

Support for those who are most vulnerable



Maintaining good mental health and wellbeing is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood and into old age. Understanding the mental health issues that affect more vulnerable individuals – including children and older adults – will help to identify problems and provide the support they need.

Children

Mental health in childhood means reaching developmental and emotional milestones and learning healthy social skills. Children must also learn how to cope when there are problems or stressful situations.

Around one in eight children and young people experience behavioural or emotional problems growing up. Some will resolve themselves with time, others will need professional support¹.

Teenagers

Adolescence is a time of many physical, mental, emotional and social changes.

Teens may face peer pressure to use alcohol, tobacco products and drugs, and to have sex. Other challenges can be eating disorders and family/relationship problems.

As they become more independent, teens make more of their own choices about friends, interests and school.

Signs something's wrong²

It can be difficult to know if there is something upsetting a child or teenager.

The NHS recommends looking for the following signs that there's an issue:

- Significant changes in behaviour
- Difficulty sleeping
- Withdrawal from social situations
- Not wanting to do things they usually like
- Self-harm or neglecting themselves

Top tips for parents³

- Be there to listen
Regularly ask how they're doing so they get used to talking about their feelings and know there's always someone they can talk to if they need. Doing an activity together is a great way to start a conversation.

This could be playing a ball game, baking, making something together or going for a walk together.

- Support them through difficulties
Pay attention to their emotions and behaviour and try to help them work through any difficulties. It's not always easy, especially when faced with challenging behaviour, but help them to understand what they're feeling and why.

- Stay involved in their life
Show interest in their life and the things that are important to them.
This helps them value themselves but also makes it easier to spot any problems.
- Encourage their interests
Having interests is a great way to build good mental health. Support and encourage them to explore their interests, whatever they are.
- Take what they say seriously
Listening to and valuing what they say, without any judgement, helps children and teenagers feel valued. By empathising with them, you can help them work through their emotions constructively.
- Build positive routines
Introducing structure around regular routines, healthy eating and exercise can help.
A good night's sleep is also really important.

How to help older adults

Recognising the signs of a mental or other health problem is easier if you see the older person frequently. If you suspect a problem, you can help them visit their GP as the first step in getting treatment.

If you don't live close to an elderly relative or friend, a phone call or brief visit may not be the best way to notice important changes in behaviour. Consider trying these tips:

- With the person's permission, contact people who see the person regularly — neighbours, friends or local relatives — and ask them to contact you with any concerns. Ask if you can contact them regularly to get updates.
- If you are able to visit in person, look for safety issues and overall living conditions. Try to determine the older person's mood and general health status.

In some cases, you may have to help them make difficult health care decisions. Talk to them about arranging a lasting power of attorney so they have one or more people to help them make decisions or to act on their behalf.



Older adults

Mental health and wellbeing are as important in older age as at any other time of life. According to the World Health Organisation, approximately 15% of adults aged 60 and over suffer from a mental illness, such as depression or dementia⁴.

In addition to the stressors that affect all adults, older people are more likely to experience physical problems, including a significant decline in functional ability and mobility, chronic pain, frailty and other chronic health problems. Bereavement, a drop in socioeconomic status with retirement, isolation and loneliness and even elder abuse may reduce the quality of life of older adults.



What can you do?

Pay attention to the mental health needs of children, teens and older adults in your family or community.

Sources:

1. Children's mental health - Every Mind Matters - NHS (www.nhs.uk)
2. Children's mental health - Every Mind Matters - NHS (www.nhs.uk)
3. Children's mental health - Every Mind Matters - NHS (www.nhs.uk)
4. Mental health of older adults (who.int)

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