



# Supporting teen wellbeing

Aberdeenshire Council Educational Psychology Service August 2021

## Why mental health and well-being?

Now more than ever, we need to ensure that young people feel healthy, confident and valued, and that they know their lives have purpose.

“Half of all mental health problems present in young people by the age of 14. **The adults around young people can play a huge part in supporting their mental health and stopping their needs escalating.**” *Young Minds*

Often parents/ carers medicalise mental health, feeling that a specialist service or counselling is required to fix difficulties. However, we know that those who are closest to teens and have ongoing relationships with them can have the greatest impact. *The nature of a young persons relationships with their family, friends and other key adults is at the core of their happiness and has a huge influence on their wellbeing.*

During these vital teenage years, the pre-frontal cortex in the brain - which is responsible for our problem-solving and decision-making - is going through lots of development. In fact, it is effectively being overhauled. Refer to our [Adolescent brain development leaflet](#) 

The pre-frontal cortex is driven by pleasure and reward systems and young people need to seek out risk to be able to survive and thrive. However, due to young people being over-protected, they are being denied of this, leading to increased vulnerability to mental health issues later on.

## Normal is different for all of us

Everyone’s teenage experience is different, but it can be a challenging time. A time when we explore our identities and try to imagine our futures. There are often stresses with exams, relationships, friends, family and even bullying. Recently there has been the pandemic, and for teenagers, emotions can feel particularly intense. Mental wellbeing looks differently for everyone and it is perfectly normal to feel a range of emotions. Recent BUPA research found that four out of five teenagers reported symptoms of poor mental health. Of those with difficulties 52% in the study had turned to harmful coping behaviours.

Looking after well-being does not just include sleeping, and what you eat and drink, but also being active, creative, and kind to others – and yourself. If something helps your teen feel good, make time to do it, (e.g. drawing or baking, or listening to music).

**29%** of teens feel their parents wouldn’t understand if they opened up about mental health.



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**45% of parents want more guidance on how to speak to their child about mental health**

When should you be concerned? [Click here for the physical and behavioural signs to look out for](#)

[To view further statistics from BUPA click here](#)



**In our hectic lives, we sometimes forget to check in with ourselves. Therefore, we sometimes don't realise our wellbeing is suffering until we are struggling because of it.**

## What is mental wellbeing?

Mental wellbeing changes constantly and is about how you are feeling right now, how well you can cope with daily life and how well you regulate your emotions. Our wellbeing can effect the way we feel about ourselves and others, and about the things we face in our lives. Having positive wellbeing can help us to:

- ◆ Feel and express a range of emotions
- ◆ Have confidence and positive self-esteem
- ◆ Have good relationships with others
- ◆ Enjoy the world around
- ◆ Cope with stress and adapt when things change

**Happy all the time is not a thing.** It is normal to feel sad, angry, or low sometimes, no one can be happy all the time. Experiencing a range of emotions is part of being human, helping us connect with each other and telling us what we need. The myth that having certain things *should* make us happy can actually make us less happy as we chase impossible goals. Some things which affect wellbeing are:

- ◆ Difficult or stressful life events
- ◆ Our relationships with the people around us
- ◆ The care and support we get at home and school
- ◆ Our physical health—sleep, what you eat and drink, if you take drugs or alcohol, and if you have any health problems
- ◆ Our environment—housing conditions, how we are treated by others, money problems
- ◆ Being able to recognise and communicate your emotions

Individuals may experience difficulties in one or more of those areas, or even experience problems not listed. Everyone is different.

However your and your teen's wellbeing is at the moment, there are things you can do to look after and improve it, in order to experience healthy emotional regulation. If you want to find out more about emotional regulation, if your emotions frequently impact on you, if you find it difficult to let go of negative emotions, reduce the intensity of your emotions, or shift from a negative emotion to a positive one then you can refer to our leaflets [Understanding and managing anger/ anxiety and Emotion coaching](#).



## NHS: 5 ways to wellbeing

The NHS model of wellbeing is evidence based and suggests 5 areas you can work on to improve your mental health and wellbeing. Trying to make a small changes in each of the following areas could make a big difference to how you or your teen feels.





## 1. CONNECT WITH OTHER PEOPLE

Humans are social animals and our relationships can bring us happiness by:

- ◆ Improving our mood
- ◆ Helping us feel more accepted and allowing us to offer support to each other
- ◆ Giving us an opportunity to share positive experiences

Try organising something nice with family/friends, visiting someone you have not seen in a while, or meeting new people by joining new clubs.

### Ideas for connection (click on links for further information)

#### Connect with loved ones

Write a [letter](#) to a special friend or relative. Post it by mail or hand deliver and await their reply.

#### Connect with yourself

Having a [30 minute nap](#) in the middle of the day could enhance your energy and increase your learning power.

#### Connect with your future

Write a letter to your future self, what would you say? What would you like to have happened/ achieved?

#### Connect through kindness

It's [Random Acts of Kindness Day](#) on the 17th February . Make a list of kind things and pledge to do them.

#### Connect with family

Create a family scrap book, call family members and ask them for stories or memories of them growing up.

#### Connect with feel good chemicals

Give yourself permission to take some time out to do what you love, something you enjoy doing just for fun, that makes you feel all warm and fuzzy!

#### Connect with your senses

What scents remind you of happy times? Gather [your own happy smells](#) for when you need a boost.

#### Connect with nature

Go into nature and take some long, slow deep breaths, listen for wildlife. Make intentions for the coming month. Imagine these as tiny seeds you are planting.

#### Connect with your body

Find a quiet place, close your eyes and slow down, breathe and turn your senses inward thinking about your own body, tense up and relax each of your muscles from top to toe.

#### Connect with your past

Together with your family or friends take it in turns to share your favourite funny memories

#### Connect with music

Play your favourite song and really listen, focus your attention, try and make sense of the lyrics. Music can be a full mind-body experience, connecting with our emotions, altering our mood, making us want to dance and sing along. It has the power to connect with our brains emotional centre and cheer us up.

Different people need different amounts and types of connection so think about what brings your teen happiness in their relationships. Help them to strengthen their current relationships with kindness and gratitude. If they would like to build new ones, support them to look for opportunities, like joining new clubs, or classes, or discussing whether there are safe spaces online which they could try.



## 5 ways to wellbeing



"No matter what people say, **self-care isn't selfish.** I've noticed that whenever I take self-care more seriously, it has a hugely positive impact on how I feel and act."

Anonymous teen



**2. BE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE** This is not only great for your physical health and fitness, evidence shows it can also improve your mental wellbeing by:

- ◆ Improving mood and self confidence, increasing energy and helping us sleep better
- ◆ Helping you to set goals or challenges and achieve them
- ◆ Exercise releases a lot of tension and gives us a sense of purpose
- ◆ Causing chemical changes in your brain which can help to positively change your mood

**Try a short walk, taking stairs instead of the lift, going for a swim, run, bike ride, HIT workouts, tennis, football.**

Visit the NHS page on: [Physical activity for young people](#)

**3. LEARN NEW SKILLS** Research shows this can also improve your mental wellbeing by:

- ◆ Boosting self-confidence and raising self-esteem
- ◆ Helping you to build a sense of purpose
- ◆ Helping you to connect with others

Even if you feel like you do not have enough time, or you may not need to learn new things, there are lots of different ways to bring learning into your life.

**Try cooking or baking something new, doing a DIY project, trying a new sport or language, visiting a museum or gallery (even if this is virtually).**

**4. GIVE TO OTHERS** Research suggests that acts of giving and kindness can help improve your mental wellbeing by:

- ◆ Creating positive feelings and a sense of reward
- ◆ Giving you a feeling of purpose and self-worth
- ◆ Helping you connect with other people and boosting your relationships

Try small acts of kindness towards other people, or larger ones like volunteering in your local community.

**Try offer a neighbour or stranger help if you see they need it, volunteer your time/skills somewhere, ask a friend how they are and truly listen to them.**

**5. PAY ATTENTION TO THE PRESENT MOMENT (mindfulness) and increase the things you do to help you relax**

Paying more attention to the present moment includes your thoughts and feelings, your body and the world around you.

Some people call this awareness "mindfulness". Mindfulness can help you enjoy life more and understand yourself better. It can positively change the way you feel about life and how you approach challenges.

Read more about mindfulness, including steps you can take to be more mindful in your everyday life in our leaflet on [Relaxation and mindfulness](#).



**Try spending time in nature, seeing friends, reading, listening to music, watching a film, having a bath or shower.**



## Child's Five Ways to Wellbeing Plan

	<b>Connect</b>  Talk and listen, develop friendships	<b>Keep Learning</b>  Set goals, develop skills, try new things	<b>Be Active</b>  Do what you can and enjoy what you do	<b>Give</b>  Give time, your words or your presence	<b>Take Notice</b>  Remember the things that make you happy
<b>I already:</b>	Chat with friends Meet with Mrs Smith every morning	Go to school Watch YouTube videos about drawing	Walk to school Walk to my friend's house	Help with the washing up Help my friends when they are unsure	Listen to my favourite music
<b>I could:</b>	Join a youth group Text friends when at home	Learn a new skill I can use in my art work.	Go horse-riding once per week.	Make my family a meal once per week Help out at an animal sanctuary or stables	Write down something I'm happy about at the end of every day.
<b>Next steps:</b>	Find out about a local youth group and try a session.	Identify a skill I'd like to learn and practice it at least once per week.	Book a lesson at a local stables.	Find out about volunteer opportunities nearby in my next mentor session.	Get a notebook and pen and put beside my bed to start things.

Date for plan review: \_\_\_\_\_

## Thrive Wellbeing Kit—Activities for children up to 16 years old

### Digital detox

Limit device use to 2 hours daily (online schooling is allowed). Uninstall unused apps and mute devices when you're with others. Try to switch off by 9pm.

### In the moment

Bring your attention to the space you are in. What can you see, hear and feel?

### Did you know?

Mindfulness is practiced by performers, athletes and more. [Click here](#) to learn more and start your mindful journey.

### Relax

Getting [enough sleep](#) has a huge impact on how we feel and think each day.

### Reflective journal

Keep a daily journal of thoughts and feeling. Record what you are grateful for each day.

### Routines

A list of daily rituals helps keep you on track and in tune with your life. [Try setting SMART goals.](#)

### Stress catcher

Life can feel really challenging, it is important you develop some [coping strategies](#).

### Sit with sensations

Scan your body from head to toe. Name, label and observe any sensations, without judgement.

### Natures ornaments

Beat the blues by getting outside and creative! Have a go at making an [ice ornament](#)

### Take a walk

Being in nature could help you to stay in the present and focus a [wandering mind](#).

### Express yourself

Express your internal feelings by creating a comic on managing different situations, who are villains and the heroes? Paint, draw or write about it.



## Eat Healthy

Healthy eating and drinking can improve our mood, increase our energy and help us sleep better. It is important for teens to:

- ◆ Eat a balanced diet (especially if vegetarian or vegan) and also make sure they eat enough to give their body energy
- ◆ Keep hydrated
- ◆ Reduce added sugar and caffeine in their food and drink

You can download the NHS page on [healthy eating for teens](#) for more information.

If you have an eating problem, or have any worries about food, it's a good idea to talk to your doctor before changing your diet.

## Get enough sleep

Getting good quality sleep, and enough of it, can help us have more energy, feel more positive, and less stressed. Teens can try to:

- ◆ Go to bed at a time that allows them enough sleep
- ◆ Cut down on screen time before bed
- ◆ Try a blue light filter or night mode on their screen in the evening to help them feel sleepy
- ◆ Practice healthy sleep habits, like reading a book before bed, or listening to relaxing music

The blue light that comes through screens is similar to daylight, so it makes our bodies want to stay awake longer. Filters lower the amount of the blue light from screens so you do not strain your eyes as much. It will also allow your sleep hormone to work, which should help you sleep better.

Click here to view our [Guide to supporting sleep](#) leaflet



## Crucial skills for Mental Health

Natasha Devon discusses the unique functions of the developing teen brain and how the skills of critical thinking, healthy stress coping mechanisms and emotional literacy can be nurtured during this time. Teens need to develop the ability to tune into, describe how they are feeling and communicate about their emotions. She feels that *"What young people today do not have is Time. Time to process and think. Time to play. Time to be creative. Time to be bored. And the impact on their mental health is catastrophic, because in those still moments of imagination, play and boredom we develop the coping strategies which help us combat every day stress."*

She emphasises the importance of helping teens to engage in activities which make them naturally resilient and self aware—such as sports, arts, music and drama.

The teen brain also offers a unique opportunity to really practice skills in particular areas and improve these, read more in [Adolescent brain leaflet](#).



# Talking to teens about mental health



We are all getting a little better at understanding mental health and knowing how to spot potential problems, but starting a conversation with your teenager about their mental health isn't always easy.

With the right words, you can help to build trust and understanding, find solutions and build resilience. Sometimes these conversations bring the realisation that a teenager needs support from someone outside the family.

Remember.....

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When it comes to starting a conversation:

**H**ow are you?

Conversations about mental health can be more helpful if they are two way and open. Don't use statements like "I'm worried about you". This can put teens on edge, or make them clam up or close off to you. **Simply asking your teen how they are and being genuine will lead to a more positive conversation.**

**U**nderstand

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. **Explain that you're there for them—and listen without judging.**

**M**yths

Try to dispel any myths they might have about mental illness. **Explain that it is just like physical medical illnesses**, and that help is available.

**A**cknowledge

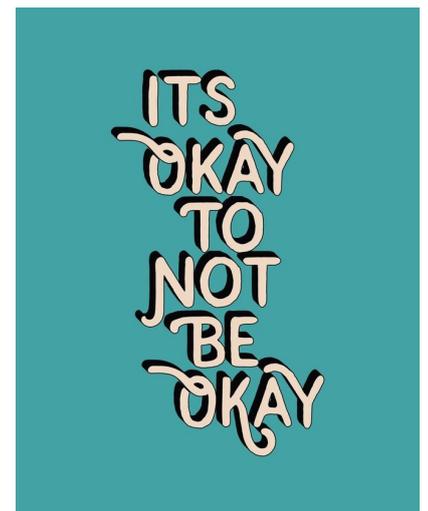
Using phrases such as "there's no need to worry about that" can undermine their feelings and doesn't offer them a solution. **When they share how they feel, acknowledge it.**

**N**ormalise

Explain that mental health is about our range of emotions and how we cope with our lives and our **mental health can fluctuate daily, just like our physical health.**

The teenage years are a tricky time and identifying if something is wrong can be difficult. If your teen is spending a lot of time alone you might wonder if this is okay, a passing phase, or something to worry about. It is healthy for young people to spend time alone but it is also typical for teens to hide their feelings.

 **Watch this 3 minute video by BUPA** to help you think about whether your teenager is spending too much time alone and showing signs of isolation and hear tips for talking to them about this and their mental well-being.



## Supporting your teen with confidence

**The key way to survive and thrive is not striving to be happy all the time—which is unrealistic. It is about learning to cope with pain and misery, to bounce back from difficulties and to accept yourself for who you are.**

Helping teens to believe in themselves and their abilities is key. Supporting them to recognise the things they are good at and give new things a go can help them develop confidence. Confidence is our ability to feel positive about ourselves and to accept ourselves, just the way we are. It can be hard as we are drawn to compare ourselves to others but we will never be the same as anyone else as we are all unique. Instead of looking at others why not focus on yourself and 'be the best version of yourself possible'.

Everyone is good at something.

Things take practise so we will not get things right first time. When we don't do as well at something as we had imagined we can have the following thoughts:

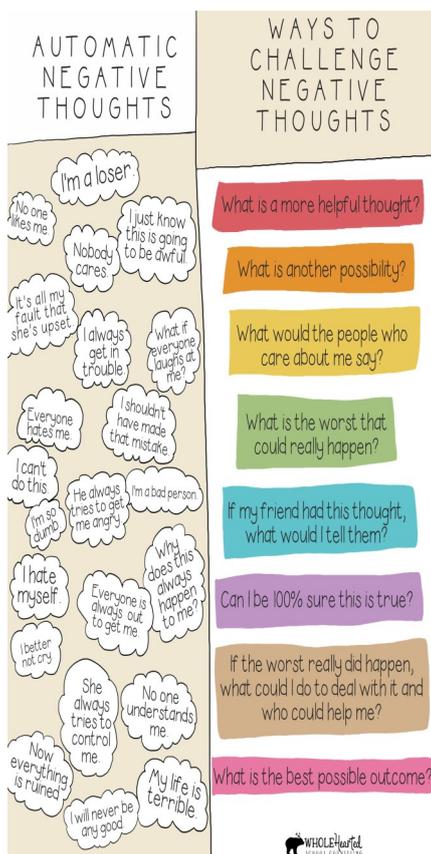
- ◆ Why bother even trying?
- ◆ I'm a failure
- ◆ I'm not good at anything
- ◆ Everyone thinks I am boring

These are negative thoughts – but instead of listening to these – *thoughts are only that, thoughts they are not facts but we often react to them as though they are* – try thinking of the things that you are really great at and your achievements.

**Did you know you can train your brain to become more confident?** We can think of confidence as a muscle, it grows when you work on it daily so anyone can become confident.

### Simple tips to improve confidence

1. **Re-evaluate goals**—like steps on ladder—make small goals to reach one big goal, break what you are trying to achieve down into manageable chunks and make a start, small steps are easier than one huge leap
2. **Don't give up**—when you try something new, often, you will fail at first—which is ok and happens to everyone—keep trying.
3. **Turn down negative self-talk**—everyone has positive and negative thoughts but you can decide which thoughts you want to pay attention to. Let go of the negative ones, let them pass like clouds. Pay attention to the positive ones, this will train your brain to be more confident.
4. **Be constructive not destructive**—there are two different types of feedback/criticism. Reject the comments that bring you down and let in all the comments that help you grow.
5. **Believe in yourself and celebrate your differences**—No one is the same it is a fact of life so why spend time comparing yourself to other people. Find your **UNIQUE QUALITIES**; the special things that make you unique and irreplaceable.



### TRY OUT SOME POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS

**I am enough      I am allowed to take up space**

**I am allowed to make mistakes; they don't define me**

**I have the power to create change      I can speak to myself with kindness**

**I am good at helping others to.....**



## Social media strategies

On average adults spend over 4 hours a day on screens, and for teenagers this is over 7, which is a serious relationship given they are awake for around 15. Although devices are a normal part of everyday life they can have a big impact on our thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Without realising it we can give our screens and the content we view through them a lot of power. Being honest about how we use these means we can take that power back.

How many hours a day do you spend? How do you use the time? (watching videos, posting on social media, chatting, emails, scrolling feeds)

For each use, consider how you feel whilst doing it? How you feel after?

How many times do you check? What time of day do you first check?

What motivates you to pick up your screen (other than notifications)?

How do you react when you hear a notification? How do you feel without your phone?

Think about changing your notification settings, planning set times of day where you take a break. Uninstall apps that make you feel rubbish. If you turn to screens out of boredom do something else instead.

*#MatesMatter— is a Young Minds campaign to grow awareness among young people of how they can look out for their friends online.*

**We all know that social media is not the most truthful place. Photos are altered and filtered to within an inch of their lives, posts are often more about how people want to be seen rather than how they are, and 'facts' can be anything but.**

Even though we know this we still have a nasty habit of comparing what we see with our lives and focusing on our flaws. We can feel like we have to join in and edit ourselves too. We can absorb the lies and believe we are not acceptable impacting on our self esteem, mood, increasing our worry and affecting our concentration. Social media can be great if we keep an eye on how it is affecting us.

## Anxiety, Stress, Worry

It is really important not to overreact to and medicalise anxiety, stress and worry. It is healthy for us to experience a little of them all and anxiety is a normal, natural emotion. Refer to our [Understanding and responding to anxiety leaflet](#).



**BREATHE OUT** an inexpensive book in aid of Mind contains simple tips for responding to anxious thoughts and feelings. We want teens to accept it is okay to feel anxious and know there are steps they can take to reduce these feelings.

**Write it forward:** write words of encouragement and support to your future self for when times are rough. This can help you to reflect on how you give yourself daily emotional support and how harsh you can be towards yourself. What we need is a supportive inner voice, that will always have our backs no matter what happens in our lives. *Consider—what would you say to a friend who had a similar problem/ feeling?*

**Listen out for the good:** shift attention to the positive in our days. Ask teens to list some of the positive experiences they have had in the past week. It is important to keep perspective and the power of positive thinking cannot be underestimated. Small moments of glory can make us smile and appreciating small, positive moments can create the world of change.

**7/11 Breathing:** 7/11 breathing technique is just that—you empty your lungs, then take a deep breath into your stomach while counting to 7, and then breathe out gently to the count of 11. You repeat it for two-three minutes until you feel relaxed, thinking of nothing but your breathing and counting. Although on first appearance this seems like a simple task, it is tricky to do which is exactly what it makes it so effective. *Next time you feel your thoughts are out of control, inhale, exhale, and remember that the easiest way back into your body is through your breath.*

**Flooding the Page:** another way to manage worries is to 'flood' a piece of paper with them. Write (or speak) about your worries in as many words as you can. The act of releasing them and emptying them out of your mind reduces anxiety and stress levels. The more words you write or share the more the stress decreases.



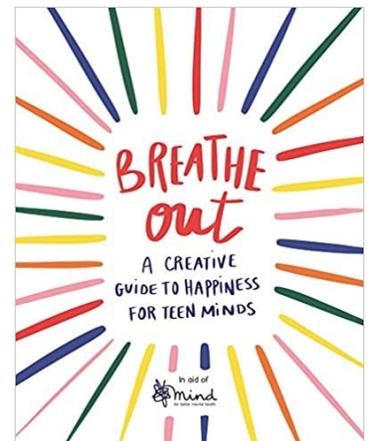
## We can choose who and what we let onto our screens

Who do you follow?

What do you get out of it?

How do they make you feel about yourself?

What do you post and why?



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We value your feedback, please complete our short survey by scanning the QR code.



## GRADE YOUR WORRY

Grade the thing that is causing you the most worry from 0-10.



Converting feelings into a number uses the rational, thinking part of the brain and helps you observe the fear rather than be in it. Once you've graded it, choose a number on the scale that you feel would be OK. It does not have to be 0 just something manageable for right now. Then use breathing until you reach that number.

## Further information and resources



[Wellbeing for kids & teens | Parent Club](#)

[CAMHS resources links](#) books, downloads, websites, apps, videos

[Mind: looking after your wellbeing](#)

[Young Minds](#) for young people, parents, those working with young people

[SAMH](#) for Scotland's Mental Health

[Reach](#) for young people to access advice on range of topics

[BUPA Teenage Wellbeing](#)

[Thrive approach](#) to meeting emotional and social needs of young people

[Living life to the full](#) Free online CBT courses for teenagers



Positively Teenage: A positively brilliant guide to teenage wellbeing (2018) Nicola Morgan

A Beginner's Guide to Being Mental: An A-Z (2018) Natasha Devon

Yes you can: Ace your exams without losing your mind (2020) Natasha Devon

Fundamentals: A guide for teachers and parents on Mental Health and Self-Esteem (2015) Lynn Crilly and Natasha Devon

Overcoming Teenage Low Mood and Depression: A Five Areas Approach (2012) Dr Nicky Dummett and Dr Chris Williams

Think good feel good (2018) Paul Stallard

Free-range kids: how to raise safe, self-reliant children (without going nuts with worry) (2010) Lenore Skenazy

Breath Out, a creative guide to happiness for teen minds, a book released in aid of Mind.



## Teens still need structure and routine

TEEN SMART GOALS

# WEEKDAY SCHEDULE

FOR TEENS

TIME	MORNING	ACTIVITY
8:00	Get up and going	Wake up, get breakfast, get dressed!
9:00	Distance Learning	Language arts, math, science
11:00	Break	Catchup with friends online
11:30	Family Teamwork	Chores, room and house cleanup
NOON	LUNCH	Help prep and clean up
1:00	Goal time!	Work on your action plan
2:00	Distance Learning	Social studies, foreign language
4:00	Outside Activity, Movement	Be safe, but get moving!
5:00	Family Time	Play a game, call a grandparent
6ish	DINNER	Dinner prep and cleanup
7:00	Personal Time	TV, screen time, chat with friends
9:00	Quiet time	Read, write in journal (no screens)
10:00	Get ready for bed	Turn in phones and electronics