

# *Parent Toolkit: Mental Health Difficulties in Children and Young People*

SECOND EDITION



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TIP: Throughout the toolkit, these boxes link to trusted online content.

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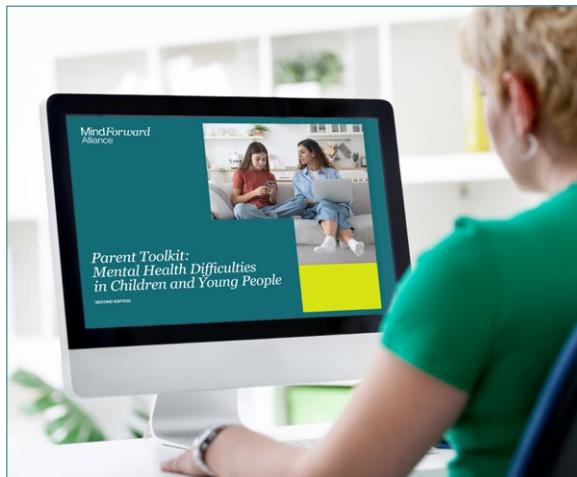
# About this toolkit

MindForward Alliance has partnered with Morgan Stanley and PwC UK to create a toolkit for parents and carers concerned about their children's mental health.

It is worrying and stressful for any parent to see their child having difficulty with their mental health, and when you search for information, it can be hard to know where to start.

That's why we've compiled this toolkit – to provide an overview of key topics and signpost to quality information from trusted sources. The toolkit is here to help you:

- ▶ promote positive mental health in your children
- ▶ be aware of why and when difficulties can arise and what to look out for
- ▶ know how to help your child if they are struggling
- ▶ recognise when to get professional help, and what's out there
- ▶ prioritise your own wellbeing, too.



You may be short on time and energy, so we've kept it short and included just a few links under each topic. However, if you want to read about a particular subject in more detail, we've provided a library of links to useful information at the end of this toolkit.

If your child is going through a mental health crisis and you need help right now, skip to *What to do if you are worried*, on page 19.



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# *Mental health in children and young people*

**Mental health refers to the way we think, feel and behave. Our mental health can change over time, and anyone can experience mental health difficulties at any age.**

In 2023, 1 in 5 children and young people aged eight to 25 had a probable mental health condition, up from 1 in 9 in 2017.<sup>1</sup>

The cause of these rising numbers is not yet understood, but our young people are living in a fast-changing world in which they are constantly exposed to a range of pressures and emotional challenges. Research suggests that worsening sleep quality, social media and smartphone use, the reduction in child and youth services and financial insecurity are all playing a part in this worrying trend.<sup>2</sup>

Some children also have social, domestic or health factors in their life that could pose a risk to their mental health. Biology plays a significant part too, with some young people being much more prone to mental health disorders if they run in the family.

However, most children also have positive experiences that balance out those risks and help them to bounce back from difficulty. These are called resilience factors. They could include a strong relationship with a trusted person, enjoyment of school, interest in sports or other activities, good friendships and having spiritual or religious faith.

We all have a unique combination of risk and resilience factors. As parents, we can support our children to get into good mental health habits and build up their defences, but we cannot protect them from life's challenges. That's why it's important to be able to recognise signs of mental health difficulty if they appear, to know how to support our children to cope, and when and how to seek extra help.



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**Seeing a child struggling with their mental health can be really upsetting and frightening because it can make our loved one sad, fearful, angry, or unpredictable.**

**If you're going through this right now, remember:**

**1. You and your child can get through this.** Lots of young people go through mental health difficulties and recover. Modern therapies and treatments – if they need them – are effective.

**2. You are not alone.** Every situation is unique but right now there are thousands of families in the UK with a child with mental health difficulties, and thousands more who have been there in the past. So, reach out for support, whether it's from friends and family, or charities and chatrooms.

# *The developing brain*



## **IN THIS SECTION**

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How young brains are shaped by age and experiences, how this manifests in their behaviours, and what kind of difficulties it can bring.

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# Infancy and childhood

(0–11 years)

**A lot of brain development takes place in the first five years of life, but different parts of the brain develop at different rates. That's why younger children need help to understand and manage strong feelings.**

We are born with billions of brain cells – many more than we need – and they are only loosely connected at first. As we interact with our environment in early life – for instance by playing with others, climbing, drawing and painting, being read to, feeling safe and loved – the brain cells that we use a lot develop stronger connections. The cells that aren't used are eventually discarded.

This 'pruning' is a normal process in early development as our brain – guided by our experiences and our genes – gets rid of the cells it doesn't need. This helps the brain become more efficient and ready to process complex information.

Research shows that persistent adversity in early life – such as ongoing abuse or neglect – can have a profound impact on the developing brain. However, we also know that many factors determine brain development, and, with the right help, the impact of negative experiences can be reduced.<sup>3</sup>



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**Building secure relationships with young children**

(Place2Be)

**Common challenges during primary years**

(Place2Be)

**Common difficulties seen in young children**

(Anna Freud)

# Adolescence, teenage and beyond

(12–20 years)

**The pre-teen and teenage years bring a great deal of physical and emotional change.**

The adolescent and teenage brain is growing and changing rapidly. This is when unused cells in the thinking and processing part of the brain are pruned away, and the remaining connections are strengthened.

The brain's emotional and reward system – involved in feelings of pleasure in response to something we enjoy – becomes much more sensitive at this time. But the prefrontal cortex – responsible for decision-making, planning ahead, thinking about consequences and controlling impulses – is the last to develop, not until our mid-twenties.

This is why teenagers are more prone to taking risks and making impulsive decisions, as well as expressing stronger emotions.

Find additional information about social media and safe internet use on page 9.

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**The adolescent brain and behaviour**

(Anna Freud)

**Connect with your teenager**

(Place2Be)

# Mental health awareness

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## IN THIS SECTION

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Many factors can contribute to good and poor mental health. Parents and carers can help to promote positive habits and be aware of behaviours that might indicate your child is struggling.

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# Good habits

A parent's first instinct is to protect their child from difficult feelings but stress, adversities and challenges are part of life. Our role is to help our children build their resilience, show them how we cope, help them learn how to talk about their feelings and ask for help if they need it.

## Healthy living

The ways we encourage and support our children to look after their bodies also benefit their mental health. Eating well, being active and getting enough sleep are key.

**Tips for tackling issues around sleep and bedtime** (Place2Be)

**A young person's guide to sleep problems** (YoungMinds)

**A fun guide about healthy habits for younger children** (NHS)

## Building resilience

All sorts of everyday habits can support our children's ability to cope with, and bounce back from, difficulties. These include having consistent routines and helping children to challenge themselves.

**Advice on raising a resilient child** (Place2Be)

**Building confidence in today's world** (MindEd for Families)

## Role-modelling

Try to model healthy emotional coping skills and positive self-talk. This will help children understand that it's OK to have strong feelings, how to manage their reactions to emotions and that it's OK to make mistakes.

**Modelling healthy emotions during arguments** (Place2Be)

**How to model good self-esteem** (YoungMinds)

## Communicating

It's useful to get into the habit of talking about feelings with your children. Then, if they experience mental health difficulties, the lines of communication are already open. 'Check in' with them every so often, while you're doing things together.

**A useful list of conversation starters** (YoungMinds)

**How to be a good listener to your child** (Place2Be)



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# Common triggers

Mental health difficulties are often a direct response to what is happening in our lives. Children and young people go through all kinds of changes as they grow up. It is a normal part of life, but it can be hard to cope with.

## Coping with change

Helping your child to understand the changes that are going on, and acknowledging the feelings they are having, can play an important part in helping them to get through their difficulties. Being their anchor – remaining calm, consistent and reliable – is especially important during times of change.

**Helping your child through transitions and change** (YoungMinds)

## School transition

Starting, changing and leaving school are big steps in your child's life. There are things you can do to help them prepare and cope.

**Helping your child start or change primary school** (Place2Be)

**Preparing your child for secondary or high school** (Place2Be)

**Navigating the transition to university** (Student Minds)

## Family separation

During a break-up, or while you establish co-parenting routines with your ex-partner, your child will need a lot of reassurance. It's important they don't feel they have to take sides.

**Supporting children during divorce and separation** (YoungMinds)

**Going through a break-up with younger children** (Place2Be)

**Mentally healthy co-parenting with your ex-partner** (Place2Be)

## Bereavement

You'll want to take your child's pain away, but when a person or an animal that they love has died you can't do that. It's important to allow them to grieve.

**Helping primary age children when someone dies** (Place2Be)

**How to support a young person feeling grief and loss** (YoungMinds)



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# Feeling different

As children grow up, they learn about who they are and how they fit into the world. Feeling like an outsider can be distressing, and being teased, bullied or excluded for being different makes it worse.

## Ethnicity

Children from black and minority ethnic groups may experience discrimination, which can negatively affect mental health.

**Advice for parents on racism and mental health** (YoungMinds)

**Talking to your child about discrimination** (Place2Be)

## Disability

Having additional needs or disabilities can lead to a child experiencing challenges that lower self-confidence, make it harder to make friends and increase social isolation. These factors make children with disabilities more likely than their non-disabled peers to experience mental health problems.

**Insights from a young person living with disability** (YoungMinds)

**Content by black disabled young people** (YoungMinds)

## LGBTQ+

Gender identity and sexual orientation take shape through childhood and adolescence. Supporting your child to understand their gender identity and sexuality will give them confidence in who they are without guilt, shame or fear of rejection from family. However, LGBTQ+ children and young people can experience prejudice, discrimination and bullying. They may also experience gender dysphoria: the distress when someone's assigned gender does not match their identity. These factors mean they may be more likely to experience difficulties with their mental health.

**Supporting your child through sexual development** (Place2Be)

**Sexuality and mental health** (YoungMinds)

**Gender identity and mental health** (YoungMinds)



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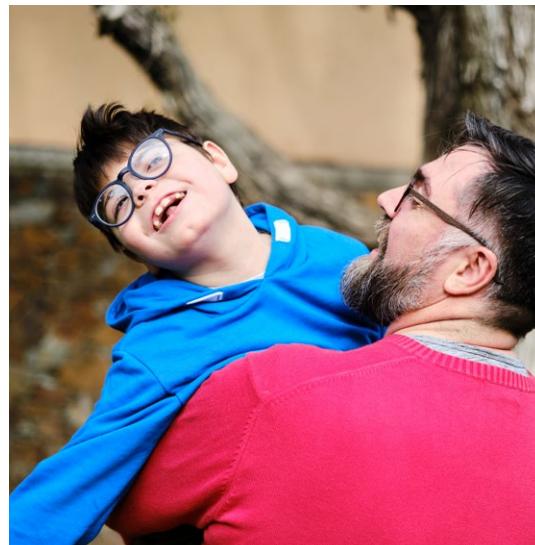
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Find additional resources and useful links on these topics on page 31.

# Feeling different (continued)

## Neurodivergence

Neurodivergence includes neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia and Tourette's syndrome. Research indicates that neurodivergent people are more likely to experience mental health issues than neurotypical people.<sup>6</sup> This may be due to the challenges of being neurodivergent in a neurotypical world, as well as negative attitudes and a lack of understanding from others.

### ADHD and mental health

(YoungMinds)

### Autism and mental health

(YoungMinds)

### Learning difficulties and mental health

(British Dyslexia Association)

Parents can help to support the mental wellbeing of your neurodivergent child in many ways, including:

- ▶ Learn and talk about neurodivergence and what it means for your child – their strengths and needs.
- ▶ Ensure your child feels accepted by you for who they are.
- ▶ Create a neurodivergent-friendly home e.g. allow extra time for processing, add regulating activities, introduce structure and routine, reduce sensory overloading experiences.
- ▶ Take advantage of practical tools that are available to help you and your child e.g. sunflower lanyards, venue 'passports', social stories.
- ▶ Access financial support that could help you and your child.



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*I've learnt that the most powerful support I can offer my neurodivergent child is to start with their feeling of safety. Creating a safe space where they know they are completely understood, loved and celebrated - just as they are. It's the foundation for everything else.*

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# *My mum was my rock.*

Growing up with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) – without knowing I had them – meant I was constantly battling things I didn't understand. I was diagnosed with ADHD at 14, but the biggest challenge was the ASD, which went unnoticed for far longer.

In school and extracurricular activities, I felt disconnected from everyone around me. I always struggled to concentrate in lessons, found it hard to get work done and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't seem to fit in with my peers. Because of my ASD, I have a very narrow way of looking at things. This made it even harder to cope in a learning environment that expected flexibility I didn't have. But because no one could explain what was really going on, I turned it all back on myself and believed I was the problem.

That's when my mum became my biggest defender.

She took me to countless CAMHS appointments, chased referrals relentlessly and when the school ignored my needs, she was ready to take legal action. She sacrificed so much to make sure I got the support I deserved. My mum was always my rock.

The most powerful thing she did wasn't just fighting the system, it was believing in me before I even understood myself. She saw my struggles for what they were, not as defiance or laziness. She reminded me that I wasn't broken and that I just needed the right support, especially for the parts of my ASD that made daily life more rigid and overwhelming.

To any parent reading this, it is never too late to get your child referred for support. Do not wait for things to get worse or hope that they will 'grow out of it'. If you feel something isn't right, trust that instinct and act on it. Your persistence could change the course of your child's life.

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# Spotting the signs that your child is struggling

**It is normal for a young person to feel angry, sad, worried or stressed sometimes. These feelings can be expressed in all sorts of ways, such as:**

- ▶ sudden changes in behaviour
- ▶ negative thoughts and low self-esteem
- ▶ arguing and fighting
- ▶ sleep problems
- ▶ avoiding school and activities, withdrawing or being 'clingy'
- ▶ complaining about aches and pains
- ▶ overactivity
- ▶ wetting the bed, when previously dry at night.

## Should I be worried?

(MindEd for Families)

Often these feelings, and the behaviours they cause, pass with time. It can sometimes be hard to know when difficult feelings go beyond that, but signs that are a cause for concern include:

- ▶ difficulties that last a long time
- ▶ persistent 'out of character' behaviour
- ▶ disordered eating
- ▶ your child hurting themselves ([see page 15](#))
- ▶ your child having suicidal thoughts ([see page 16](#))
- ▶ your child putting another person's safety at risk
- ▶ difficulties that are interfering with a child's development
- ▶ the situation being overwhelming for parents or carers.

You know your child best, so you're well placed to recognise if their negative feelings or unhelpful thoughts are becoming overwhelming. At this point, you might need to seek some extra help.



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# Spotting the signs that your child is struggling

(continued)

## Self-harm

Some young people self-harm as a way to deal with difficult feelings, express something that is hard to put into words and to reduce overwhelming thoughts and have a sense of control.

It's natural to feel incredibly worried and upset if you believe or discover that your child is self-harming, but keep in mind that they can get through it – many young people who self-harm do recover. There is a lot of information and advice out there to help you understand self-harm and support your child.

### Advice around self-harm

(YoungMinds)

### How to support a young person who is self-harming

(Place2Be)

## School avoidance

Some children and young people find it difficult or impossible to attend school due to feelings such as anxiety and stress due to factors in school, or separation from a parent at home.

Initially this may show up as prolonging getting ready and leaving the house in the mornings, physical symptoms such as headaches, dizziness or stomach pain. Sometimes it can develop so that they do not attend intermittently, for whole weeks, or at all. However, emotionally-based school avoidance or non-attendance (EBSA or EBSNA) is not 'bunking off', it is a recognised and complex emotional response.

It can feel incredibly stressful and frustrating when your child won't go to school, but you're not alone. Lots of families are going through it, and you should expect the school and healthcare professionals to work with you and your child to overcome the issues.

### EBSA factsheet on what you should expect from your school

(Cognus)

### Guide to school anxiety and refusal

(YoungMinds)

### Things to try if your child fears school

(Place2Be)

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*I was very disapproving and impatient with my daughter when she started missing school, which didn't help and just made both of us more stressed.*

*The starting point for recovery was recognising how hard it was for her and taking the pressure off.*

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# Suicidal thoughts

Lots of young people will have thoughts about suicide at some point. This doesn't mean they are going to attempt suicide, but it does mean they need help and support.

It's not always easy to know if your child is having suicidal thoughts. Many young people will keep it to themselves. While these won't apply to everyone, certain changes in behaviour may be warning signs:

- ▶ Expressing feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, sadness, guilt or shame.
- ▶ Spending lots of time alone and withdrawing from friends and family.
- ▶ Losing interest in things they usually enjoy.
- ▶ Giving away their possessions.
- ▶ Seeming agitated or behaving in ways that seem out of character.
- ▶ Eating or sleeping more or less than usual.
- ▶ Using drugs and alcohol to help them cope when they're struggling.
- ▶ Self-harming.

Guide for parents on suicidal thoughts

(YoungMinds)

## Talking about suicide

It can feel really difficult to raise the subject of suicidal thoughts with your child. But talking about it does not make it more likely to happen, and it may help them.

A young person who is thinking about suicide often feels very alone with their dark thoughts, so feeling like they're able to share their worries may help them feel less isolated.

Using the word 'suicide' yourself lets them know that it's okay to talk about it. Don't be afraid to ask directly whether they are thinking about suicide.

### How to ask a young person about suicidal thoughts

(Papyrus)

If your child tells you they are having suicidal thoughts:

- ▶ Take their feelings seriously.
- ▶ Reassure them that you're really glad they've told you and that they're not alone.
- ▶ Don't try to fix or downplay their feelings – empathise with just how bad things are for them.
- ▶ Think together about what's making them feel this way.



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The biggest sign that someone is at risk of attempting suicide is if they have made plans, for example thinking about how, when or where they would do it, or researching methods online.

In this case, seek urgent professional help: call 999 or take them to A&E.

If the situation is not immediately life-threatening you can call NHS 111 for urgent advice or use [NHS 111 online](#).

# Taking action

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Starting a conversation about mental health and seeking help can feel hard. However, it's important to talk openly with your child and to respect their views. Various sources of support are available, depending on what you need.

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# How to speak to your child if they're struggling

**When you know your child is struggling with their feelings, talking to them about it can be hard. You might not know where to start or when is the best time.**

You might feel you want to rush in and do what you think needs doing to rescue your child. However, this can disempower them and exacerbate their difficulties. It's really important to talk to your child about what they think will be helpful and to respect their views, even if you disagree. Your child will need to agree to any approach if it is going to work.

Here are some tips from YoungMinds and Place2Be for starting a conversation:

- ▶ Avoid conversations at the height of distress. Reassure your child that you are there for them right now, but wait for a calmer time to talk about the cause.
- ▶ Sometimes talking while doing an activity together – e.g. walking, playing a board game - can feel less pressured and intense. Doing something physical can also help to release feelings of anxiety.
- ▶ If your child doesn't want to talk right now, reassure them that they can talk to you at any time.

- ▶ If your child always finds it hard to talk, give them the opportunity to communicate in other ways that aren't face-to-face, such as writing it down.
- ▶ As parents, we want to take the pain away, but it's important to avoid dismissing your child's experience by saying things like 'don't worry'. Show them that you're really listening and that you believe what they're telling you about their feelings and fears.
- ▶ Tell them what you've noticed, e.g. 'you seem a bit wobbly/sad/down/angry lately, I'm wondering if you're worried about something'.
- ▶ Saying 'it's understandable that you're feeling...' helps them know they are entitled to those feelings. It's different from 'I understand', which puts you in the role of an expert.
- ▶ Let them know that you love them, you're there for them and you can help them get support if they need it.
- ▶ Ask them if there's anything you could do that they would find particularly helpful.
- ▶ Avoid throwaway phrases like 'it'll be fine' but give them hope by reassuring them that things can change, and they can feel better.



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# What to do if you are worried

If you are worried about your child's mental health, reach out for some extra help. Getting support early can be very beneficial, so don't wait until things have become very serious. There are lots of different services and there will be something out there that can help you and your child.

It's important to talk to your child about the situation first. But even if they're not ready to talk to anyone else, you can still reach out for advice and support. It can be helpful to tell your child that you are doing this, particularly for teenagers.

## GP services

Talking to your GP is a good first step. Make an appointment with your family doctor or ask if any of the GPs at your surgery specialise in young people's mental health. The GP should be able to tell you what support is available near you and make referrals. This could be to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS, also called Children and Young People's Mental Health Services, CYPMHS).

## CAMHS

CAMHS is a free, NHS-run specialist service that provides support and treatment. It is run by a local team in each area so the types of support they offer varies. In some areas you can self-refer. In others you need a referral from your GP.

Waiting times vary but are often very long. In 2023, the average wait after referral was around 13 months.<sup>7</sup>

### How to get support from mental health services

(YoungMinds)

## Education support

Tell your child's pre-school, school or college what's going on.

An increasing number of schools now have a Mental Health Support Team and they should be able to provide someone – such as a counsellor, mentor or buddy – who your child can talk to about how they're feeling, if they want to, as well as offering access to other support.

## Other services

We know that accessing services can be difficult, as many are under pressure. However, there may be other free sources of support in your area.

- ▶ [Search by postcode for free confidential youth advice and counselling](#) (Youth Access)
- ▶ Check your employment benefits. You may be able to access support for your child via an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) or health insurance.

If you're considering paying for private mental health support, see if your school or GP can recommend someone.

- ▶ [Advice on finding a private therapist](#) (YoungMinds)
- ▶ [Find autism-adapted services](#) (National Autistic Society)

Doc Ready is a free online service that can help you and your child [prepare for an appointment where you want to talk about mental health difficulties](#).



## If you are in a crisis...

If your child needs urgent help call NHS 111 and press 2 for mental health support, or call your CAMHS crisis line.

If your child is not safe, for instance due to overdose or severe self-harm, call 999 or take them to A&E.



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# *It was finally out in the open.*

When Jack\* was 11, his grandad died. Within a few weeks he had completely withdrawn; he stopped talking and couldn't eat. He went to school but stopped all his activities and seeing his friends. We spent 10 days trying to understand how he was feeling. He kept saying he couldn't say.

Eventually I asked if he had thought about killing himself, at which point he broke down and said yes it was that; he felt worthless and he didn't want to be alive anymore. I was shocked – I didn't think an 11-year-old could have those thoughts – but it seemed like it was an instant weight off his shoulders that it was finally out in the open.

We got a referral to talking therapy but after four weeks we realised it wasn't helping, and we saw a child psychiatrist. They recommended he try CBT and anti-depressants, but I was extremely reluctant for him to take medication.

The CBT helped a bit, but Jack was still quite down. One day he didn't come home after school and turned off the tracking on his phone. I was terrified, thinking the worst. We eventually found him sitting on a bench in a field, but that was the turning point when I realised he needed more help and we agreed to anti-depressants.

Within eight weeks he was a different child. It was remarkable. He found new interests like boxing and stunt scooting and he went back to his rugby. Jack is now 13, off medication, and doing well. My husband and I are very alert to anything that could knock him off balance, but we're learning to relax a little and, through CBT, we've got the tools to help him help himself to understand difficult feelings.

\* not his real name

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# Conditions and treatments



## IN THIS SECTION

Explanations of common mental health conditions, from A to Z, and descriptions of some of the treatments and therapies that may be recommended for young people who are struggling.

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# Common mental health conditions

Here we outline some of the mental health difficulties seen in children and young people, and signpost further information from trusted sources. This list should not be used to try and diagnose your child, always seek professional help if needed.

## Addiction

Addiction is when a person has no control over whether they use something - such as drugs, drink, gaming or social media - and they have become physically or psychologically dependent on it.

Substance abuse means using a drug or alcohol in the wrong way but does not necessarily mean the person is addicted. However, addiction can begin as abuse.

Information about addiction

(YoungMinds)

Concerned about a child and drugs?

(FRANK)

## Anxiety

Fear and worry are normal emotions, but anxiety can become a problem if it feels overwhelming or goes on for a long time. It can start to impact behaviour, interfering with school, home and social life. It can cause panic attacks.

Some children are more prone to feeling anxious and some children can pick up anxious behaviour from others around them. It can also develop following a stressful or traumatic event.

Supporting a child with anxiety

(YoungMinds)

Coping with panic attacks

(Childline)



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## Bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder causes people to experience periods of extremely high or low mood - lasting days or even weeks. In children or young people, bipolar disorder can impact sleep, energy levels, behaviour, thinking and relationships.

Learn about bipolar disorder

(YoungMinds)

## Depression

It is normal to feel low at times, but if this becomes overwhelming or lasts for a long time it might be depression. Depression can be due to past or present stressful or upsetting experiences, or it may run in the family.

Depression often goes undiagnosed but it can be treated, and parents can help.

Guide to teen depression

(HelpGuide)

Advice on depression and low mood

(YoungMinds)

# Common mental health conditions

(continued)

## Eating disorders

Eating disorders most commonly emerge during adolescence. Common disorders include bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, avoidant restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID) and other specified feeding or eating disorder (OSFED).

Signs of an emerging eating disorder can include worries about weight or body shape, over-exercising, using laxatives or inducing vomiting after eating (known as purging).

- Guide to eating disorders** (Beat Eating Disorders)
- Families Empowered and Supporting Treatment of Eating Disorders** (F.E.A.S.T.)
- Eating disorders and autism** (NAS)

## OCD

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is a type of anxiety disorder that affects a person's everyday life. OCD has two main parts: obsessions and compulsions.

Obsessions are unwelcome thoughts, images, urges, worries or doubts that repeatedly appear in the person's mind and cause them to feel very anxious. Compulsions are repetitive actions or rituals to try and make the obsessions go away. This can become a vicious cycle.

- More about OCD for young people** (YoungMinds)
- Support services for young people with OCD** (OCD Youth)

## Personality disorder

A person may receive a diagnosis of personality disorder if they experience significant difficulties in how they relate to themselves and others and have problems coping day to day.

It's uncommon for children and adolescents to be diagnosed with a personality disorder, because their personalities are still emerging and evolving.

- Information about personality disorders** (Mind)
- Guide to borderline personality disorder** (YoungMinds)



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*Eating disorders can affect anyone regardless of age, ethnicity, gender or sexuality. Young people often present with changes in their mood, becoming more withdrawn, anxious and lower in their mood. Seeking help early can lead to a full recovery.*

# Common mental health conditions

(continued)

## Psychosis

Psychosis is when a person's thoughts are so disturbed, they lose touch with reality. They may hear voices, see or feel things that aren't there, or believe things that are not true.

Some people have a one-off psychotic episode, which could be caused by a stressful event, illness or drug use. In other cases, there may be regular episodes, sometimes linked to other conditions such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia.

Although psychosis can affect people of all ages, it is rare before the older teenage years.

[Guide to psychosis for young people](#) (YoungMinds)

[Signs of psychosis in teens](#) (Child Mind Institute)

## PTSD

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can develop after experiencing or witnessing something extremely frightening or distressing. Symptoms can include flashbacks, avoidance of triggers, being very tense and other mood changes. PTSD can be treated.

[Guide to trauma and PTSD for young people](#) (YoungMinds)

[PTSD in children and young people](#) (PTSD UK)

## Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a severe long-term mental health condition with a range of psychological symptoms which can include hallucinations, delusions, loss of interest in everyday activities and withdrawal from others. It usually starts between the ages of 15 and 35, but it is rare for it to be diagnosed before adulthood. Effective treatment is available.

[Guide to schizophrenia for young people](#) (YoungMinds)



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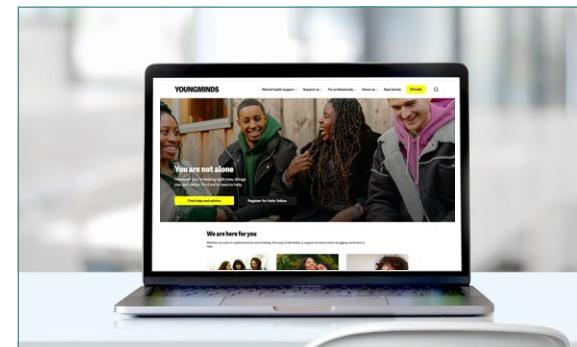
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## Recovery

Getting better can mean different things to different people. With support, many young people will be able to make full clinical recovery, where they no longer have mental health symptoms.

Others may achieve good personal recovery, according to what is important to them as individuals. This could be something like feeling in control of their emotions, thinking more positively and having hope for the future, or being able to achieve something that they find difficult, such as going to school.

[Stories of recovery](#) (YoungMinds)

# Treatments and therapies

If your child has been referred to a mental health service – or you have self-referred – the specialists there will carry out an assessment. This will confirm whether your child's difficulties meet a mental health diagnosis, and discuss with you what support or treatment is most appropriate.

## Talking therapies

Any treatment that involves a person talking to a trained therapist about their difficulties is known as talking therapy. They come in many different forms, suited to different situations. These are some of the most common for children and young people:

- ▶ **Counselling** usually involves weekly one-to-one sessions with a counsellor, who will help your child to think about their situation. This is ideal for people who are generally well, but need help coping with a current crisis, and it may even be available at your child's school.
- ▶ **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)** supports a young person to look at how they can manage their thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and how changing the way they think can help them feel better.
- ▶ **Family therapy**, as the name suggests, involves the whole family. It's used in situations where the family unit is having difficulty, perhaps because one member of the family has a serious problem that's affecting everyone.
- ▶ Other types of talking therapy include behavioural activation, mindfulness-based approaches, dialectical behaviour therapy, EMDR, psychotherapy and art/music/drama therapy.

Note that neurodivergent children and young people should ideally receive adapted support from practitioners who are knowledgeable in helping people with neurodivergence. For instance, it has been shown that standard CBT may not be as effective for autistic people.

Guide to talking therapy and counselling

(YoungMinds)

Information about family therapy

(AFT)

## Medication

There is a lot of evidence that talking therapies work well, but medicines can also help in some cases. For instance, for young people with ADHD, severe depression or anxiety.

Medication guides

(YoungMinds)



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## Inpatient treatment

Most children and young people who need treatment or therapy will live at home as normal and attend regular appointments with their mental health workers. This is referred to as 'outpatient' or 'community' care.

If a young person needs intensive mental health support or is at risk of serious harm to themselves or others, they may benefit from a period in hospital. Usually this happens with the agreement of the child or young person. However, if the risk of harm is so high that their doctors think admission is essential, the Mental Health Act can be used to admit the young person against their will.

Information about inpatient care for young people

(YoungMinds)

Always try to maintain positive relationships with your child's therapists and doctors. Open communication and a collaborative approach between your child, you and the mental health professionals will give you the best outcomes.

# *It was like somebody else in her body.*

It was in March 2021 that we first noticed a change in Molly. I'd collected her from university for her 21st birthday celebrations and it was like somebody else in her body. She got into the car and I felt like I'd brought a different child home, we couldn't even make her smile. It was a complete change from the bubbly, vivacious girl she'd been.

By June, there were dramatic changes in her body. I told her that I was worried that she was terribly poorly. She said "I am, and I don't want to be" and that she'd made an appointment with the GP.

They referred her to a clinic where she got a diagnosis of an eating disorder and was assigned a nurse. All through that summer she went weekly for tests and weighing – it was incredibly hard for her. She called the disease Polly, and at that point Polly was completely in charge.

It took a huge toll on me and her dad, John. It was like a massive black cloud wrapped around us all the time. It was suffocating until, in November, we attended a course\* with other parents that helped us understand what was going on in Molly's head and how to navigate life with her. For instance, learning to avoid triggering language about her body or food. It wasn't easy, we had to keep practising what we'd learned and were thinking about it all the time.

Sometimes it would be a month before we saw any kind of progress, but gradually Molly got stronger. Then, on New Years Eve she said to me 'That's it. Polly is not going to be part of my life in 2022.' Honestly, it was incredible – like flicking a switch – and she's been thriving ever since.

\* the course was run by the Charlie Waller Trust

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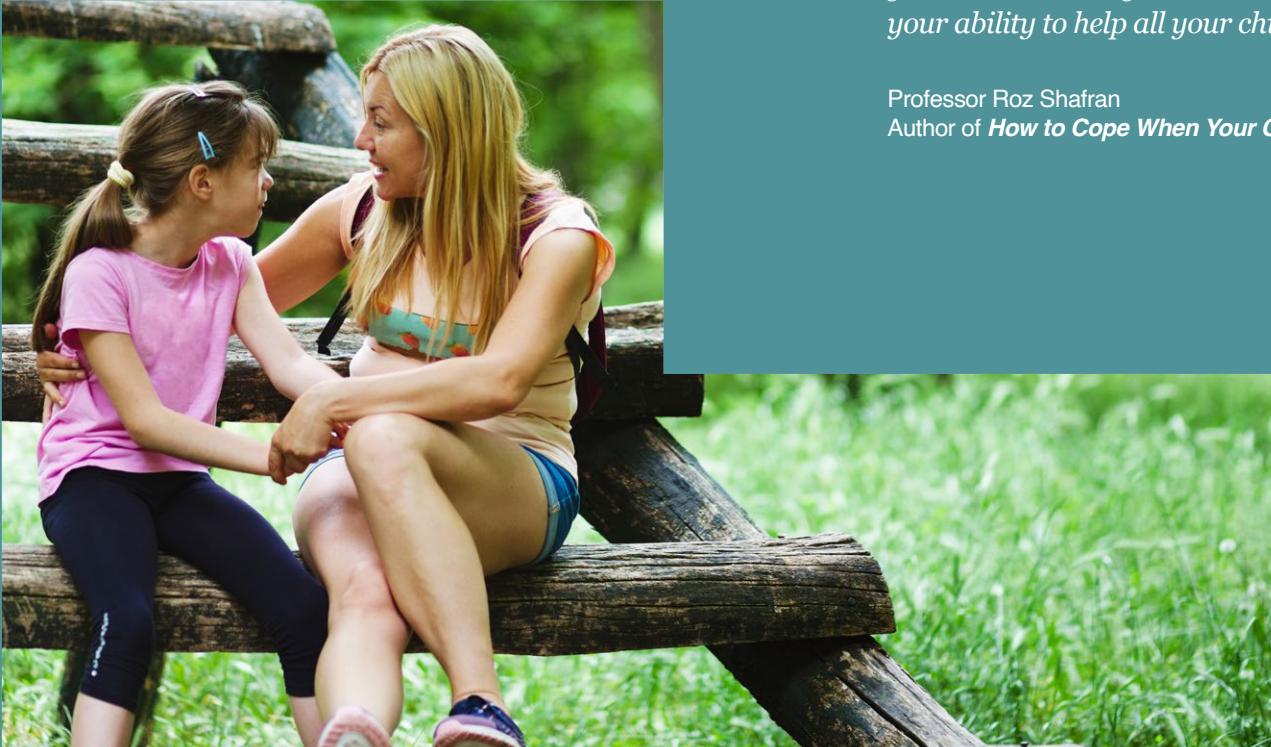
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**Parenting in difficult times**

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# Parenting in difficult times



“

*Parental mental health often gets forgotten but is a key factor in a child's recovery. Supporting your own wellbeing, even in small ways, enhances your ability to help all your children.*

Professor Roz Shafran  
Author of *How to Cope When Your Child Can't*

”

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# Looking after yourself

Parenting a child who's going through a tough time is incredibly demanding. You'll have times when you feel completely drained. Don't feel guilty about this, or about getting frustrated sometimes – it's totally understandable because it's really difficult dealing with this kind of situation.

You might feel you need to put all your energy into helping your child, but it is vital to find ways to look after yourself. You need to protect your own mental health and recharge your batteries. By doing this you'll be more able to give your child what they need and you'll be modelling mentally healthy behaviour.

## Ask for help

You don't have to manage mental illness in the family alone. Reach out to friends, relatives, your GP, or specialist organisations for support, advice, or just a listening ear. Gathering support around you helps everyone to be there for the child or young person who is struggling, as well as for other family members.

**Free and confidential parent helpline and webchat** (YoungMinds)

If you're experiencing your own mental health difficulties, speak to your GP. Also check your employment benefits as you may have access to counselling or support via an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), parents network or health insurance.

## Connect with others

Dealing with these issues can feel very isolating. Peer support – connecting with other parents in the same boat – will show you that you're not alone and can be a place to share experiences without judgement.

If there is a lack of local peer support, you could consider setting something up yourself. There are likely to be other parents and carers in your area who are in a similar situation.

**Find peer support near you** (Charlie Waller Trust)

**How to set up a parent support group** (YoungMinds)

## Self-care

Self-care means finding effective ways to look after yourself. This can be anything that gives you a break from the stresses of life, whether it's for a few minutes or a few days. Even if you can't always get away from the home – for instance if you're a single parent to young children or have



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mobility issues – try to think of ways you can create a 'haven' for yourself. If necessary, ask friends or family for help to give you the time and space you need to do something for yourself, like:

- ▶ watch your favourite TV show, without interruption
- ▶ spend time outdoors
- ▶ take a bath
- ▶ try meditation or mindfulness
- ▶ speak to friends who are encouraging, not judgmental
- ▶ do exercise that makes you feel good
- ▶ order in your favourite meal.

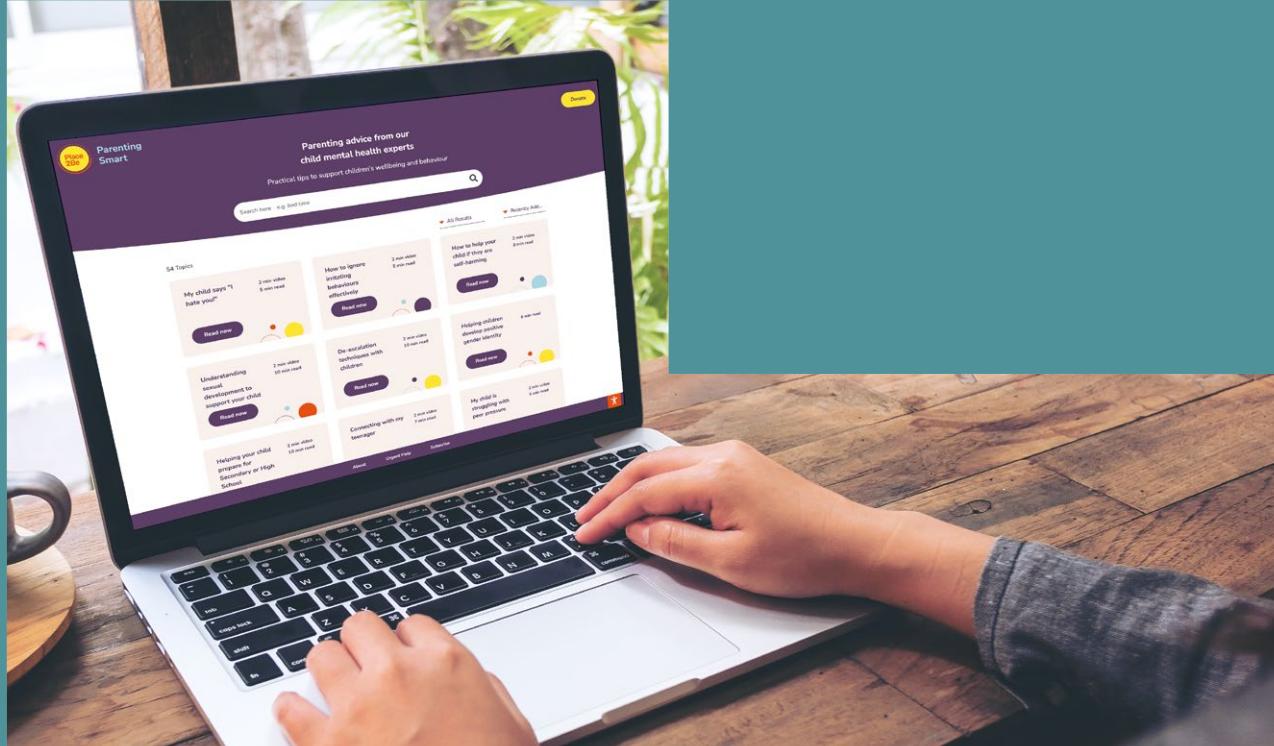
**Parents' guide to looking after yourself** (YoungMinds)

**Healthy habits for parenting** (Place2Be)

**How to cope when your children can't** (Roz Shafran)

# Link libraries

## Parent Toolkit: Mental Health Difficulties in Children and Young People



### IN THIS SECTION

Signposts to more information on many of the topics covered in this toolkit, plus links to organisations who provide helplines and advice for parents, carers and young people.

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# Trusted organisations

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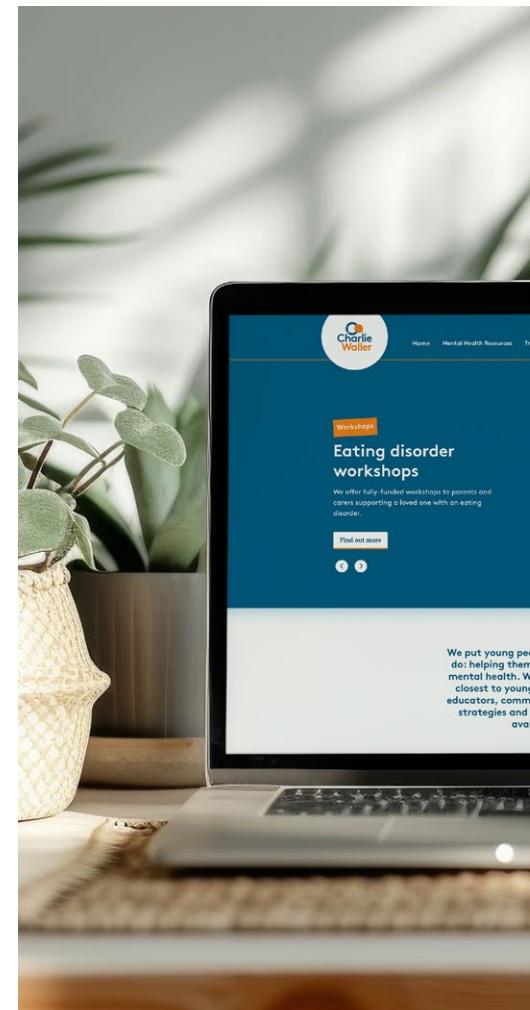
- ▶ **Childline** is for anyone under 19. They provide support via phone online chat or email. They can provide a BSL interpreter if you are deaf or hearing-impaired.
- ▶ **No Panic** provide a youth helpline for people aged 13-20 who experience panic attacks.
- ▶ **Papyrus** has a helpline, textline and email service for anyone under 35 experiencing thoughts of suicide.
- ▶ **Kooth** has discussion boards, live chat, and an online community for young people.
- ▶ **Shout** provides free text support for young people experiencing a mental health crisis.

## Support for parents

- ▶ **YoungMinds** offer a free and confidential parent helpline and webchat.
- ▶ **Charlie Waller Trust** provides skills training and peer support for parents and carers.
- ▶ **Parenting Mental Health** have a private Facebook community.
- ▶ **Place2Be** have a half-termly newsletter, with parenting guides and support.



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# Issue-based information

## Online safety

- ▶ [What young people want adults to know about social media and mental health](#) (YoungMinds)
- ▶ [Creating a positive culture around gaming in your home](#) (YoungMinds)
- ▶ [Advice for parents worried about issues raised in Adolescence](#) (Mental Health Foundation)
- ▶ [CEOP](#) from the National Crime Agency have resources to help you protect your children online.

## Family separation

- ▶ [Gingerbread](#) provides information to help single parents support themselves and their families.
- ▶ [The Parents Promise](#) have guides for parents and schools on how to help children thrive through parental separation.

## Bereavement

- ▶ [Winstons Wish](#) provides practical support and guidance to bereaved children and their families.
- ▶ [Hope Again](#) is Cruse Bereavement Care's website for young people experiencing grief.
- ▶ [Grief Encounter](#) support bereaved children and young people.

- ▶ [Child Bereavement UK](#) supports children, young people and their parents when a child grieves or when a child dies.

## Neurodivergence

- ▶ [Tips for coping with autistic burnout](#) (YoungMinds)
- ▶ [ADHD self-care tips](#) (YoungMinds)
- ▶ [A guide for parents of neurodivergent children](#) (University of Edinburgh)
- ▶ [National Autistic Society](#) offers support to autistic people and their families.
- ▶ [Ambitious about Autism](#) supports children and young people with autism.
- ▶ [ADHD and You](#) has information and resources to help young people living with ADHD.

## LGBTQ+

- ▶ [Messages for anyone struggling with their gender identity or sexuality](#) (YoungMinds)
- ▶ [MindOut](#) is a mental health service run by and for LGBTQ+ people with mental health issues.
- ▶ [Stonewall](#) provides information and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people.



To get urgent mental health advice from the NHS, call 111 or use [NHS 111 online](#)

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# References

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- 4 [World Health Organization 2024. Mental health of adolescents.](#)
- 5 [J M Twenge & E Farley, 2021. Not all screen time is created equal: associations with mental health vary by activity and gender.](#)
- 6 [E Simonoff et al. 2008. Psychiatric disorders in children with autism spectrum disorders: prevalence, comorbidity and associated factors in a population-derived sample.](#)
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# MindForward Alliance

Transforming workplace  
mental health

## About MindForward Alliance

MindForward Alliance supports organisations to build mentally healthy workplaces where both people and business thrive. As a non-profit, we provide impartial expertise, insight and guidance to help businesses build more resilient performing teams and sustainable cultures.

In partnership with:



## Morgan Stanley



With thanks to:



Place2Be is a children's mental health charity that provides counselling and mental health support and training in UK schools.

## YOUNGMINDS

YoungMinds is a mental health charity for children, young people and their parents, making sure all young people get the mental health support they need.



**King's Maudsley  
Partnership**  
for children and young people

The King's Maudsley Partnership works to transform the understanding, treatment and prevention of young people's mental ill health.

[www.mindforwardalliance.com](http://www.mindforwardalliance.com)

**Date:** November 2025