



Children's mental health:

a parent's guide



This guide focuses on the most common issues - anxiety disorders and depression - we hope that the tips and guidance can be used to help you start an important conversation about mental health and resilience with your children.

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Foreword

The conversation about mental health has changed since I started my career. As a society we are now far more open and willing to discuss experiences of poor mental health thanks, in part, to high profile individuals and celebrities sharing their stories.

At Bupa, we work with families to safeguard their mental health, recognising the positive impact an early diagnosis and fast access to treatment can have on someone who is struggling with their mental health.

Industry figures show that one in 10 children experience mental ill health. Our specialist support colleagues talk to parents who have questions about how to identify if their child may need support with their mental health, helping them with how to start a conversation on mental health and how to build their child's resilience.

We found that only 36% of parents say that they would be able to find the right words to talk to their children about their mental health and wellbeing.

We've created this guide to help any parent, carer or guardian who is concerned that their child may be struggling with a mental health condition. We hope that it will empower parents who are worried about their child's mental health and ensure that more children receive support when they need it.

Pablo Vandenabeele

*Clinical Director of Mental Health
at Bupa UK*



What is mental health?

Mental health refers to the ability to function and deal with daily life and everything it presents.

When we hear the phrase 'mental health', we often think about mental health problems. We think of symptoms such as low mood and conditions such as depression or anxiety.

In fact, everyone has mental health. You and your family will have times when your mental health is good - and times when it is not as good. Just like physical health.

Throughout your life there may be times when you'll experience low mood, fear, anxiety or confusion. These feelings are a common part of everyday life and don't always mean you have a mental health problem.



What is a mental health problem?

Mental ill health refers to a group of conditions that affects how a person thinks, interacts with others and copes with the demands of everyday life, leading to significant changes in feelings or behaviour.

Sometimes moods, thoughts, experiences or reactions to things may feel difficult for a long time and affect your life and how you want to live. This might be a mental health problem.

Mental health and wellbeing issues in children

All any parent wants for their child is for them to have a happy and healthy childhood. Knowing or suspecting that your child may have a mental health problem can be greatly worrying and distressing for both a parent and their child.

One in 10 children has a diagnosable mental health condition, equating to roughly three children in every classroom.

Our figures show that just **23%** of parents of young adults and children feel confident that they would be able to identify the symptoms of mental ill health in their children.

It can be hard for a parent to identify as it can be difficult to distinguish between signs of a problem from normal childhood behaviour and children may not have the vocabulary to express their concerns.

As a healthcare provider, we receive calls from concerned parents every day who want advice and guidance on a whole range of mental health and wellbeing issues.

This guide focuses mainly on anxiety and depression because they are the most common mental health conditions in young children and adults and are also what most of our calls from parents are about.

Childhood challenges

The modern childhood can seem very different to those of the previous generation.

Advances in technology, the advent of smartphones and social media make it easier for children to access information. It can also help them in their learning and ability to connect with friends and family wherever they are. However, it can potentially have a negative impact on a child's mental health and wellbeing. The desire to stay connected can interfere with activities that build mental resilience such as socialising, eating and sleeping. And the constant images and updates on other people's lives can cause a sense of inadequacy.

Children may experience a wide range of life events growing up that they find difficult that won't lead to mental health problems on their own, but traumatic events can trigger problems for children and young people who are already vulnerable.

Changes such as moving home or school or the birth of a new brother or sister, for example may act as triggers. Some children who start a new school will feel excited about making new friends and doing new activities, but there may also be some who will feel anxious about entering a new environment.

Teenagers often experience emotional upset as their minds and bodies develop and they make this transition to adulthood. Some young people may experiment with alcohol, drugs or other substances that can affect mental health.



The changing conversation on mental health

Over recent years, the mental health conversation has changed with high profile people such as Demi Lovato, Prince Harry, and Ryan Reynolds talking openly about their challenges.

This has helped to reduce the stigma about mental health and make society more open to talk about challenges. Our figures show that **70%** of parents speak to their children about their emotional health and wellbeing more than their own parents did.

Creating an environment where children feel comfortable talking about their mental health can help you to understand if your child is struggling. It is clear that attitudes are changing across households in the UK, we found that **78%** of parents believe there is a greater awareness of the importance of considering children's mental wellbeing than when they were

growing up. However, it can still feel daunting to address concerns about your child's mental health head-on.

When your child is slightly 'out of sorts' it can be hard to know when or whether to be worried, how to approach the situation, or where to turn for support.

When it comes to mental health and resilience, early intervention plays a key role in helping children to think about how to cope with difficult situations and can potentially prevent problems from worsening and becoming more complex later in life. It also can aid recovery and improve how a condition is managed.

While these focus on the most common issues - anxiety disorders and depression - we hope that the tips and guidance can be used to help you start an important conversation about mental health and resilience with your children, whatever the concern may be.

Spotting the signs

As parents you are well-attuned to spotting any changes in your child's behaviour, but it may be more difficult to identify signs of mental health concerns. Many of the tell-tale signs may be character traits or dismissed as the 'growing pains' of a teenager. Knowing what to look out for may help you identify whether there is a problem.

What is anxiety?

We can all feel anxious from time to time, but anxiety disorder has two core symptoms: excessive anxiety on most days and difficulty controlling these feelings.

There are different types of anxiety disorder ranging from generalised anxiety disorder, where sufferers feel anxious much of the time, to panic disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder and phobias relating to specific things.

Anybody can suffer from anxiety and it is thought that one in six children and young people experience anxiety at some point.

How do I know if my child has anxiety?

There are several types of anxiety which are explained on the next page as they affect everyone in different ways.

Generalised anxiety disorder

is a long-term condition where someone regularly feels very worried about a range of everyday things. There may not always be an obvious reason why they feel anxious.



Below we've outlined the symptoms children may experience if they have generalised anxiety disorder.

How they may feel:

- very worried about a number of everyday things
- find it hard to control the worry
- restless or nervous

Physical symptoms

Anxiety isn't just about how someone feels mentally, it may cause a behaviour change and other physical symptoms too.

They may also:

- feel nauseous
- experience a shortness of breath or chest pain
- feel muscle tension
- become tired easily
- have trouble sleeping well – possibly taking one or two hours to go to sleep and waking up earlier than usual
- get unexplained or worsening aches and pains
- have constant headaches

You may notice them:

- struggling to concentrate
- experiencing stomach problems

Social anxiety disorder

is characterised by a persistent fear or anxiety about social situations that involve interaction.



How they may feel:

- very anxious about being around other people and having to talk to them
- very self-conscious in front of other people and worried about feeling humiliated, embarrassed or rejected
- afraid that people will judge them
- worry in the lead up to a social event

You may notice them:

- avoiding places where there will be other people
- cancelling planned social activities
- blushing, sweating or trembling around other people

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

is a long-term condition characterised by obsessive thoughts, compulsive behaviour or both. Below we've outlined the symptoms someone typically experiences if they have obsessive-compulsive disorder.



How they may feel:

- have unwanted thoughts, images or urges that repeatedly enter their mind
- compelled to repeat certain things (for example, checking that doors are locked) or repeat mental acts which people won't see, such as repeating a certain phrase in their head

They may also:

- fear contamination from dirt, germs and viruses
- display excessive concern with order or symmetry
- display aggressive obsessions – thinking about doing harm to their self or others
- repeatedly checking things, such as locks, light switching, the oven

You may notice them:

- cleaning or washing
- arranging or touching objects
- hoarding or collecting things that have no use
- repeating certain acts or behaviours

What is depression?

It's natural to have ups and downs – sometimes someone might feel a bit low or be really upset and sad when something bad happens, such as losing someone they love. It's common for people to say that they are 'depressed' when they are feeling down.



However, if the feeling of sadness lasts for a long period of time and causes someone to lose interest in their life or things they usually enjoy or affects how they think or behave, it's possible they may have depression.

Anybody can suffer from depression and it is thought to occur in around 1-3% of children and young people.

How do I know if my child has depression?

There are lots of symptoms of depression and they affect everyone in different ways, not everybody will have the same experience. The two main symptoms of depression are having a low mood (feeling down or hopeless) along with losing interest or pleasure in doing things you usually enjoy.

How they may feel:

- sad all the time or not enjoying or wanting to do any of the things they usually would
- guilty
- helpless
- worthless or have a loss of self-esteem or self-confidence
- hopeless or that it's too hard or painful to live and have thoughts about running away or escaping their life. They may also have thoughts about harming themselves or self-harm

Physical symptoms

Depression isn't just about how someone feels mentally, there are physical symptoms too. Aches and pains are sometimes what people notice first.

They may also:

- cry in situations where they wouldn't usually cry
- feel tired and lack energy
- have trouble sleeping – possibly taking one or two hours to go to sleep and waking up earlier than usual
- get unexplained or worsening aches and pains
- have constant headaches
- feel restless or agitated
- have poor concentration and find it difficult to make decisions

You may notice them:

- gaining or losing weight as a result of a change in appetite – either eating more or not being hungry
- avoiding family and friends or cancelling plans

Starting the conversation

As every parent knows, each child is different. There isn't a one size fits all approach to having an open conversation about mental health but these tips may help:

- It may be tempting to tell your child that you're worried about them, but that may put them on edge and make them clam up or rebuff your questions
- Simply asking your child how they are is more likely to lead to a more positive conversation
- Explain that mental health is about our range of emotions and how we cope with our lives and that mental health can fluctuate daily - just like our physical health
- Using phrases such as "there's no need to worry about that" can undermine their feelings and doesn't offer them a solution
- When they share how they feel, acknowledge it

- As upsetting as it may be to hear that your child is struggling with their mental health, try to remain calm. If they sense that you're agitated it may cause them to become nervous and stop them feeling comfortable enough to open up
- If you are noticeably upset, try to explain that they shouldn't worry if you're upset, and that you want to support them
- Try to dispel any myths they might have about mental illness. Explain that it is just like other medical illnesses, in that help is available
- Don't be put off asking if you have concerns. Explain that you're there for them and listen without judging

If you think your child may be showing signs that they are struggling with their mental health it's important to seek medical support as soon as possible, in most cases this should be your local GP.

They may suggest a 'wait and see' approach, but the key thing is that it's now been logged with your GP.



Treating and managing mental health concerns in childhood

Our brains don't finish developing until we are 25 years old which makes treating and managing mental health concerns in children more complex than it is for adults.

Children and young adults are more vulnerable to emotional distress and are less able to navigate potentially stressful situations. This means children may seem to display signs of a mental health concern which is actually a response to other external factors such as academic pressure, bullying or bereavement.

Either way, seeking medical guidance can help give you and your child peace of mind and provide you with a possible way forward.

If your child is experiencing challenges with their mental health, support will be provided by your local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) team. This multidisciplinary team of professionals may include:

- support workers
- school – teachers and school nurses
- nurses
- primary mental health link workers
- family therapists
- social workers
- psychologists
- occupational therapists
- psychological therapists
- child and adolescent psychiatrists
- child psychotherapists
- specialist substance misuse workers

They say it takes a village to raise a child.

The CAMHS team will work together to help you and your child to identify the problem, understand the cause and advise on what steps to take.

They say it takes a village to raise a child and that is certainly the case when it comes to supporting a child with mental health issues.

For a child to receive the most effective treatment it is important to get a full sense of their wellbeing. They may not be able to articulate this, but there are others that can help you to get a better idea of how they fare throughout the day.

We would encourage you to talk to your child's school so that the school's medical team and special education needs (SEN) support team are aware of your concerns and they can help you to monitor any changes in behaviour or mood. With children spending such a considerable amount of time at school, their teachers and the school's nurses are well placed to help you identify whether there may be any external pressures which may be having a negative impact on their mental health.

For many of us when we think about treating or managing a mental health concern, we automatically think of medication such as antidepressants as the remedy. However for the majority of pre-pubescent children and young adults, they will be prescribed talking therapy, which involves talking to a professional who is trained to help people deal with negative feelings or feelings of distress, and help to identify any patterns which it may be helpful to change.

If a child is prescribed medication we would encourage you to discuss it with your pharmacist. They are medicine experts and will be able to provide you with support, dispelling any myths about potential side effects and providing you with guidance for any questions you may have. If you have any concerns with the prescription, you may wish to talk to your GP too.

Discovering that your child is struggling with their mental health can be tough and upsetting, and **88% of parents** say that their child's mental health has an impact on all aspects of family life.

Talking is key to recovery for children with mental health conditions and having a strong support group is essential for both you and your child. You may benefit from attending groups or workshops designed for parents with children who have a mental health condition.

88%

of parents say that their child's mental health has an impact on all aspects of family life.



Boosting mental health and resilience in childhood

From starting school and maintaining friendship groups to exam pressure, the journey to adulthood can be difficult and your child is likely to experience many situations that they find upsetting, disappointing or that might make them angry, stressed or low.

Improving your child's mental resilience can help them to manage their emotions and bounce back from a setback throughout their life. It can also help them to manage a mental health condition.

Here are some things you can encourage your children to do which will boost their emotional resilience.



Exercise: exercise is good for the mind, as well as the body, and can help to release stress and anxiety. Encourage them to try different sports or activities to find something they enjoy or suggest a family walk after dinner.



Eat and drink well: a healthy, balanced diet with plenty of fruit, vegetables and fibre can help to maintain a steady level of energy and clear thinking. Keeping hydrated is also important in maintaining energy.



Write things down: writing things down sometimes can help people to see exactly what they're feeling and give them some control and understanding, especially for those who don't feel comfortable or can't find the words to talk about it.



Use distraction techniques:

a distraction technique is an action that gives them a new focus and some respite. It can be something simple such as reading a book, helping to prepare dinner or with the weekly shop.



Sleep well: a healthy sleep pattern will mean they are well rested and can help to reduce any agitation. If they find getting to sleep difficult, listening to soothing music in bed, meditating or practising relaxation techniques may help.



Make a toolkit: put together a box of 'tools' for the times when they're feeling too low to come up with a plan or are struggling with ideas. It could contain anything they know will occupy their mind and give them a break from their thoughts. For example, their favourite book or magazine, some treats, a crossword. Or they could put in notes or a letter they've written to encourage themselves, or photos of good times and memories. Younger children may find that a 'worry monster' helps to make them feel more confident.



Speak to people: it might seem hard at first but encouraging children to open up to friends and family can help them feel better and more understood.

People like you



Kathryn Dee

*Registered mental health nurse
at Bupa UK and mother of two*

Hi, I'm Kathryn and I wanted to share my story as I want parents to know that they aren't alone and that even being a medical professional doesn't mean you get it right all the time.

I am a registered mental health nurse who works in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, but when my daughter started to self-harm when she was 15, I reacted as a parent – not a nurse.

I had noticed some of the tell-tale signs of possible depression, such as low mood and some anxieties, but she is outgoing and very talented academically so I put it down to normal teenage angst.

However, it became clear that it was more acute than that when she took an overdose in an attempt to take her own life. I was out and called her to see what her and her brother wanted to eat. Her speech was slurred and she was slow to respond and I just knew what had happened. I don't remember the journey home but I remember being frantic when I called the ambulance and tried to find out what she had taken. I didn't respond as a calm nurse. I was her mum and I was scared, angry, upset and worried.

Thankfully she recovered and she was subsequently diagnosed with depression. Despite my training, my reaction was to become upset. I recall telling her that I was worried and didn't know how to feel. I made it clear that it was always ok for her to talk to me and that I would always listen and that I loved her, which is why I sometimes cried. Most importantly, I promised to be her mum and not her nurse.

My daughter received talking therapy and now, at 25 years old, she sees a psychologist. It is by no means easy being the parent of a child with mental health condition. I still worry about her. But if you're open and honest, explain your feelings and give your child the space and time to talk, it certainly helps.

My advice to any parents who find themselves in a similar situation is to reach out if you need support. Talk to your GP, a friend or a parent in a similar situation. Talking and giving yourself time to explore how you feel makes a big difference, and allows you to support your child the way you wish.

" I promised to be her mum and not her nurse."

Looking after yourself

Eighty-eight per cent of parents say that their children's mental health impacts all aspects of family life.

As a parent our children always come first, but it is important to make sure that you don't forget to look after yourself. If you don't look after your health and wellbeing it can make it harder for you to support your children, especially if they are struggling with their mental health.

It's important not to blame yourself if your child is having problems. It can be an incredibly distressing situation to be in, but it doesn't make you a bad parent.

For some people, talking to a friend or family member will help them to put the situation into perspective. For others, talking to people who have been through or are experiencing a similar thing proves beneficial as they can share their challenges and coping strategies. Across the UK there are local support groups run for parents and carers of children who are struggling with their mental health which can be found via the [Rethinkmentalillness](#) website.

Taking some time for you can also help to boost your mental resilience and morale. Asking a friend or family member to look after your child so that you have time either to do something you enjoy or to rest.

However, if you feel that your situation is impacting on your own mental health it is worth speaking to your GP or being referred to a counselling service. **Being able to recognise that you need support is a sign of strength. You won't be able to help your child if you don't feel your best.**

Places you can find more information

If you believe that your child might be struggling with their mental health, your GP should be your first point of call. But there are several charities and other organisations that could provide you and your family with supplementary help and advice:

- **Mind** is a mental health charity in England and Wales
- **Rethinkmentalillness** is a mental health charity in England providing information, services and a strong voice for everyone affected by mental illness
- **Samaritans** is a charity aimed at providing emotional support to anyone in emotional distress or struggling to cope
- **The Mix** is the UK's leading support service for young people and provides teenagers and young adults with support on range of topics including mental health via helplines, message boards, web chat and text
- **YoungMinds** is the UK's leading charity committed to improving the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people. YoungMinds Parents helpline: 0808 802 5544

Bupa customers can access our **Anytime HealthLine** - which offers unlimited telephone consultations with our team of GPs and nurses.

Although this guide focuses on anxiety disorders and depression, our **health information** pages offer a wealth of free, trusted information about other mental health conditions, treatments and procedures. It also includes advice from our experts about staying healthy and living well.

If your child is in a crisis they can call **Childline** on 0800 1111

If you are in a crisis you can call the Samaritans on 116 123

If you or your child are in an emergency call 999

Research referenced in this guide was carried out amongst 1,004 parents of children aged 4-18 years old between 24 August and 3rd September 2018. The sample has been weighted to reflect a nationally representative audience.