

# A brief introduction to youth mental health and Mental Health Educate

## Why is there such an interest in youth mental health?

Mental ill-health is the biggest health issue affecting young people globally. The adolescent and early adult years are a peak period of risk for the onset of mental health difficulties. Research has also shown that mental ill-health is the leading cause of disability among young people aged 10-24 years. Experiencing mental ill-health during adolescence or early adulthood places young people at higher risk of ongoing mental ill-health, the unwanted consequences of which include potentially devastating intrapersonal, relational, social, educational, vocational and economic difficulties. On account of this, promoting mental health and preventing mental ill-health are global health priorities. Protecting young people's mental health and detecting and intervening early with those who are struggling reduce the risk of young people experiencing enduring mental health difficulties into their adult years.

## Mental health, mental health issues and mental ill-health

People often get confused about mental health and mental ill-health. Mental health refers to a positive sense of wellbeing, defined by the World Health Organisation as 'a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.' (WHO 2014). Usually, the term mental health issues refers to the full spectrum of difficulties that people experience with their emotions, thoughts, functioning and behaviour (for example, in the case of depression, this could be anything from mild experiences of low mood to a serious and pervasive experience of clinical depression). Mental ill-health generally refers only to issues that fall within the clinical end of the spectrum (i.e. mental health issues that would meet classification for a diagnosis).

Related to these issues is the concept of emotional distress, which refers to times when a person experiences difficult and upsetting emotions. Emotional distress is part of the human condition and is therefore a universal feature of youth. All young people will go through difficult times and periods of sadness, confusion, frustration and worry. Often these experiences are short-lived, transient and do not negatively affect a young person's capacity to function. However, if a young person reports persistent emotional difficulties lasting for two or more weeks that are accompanied by changes in their behaviour and their functioning, this may be a sign that they are experiencing more significant difficulties that may require assessment and/or support. Factors such as the intensity, duration and impact of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and functioning difficulties are central to determining their significance and meaning.

Grief is another issue affecting many young people. Grief is a normal response to the experience of loss through the death of a loved one, separation or the loss of one's usual functioning and capacity (for example, through serious illness or a disabling accident). When someone is grieving, their experiences can be very similar as those experienced by people with depression. They may feel sad or angry, find it difficult to concentrate, lose a sense of meaning or purpose in life, withdraw from friends, have difficulties with their sleep or their appetite. In general, these experiences indicate a normal grief reaction and are not a marker of depression. However, in some cases, young people can become depressed following a bereavement or loss, particularly when there are complicating factors associated with the loss. It is important not to assume someone who is grieving is depressed and not to assume grief and depression cannot co-occur

## Common issues and stressors facing young people

Youth is a time of exploration and identity formation. As such, it can be both a challenging and exciting time for young people. Certain experiences and stressors facing young people can increase their risk of emotional and mental health difficulties. These include:

- Low sense of self-worth
- Family stress
- Living with parental addiction or mental ill-health
- Living in an area where they do not feel safe
- Living in poverty/social disadvantage
- Bullying
- Loss (death of loved ones, suicides of peers, parental separation, relationship breakdowns)
- Existential meaninglessness
- Poor body image
- Financial stress
- Pressure for academic achievement (self and parents)
- Exam pressures
- Difficulties negotiating peer relationships
- Work demands
- Loneliness
- Social isolation
- A sense of being different to others
- Gender identity issues
- Issues regarding self-acceptance and social responses to non-heterosexual orientation
- Discrimination based on race, ethnicity or religious beliefs
- Peer pressure: social media, alcohol use, drug use, social activities
- Shame regarding aspects of own family or social circumstances (e.g. living in Direct Provision or in homeless accommodation)
- Social media pressures: perpetuating myths about physical beauty, social status and 'happiness'
- Caregiving demands (e.g. living with a parent/family member with a chronic disability or illness)

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A primary goal in conducting mental health sessions with young people is to promote and protect their mental health. People who have good mental health:

- Feel the full range of emotions that everyone feels: happiness, sadness, joy, fear, guilt, grief, anger, joy, confusion, etc.
- Allow themselves to feel these feelings without criticising themselves for feeling that way
- Cope with their difficult emotions and feelings
- Cope with and manage the day-to-day challenges of their lives
- Are more likely to hold onto a sense of hope when dealing with challenges and disappointments in life
- Are more likely to share how they are feeling with people in their lives who they trust (as this is protective for people and promotes good mental health)
- Are more likely to have higher levels of self-acceptance (although self-doubt is a normal part of the human condition and full self-acceptance is a challenge for most people)

It is important to remember that high levels of adversity and stress place young people at higher risk of mental health difficulties. How young people cope with difficulties and their access to trusted adults who can offer them meaningful support also influence how they get through the challenges they are facing. Reducing and minimising stress, developing coping mechanisms that work for the young person him/herself and talking to a trusted adult are important issues to highlight when conducting mental health-focused sessions with young people.

### Why explore youth mental health in school or other educational settings?

Schools and other educational settings have been recognised as places that have the potential to positively influence the mental health and wellbeing of young people. This is reflected in the increasing emphasis on integrating mental health education, awareness and promotion in national policy documents. It is also reflected in initiatives, such as the One Good School™ initiative developed by Jigsaw, the national centre for youth mental health (<https://jigsaw.ie/one-good-school/>). One Good School™ supports the mental health and wellbeing of young people by developing a shared responsibility across the whole school community. This emphasis on a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing stems from research demonstrating better mental health outcomes for young people where mental health promotion is integrated into the ethos and practice of all aspects and areas of a school.

Although many schools have yet to adopt a whole-school approach to mental health, many teachers and other educators have taken on the task of engaging with young people to explore the topic of mental health. Any such effort has the potential to make a difference to young people. Exploring mental health with young people has the potential to both enhance mental health literacy and to promote help-seeking in young people. Mental health literacy is about raising young people's awareness about mental health and improving their capacity to recognise signs of mental health difficulties. Mental health sessions also promote the concept of empathy: young people having empathy for themselves and for others. This can enhance self-esteem in young people

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and help to promote coping and self-caring strategies, which can include help-seeking when needed. Signposting young people to supports is also important where possible.

## Mental Health Educate

**Mental Health Educate** offers a range of youth-focused resources to educators who want to explore mental health and related issues with young people in an educational context. It is important to note that it is not a whole-school programme or approach. It was developed as a means of ensuring free access to material that had been developed by a team of academics in the Department of Psychiatry, RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences and a number of collaborators from the Arts, online and educational sectors.

All of the resources on Mental Health Educate are grounded in research. Some of that research was carried out with young people in Ireland.

- The video presentations in our **Introduction to Youth Mental Health** are all based on empirical findings from international and national research studies. To promote engagement by young people, each video is between 6 and 7 minutes in length, focusing on key messages for young people.
- The **Youth Mental Health Animation series** is based on findings from a qualitative research study with Irish youth, the quotes from which were used to create the scripts. The animations can be used to complement any presentation on youth mental health, highlighting young people's lived experiences of anxiety, depression, being bullied, loneliness, feeling different and poor body image. All animations also highlight constructive ways to deal with these difficulties and different ways of getting support.
- Mental Health Educate also offers some creative biologically-oriented resources, such as the **Journey through the Brain** book. The book combines details about the anatomy and function of the brain in the style of a mindfulness colouring book. The illustrations bring the science of the brain alive using visual metaphors and the option to colour in the images offers a unique wellbeing-promoting mindfulness exercise for students.
- The intersection between science and mental health is also explored in the lessons about **Cannabis and Mental Health** and in the material about memory, brain scanning and research in our companion website, **A Young Person's Guide to the Mind**
- Help-seeking is supported by the lesson plans on **Exploring Local Mental Health Services**, offering young people a non-stigmatising way to gather information on all available supports in their local area. These lesson plans will also yield an important resource for the school about what supports are available to young people

We wish you all the best in using our material to explore the important issue of mental health with young people. We encourage you to listen to our **Tips for Running Mental Health sessions** video on our website and familiarise yourself with all of the material and related resources before using them.

*The Mental Health Educate team*