

# Advice for parents, guardians and carers on how to support a child or young person if you're concerned about their mental health

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Many parents, guardians and carers are concerned about how their children, whatever their age, are feeling at the moment. We are now in our third national lockdown and we have lived through almost a year of the coronavirus pandemic and social restrictions which have affected us all.

Some of our children are unable to attend school, college and universities, and for those who can access face-to-face teaching, the environment is very different which can cause anxiety, worry and stress for our children.

At this time, it is understandable that children and young people may be feeling anxious and upset. Their life may feel unpredictable and out of control and their usual mechanisms of support through friends, family members and professionals more limited. This worry is natural, and many children and young people will be able to cope with the support of their families and friends. But please remember that the NHS is open for those who need more help.

During the COVID-19 pandemic NHS services are working as usual so it's important to remember to ask for help and not hold back.

## What should I do if I am worried about my child's, or child that I care for, mental health and I think it's getting serious?

- **Make time to listen to them:** Create a calm safe space where they can communicate how they are feeling without judgement.
- **Try to understand the problems and provide reassurance that you have heard them and are there to help. The problems could be something you are not aware of or don't notice at first, such as:**
  - relationship problems with friends and family
  - being bullied
  - experience of traumatic events such as abuse
  - self-harm or suicide by someone close to them
  - low self-esteem.
- **Or it might be something more noticeable, such as:**
  - a recent death of a friend or family member

- worries about schoolwork, exams or exam results
- worries about employment opportunities
- coping with a chronic illness or disability
- substance misuse problems
- coping with pre-existing mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and eating disorders.
- **Take time to talk to the child or young person you care for:** This is particularly key in relation to children and young people, who may feel overwhelmed by a changing situation which isn't being clearly explained in a way they can understand. Some young people may find it easier to talk while doing something together such as playing in the park, going for a walk, painting or other activities.
- **Keep an eye on the child or young person you care for:** Look out for symptoms that your child's mental health may be deteriorating, including symptoms of anxiety and low mood or worrying changes in behaviour. Seek specialist health advice and support and increase vigilance, including checking if they are accessing websites about self-harm, suicide or pro-eating disorders.
- **Help the child or young person you care for do positive activities which means they aren't isolating themselves:** Positive activities including exercise and safe contact with family and friends can provide a distraction from negative thoughts and may help them open up about their feelings.
- **Provide structure and routine (including for sleep):** Frequent changes to routine due to implementation of local and national infection control measures can cause some children and young people to feel more anxious and upset. Many children and young people may experience difficulties with their sleep. Providing structure through the development of daily and weekly timetables, including bedtime routines, can be helpful in providing some predictability for young people in this unsettled time.
- **Support children and young people with a disability:** Children and young people with a disability, including people with a learning disability, autistic people and people with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, may find the impact of coronavirus particularly difficult to manage. It is important to explain change and manage any anxiety and distress they may be experiencing. Seek immediate advice if they are already in contact with specialist health and social care services or contact your GP. The National Autistic Society have helpful [advice on their website](#) on how to deal with this uncertain time with the coronavirus.
- **Seek specialist advice and support quickly if you think the child or young person you care for is having suicidal thoughts or are self-harming:** It is important that you do not ignore these symptoms and that you speak to a GP or crisis mental health helpline urgently to get the right help and support (more information is available below) – or contact some of the services detailed below. If there is a threat to life, call 999.
- **Finally, as a parent or carer, look after your own mental health too:** This will help you to best support yourself and those you care about. Remember to talk to your family and friends about how you are feeling, and seek help for yourself from the NHS and other support services if it's all getting too much. It's okay not to feel okay.

## What can I do if I am worried about my child right now?

During the COVID-19 pandemic services are still there for you, so don't hold back asking for help.

If your child needs urgent mental health support or advice, you can contact your [local 24-hour mental health helpline](#). You can call the helpline for 24-hour advice and support for you and your child, to speak to a mental health professional or for an assessment to help decide on the best course of care

If your child has taken an overdose or need urgent medical help, then please call 999 or take them to the nearest A&E.

If you notice any physical injuries on your child, such as deep cuts or burns then you should contact NHS 111 online or your GP for advice.

If your child is currently being supported by a children and young people's mental health service (CAMHS), paediatric services or children's social care, you can also talk to them if you are worried about your child.

## Where else can I get help and support?

It's okay not to feel okay and looking after a child or young person who is unwell with their mental health can be very worrying. The NHS has online [information on how to access help and support](#). Remember to look after yourself as well as your loved ones, and you matter too.

There are other support services available, too:

- Public Health England's [Better Health Every Mind Matters](#) campaign provides helpful tips for yourself and children. There are designated pages to help parents and carers spot the signs that children may be struggling with their mental health and also provides advice that can help maintain good mental wellbeing.
- [SHOUT](#), the UK's first 24/7 crisis text service, provides free, confidential, 24/7 text message support in the UK for anyone who is struggling to cope. Text SHOUT to 85258. This service is free on all major mobile networks, for anyone in crisis, anytime.
- [YoungMinds Parents Helpline](#) is available for parents, guardians and carers and you can call them on 0808 802 5544; 9.30am to 4pm on weekdays.
- [Samaritans](#) are an organisation you can ring, on 116 123, for free, at any time of the day or night. You can also email them: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)
- If you are struggling with feelings of anxiety or depression, NHS talking therapies can help. Speak to your GP, or you can refer yourself online at [nhs.uk/talk](https://nhs.uk/talk).

For parents and carers worried about their child's eating problems or disorder, as well as contacting your local children and young people's community eating disorder team or asking your GP for a referral, you can refer your child to [Beat Eating Disorders](#). You can get in touch with them for support via their helpline on 0808 801 0677.