org/ Website with information and advice.

Support Line: 0808 8010 722

www.minded.org.uk/families/index.html#/

A website developed by Health Education England and the Department of Education to help families understand and support young people, from parenting tips to getting help in a crisis.

www.themix.org.uk/

A charity that provides free, confidential support for young people under 25 via online, social and mobile.

0808 808 4994

www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/self-care/

An organisation who provide information for young people, parents and schools. This link takes you to a 'hub' of ideas and tools for young people to use to maintain their own mental health

FINAL THOUGHT

You can be instrumental in supporting a young person to realise that they have a choice about where to place their focus. They can choose to focus on building their self-esteem and prioritising coaching thoughts over negative and disempowering critical thoughts.

Final thought

'The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another.'

William James

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