

# Supporting mental health & wellbeing in secondary schools



**Anna Freud**  
National Centre for  
Children and Families

# Introduction

We know that 1 in 10 children and young people experiences a mental health issue at any one time. School leaders, teachers and support staff play a vital role in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their pupils. This booklet aims to offer practical guidance about what school staff can do to support mental health, and how to help if they are concerned about a child or young person.

This advice and guidance has been produced by child mental health experts from the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families. As an independent charity we bring together leading clinicians and researchers dedicated to improving the quality, accessibility and effectiveness of support and provision.



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# Exam stress

Exam stress describes the emotional, physiological, and behavioural responses caused by an imminent test or exam. It can be related to a negative previous experience of exams, poor preparation, worry about failure, or pressure to perform. For children and young people who are generally anxious, the experience of taking exams can be very threatening and could lead to unmanageable increases in anxiety levels.



## What can school staff do to support a young person experiencing exam stress?

**1.** **Provide reassurance** to minimise the burden of the upcoming exam. Remind pupils of past successes and give pupils the opportunity to say how they are feeling.

**2.**



**Support exam preparation** by holding revision classes and helping pupils to create a study schedule using personal devices or a PC to monitor progress. Encourage pupils to form small study groups or partners to embed learning. Check whether they're on track at regular points. Allow pupils to familiarise themselves with the exam conditions including the room, the invigilator role, the rules and the timings.

**3.**

**Promote regular exercise** to get rid of physical tension. Improved blood flow to the brain can improve a young person's ability to think clearly, learn, concentrate and remember.



**4.**

**Encourage relaxation** techniques such as controlled breathing and mindfulness.



**5.**

Encourage pupils to **take care of themselves** by eating the right kind of foods, drinking water and getting enough sleep. At least 8 hours of sleep is essential as tiredness can impair concentration and increase anxiety.

# Sleep problems



Good sleep is essential for a young person's wellbeing, and has proven advantages for memory and performance. However, during adolescence, changes in the brain can mean that teenagers' body clocks are not set for early starts. Over time this can lead to a 'sleep debt', which might impact on their everyday functioning. Sleep problems can also be associated with mental health difficulties, and life stressors at school and/or home. They can be a signal that something is not right for that young person and they need help.

## What can school staff do to support a young person who experiences sleep problems?



1.

**Ask them** about their sleep and other areas of their life. Try to get a better understanding of their problem and whether it is primarily linked to lifestyle or broader problems.

2.

**Educate the whole class** about the importance of sleep and the benefits of lifestyle changes such as daily exercise. Help pupils to monitor the impact of sleep on their sense of wellbeing and performance by setting them the task of trying two things that might improve their sleep, and reporting back.

3.

**Discuss sleep hygiene.** This is usually very effective and involves consistently using guidelines on how to promote good sleep, including reducing caffeine, stimulants and screen time, and developing a routine. Further information can be found at [www.annafreud.org](http://www.annafreud.org)



4.

**Involve parents and carers** wherever possible in understanding why a pupil is having difficulty sleeping and promoting good sleep.

5.

**Be aware** that some pupils may have sleep difficulties associated with mental health, relationship difficulties (including bullying) and/or problems at home. Help them to access appropriate support.



# Eating disorders

Those with eating disorders may be underweight (anorexia nervosa), or normal/overweight (bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder). Signs that may indicate an eating disorder are weight loss; going to the toilet after eating; excessive exercise; and being obsessive about food and/or body image.

Anyone can develop an eating disorder. However, they are most common amongst young women aged 12 to 20.



## What can school staff do to support young people with eating disorders?

1.

**Listen.** Make enough time to speak to the young person in a private and calm space. It takes great courage to acknowledge an eating disorder and the underlying thoughts, feelings and psychological distress.

2.

**Share your concerns** with a parent or carer. Explain to the young person why and how you'll do this. If they refuse consent for this talk to your manager and decide together on a plan of action.



3.

**Keep in touch.** Make a plan with the young person to meet regularly, and find out if there is a particular member of staff they would like to check in with.

4.

**Offer guidance.** Ensure every member of school staff has received some training about eating disorders. Running parent and carer workshops and information sessions can help build staff and parent/carer confidence in being able to support young people.



## Remember

In extreme cases where a young person is visibly very ill go directly to A&E.

For more information visit [www.b-eat.co.uk](http://www.b-eat.co.uk).

# Substance use



Fewer young people are using substances (drugs and alcohol) than ever before. However, those who do use are often using more substances more often than we have seen in the past.

## What can school staff do to support a young person who uses substances?

**1.** **Understand** the different reasons that young people use substances. Some young people use substances just to test them out, while others use them to fit in to a peer group. Young people often use drugs as a way to cope with difficult things in their lives. Take time to find out what else might be going on.

**2.** **Don't panic.** Hearing about a young person's substance use can make us worry, and respond to young people in ways that make them feel misunderstood or chastised. This can prevent young people from engaging in help. Try your best to stay calm and thoughtful.

**3.** **You don't have to know everything!** It's good to do some reading, but you can use not knowing about substances to your advantage. Asking young people 'What is that like?' or saying 'Let's look up the risk of that drug together' can start helpful conversations.



**4.** **Choose the right time to talk.** Schools need to respond robustly to substance use, in line with their drug policy. However, young people are unlikely to feel able to have supportive conversations about substances when they are stressed because they are being sanctioned. Try to find a separate time to talk, when everyone is calmer.

**5.** **Know what resources are available locally.** Your area will have a young person's substance use service. Find out what is available in your local area.

# Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition, characterised by inattention, impulsivity, and often with hyperactivity. Symptoms of ADHD tend to be noticed at an early age with most cases diagnosed when children are 6 to 12 years old. The classroom environment can be very challenging for a young person with ADHD as their condition makes sitting still, listening quietly, and concentrating incredibly difficult.



## What can school staff do to support young people with ADHD?



1.

**Be clear.** Young people with ADHD tend to have difficulty following instructions, even if they write them down. Try to break down the steps and talk them through one at a time, allowing young people to complete each smaller task before coming back for the next step.

2.

**Be creative.** Young people with ADHD tend to be easily distracted so it's helpful if you can adapt your teaching methods to break up long periods of concentration into shorter chunks, and incorporate different activities which allow young people to move from their seats.



3.

**Plan together.** Parents or carers, SENCOs, and GPs can all help plan strategies for young people with ADHD to get the most out of school. Meet regularly with parents or carers to agree how best to support the young person's learning.



4.

**Encourage exercise.** Make sure the young person never misses break time or PE. Releasing energy at these times can make it easier for young people to keep calmer during lessons. Providing a stress ball for a young person to squeeze or play with discreetly at his or her seat can also help combat hyperactivity.

5.

**Be supportive.** Talk to your colleagues about the challenges you're facing and come up with strategies to support each other. Your school should have a policy that equips you to help young people with ADHD.

# Responding to traumatic events

Children and young people sometimes witness or are involved in events that they find very difficult or distressing, such as accidents, violence or terrorist attacks. Afterwards, it is normal for them to feel sad, upset, guilty, confused or any combination of feelings. Some continue to feel scared even though the danger has passed. They may have difficulty sleeping or concentrating which may impact their behaviour or attainment at school. You can help them to worry less by helping them to understand that their reactions are normal and understandable.



## What can school staff do to support young people after a traumatic event?

- 1. Help them to feel safe.** Everyone feels safer when they know what to expect. You can help young people feel safer sooner by sticking to their normal routines and continuing with their usual activities where possible.
- 2. Talk to the young person** about the strategies they have to help them calm down. They may feel able to do some of their usual activities like sports, art or spending time with friends. Find out who is best placed to help them to stay calm, whether teachers, parents or carers, siblings or friends.
- 3. Encourage them to understand the event truthfully and usefully.** Sometimes events can distort a young person's view of the world, other people or themselves. Helping them to make sense of the events by talking about them – if they want – and answering questions can enable them to understand the event in the most realistic and helpful way.
- 4. Help them to feel in control.** Young people can be made to feel even more powerless when others come rushing in to do something to 'fix' them. Young people are more likely to need someone that they already know and trust to support them, listen to them and help them plan what they are going to do.
- 5. Enhance social support.** Sometimes young people isolate themselves at these times – just when it can be really helpful to be with others. Find out what help they or their family might need to continue to connect with their social support.

Many young people may feel upset for a few weeks after frightening events but, over time, most become happier and more confident again. If you are worried because a young person is very distressed or continues to be distressed you should signpost them to an appropriate child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) or to their GP.





# Schools in mind

Schools in Mind is a free network for school staff and allied professionals hosted by the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families. We provide a trusted source of accessible information and resources that teachers and school leaders can use to support the mental health and wellbeing of their whole school community.

The network shares academic and clinical expertise regarding mental health and wellbeing issues for schools, and enables members to access:

- Termly events, newsletters, trainings, and resources
- Ideas to support school staff mental health and wellbeing
- Opportunities to take part in ground-breaking research

## Further information

For free sign up, further information and access to Schools in Mind accompanying resources (e.g. online multi-family groups in schools training, mental wellbeing toolkit, and expert support videos) please visit [www.annafreud.org](http://www.annafreud.org) or contact [schoolsinnmind@annafreud.org](mailto:schoolsinmind@annafreud.org)

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