THURSTON
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Mental Health Resource Pack

For Parents

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Contents

The Teenage Brain	3
Anxiety	5
Low Mood	6
Eating Difficulties	7
Self-Esteem	8
Trauma	9
Self-Harm	10
Suicidal Thoughts	12
What can you do?	13
Internal School Support	15
Apps / Websites	16
Additional Support	17
External Community Support	18

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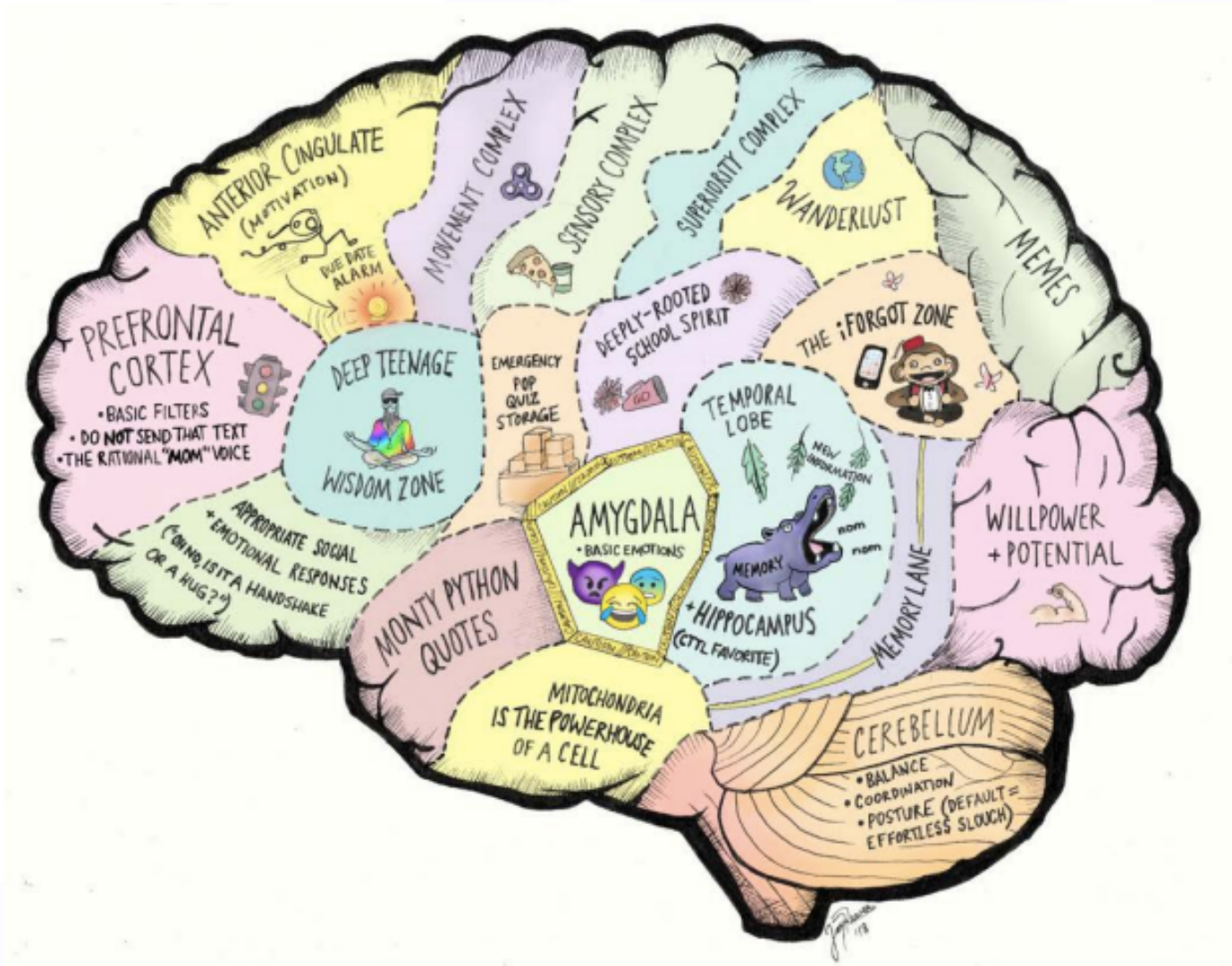
The Teenage Brain



Neuroscience tells us the brain goes through a rapid phase of change between ages 9-14. Early adolescence is a crucial period of brain development when challenges can emerge, including the initiation of risky behaviours, such as unsafe sex, substance use, and other unhealthy habits. But it is also a time of opportunity when we can harness those rapid changes to set adolescents on a positive path.

- Puberty initiates intense hormonal changes, and the brain forms faster, stronger connections
- The adolescent brain goes through a period of greater sensitivity to social evaluations and emotional reactions.
- Teachers play an important role in supporting progress and learning during this period of rapid growth and development.

The Teenage Brain

The prefrontal cortex is the last to develop in adolescents. It is the bit that helps us think things through, plan and control impulses. This explains why teens can tend to be forgetful and make decisions in the moment – sometimes leading to risky choices. Instead, teenagers are directed by their amygdala, which is responsible for emotions, impulses, aggression and instinctive behaviour.

Supporting teenagers:

Be a role model

What you do shows adolescents how you want them to behave. What you say is also important. You can help adolescents to manage and control their behaviour by talking about how behaviour affects other people.

Validate feelings

Teens experience emotions more intensely than adults, which presents a challenge in emotionally charged situations. Validating responses also matters for brain development and future communication.

Repetition

Since the teen years follow the first three years of life in terms of brain plasticity, it's a window where repeated experiences and opportunities for teaching and skill-building matter tremendously.

Promote positive risk taking

Adolescent brains are wired to seek new experiences and rewards. This could mean reflecting strengths back to them, doling out specific praise, and understanding that through taking risks and trying new things.

Anxiety

Anxiety tends to affect a young person's body, thoughts and feelings. They may also behave differently, including turning to certain coping behaviours to try to avoid or manage their anxiety.

Physical symptoms:

- panic attacks
- shallow or quick breathing, or feeling unable to breathe
- feeling sick
- dry mouth
- sweating more than usual
- tense muscles
- wobbly legs
- irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), diarrhoea or needing to pee more than usual
- getting very hot

Thoughts and feelings:

- preoccupied by upsetting, scary or negative thoughts
- nervous, on edge, panicky or frightened
- overwhelmed or out of control
- full of dread or an impending sense of doom
- alert to noises, smells or sights
- worrying about being unable to cope with daily things
- worrying so much that it is difficult to concentrate and/or sleep

Coping behaviours:

- withdrawing or isolating themselves
- repeating certain behaviours, actions or rituals
- eating more or less than usual
- self-harming

Low Mood

When a young person is depressed, sadness and low feelings do not change or go away with time. These feelings can become overwhelming and stop them from doing or enjoying things they normally would. When a young person is experiencing this, it's very difficult to shift the situation without extra help and support.

While every young person is different, and these feelings are often expressed differently at different ages, some signs that your child may be feeling depressed include:

- withdrawing, or avoiding friends or social situations
- finding it hard to concentrate, and/or losing interest in schoolwork
- not wanting to do things they previously enjoyed
- feeling irritable, angry or frustrated
- feeling tearful, miserable, lonely or hopeless
- feeling empty or numb
- being very self-critical, or feeling less confident
- sleeping more or less than normal
- eating more or less than normal
- feeling tired or not having any energy
- showing less or no interest in self-care activities like washing
- wanting to self-harm
- experiencing suicidal thoughts

Eating Difficulties

Problems can start to emerge when a young person feels under pressure. They may lose their appetite; or they may turn to food for comfort and eat even when they are not hungry; their worries about food may be related to their size or body shape, or can be more about their emotions and self-esteem.

Young people's problems with food can begin as a coping strategy for times when they are bored, anxious, angry, lonely, ashamed or sad. Food becomes a problem when it is used to help cope with painful situations or feelings, or to relieve stress, perhaps without even realising it. Young people can fear getting fat and may perceive their body shape differently than those around them. It is useful to know that an eating problem is usually symptomatic and suggests there is an underlying problem that needs to be identified, understood and treated.

Young people with eating disorders often consider them to be a solution rather than a problem, making identification and treatment more difficult. They tend to have extreme concerns and sense of self-worth in terms of body shape and weight.

Self Esteem

Self-esteem is how a person feels about themselves. Most young people will have dips in self-esteem as they go through different stages or challenges in life, and there are different pressures that may affect them - including social media, bullying, exams, family problems and abuse.

Things like starting a new school, moving house, social media or going through changes in the family can also affect a young person's confidence.

Young people with low self-esteem often:

- have a negative image of themselves - they might feel bad, ugly, unlikeable or stupid
- lack confidence
- find it hard to make and keep friendships, and may feel victimised by others
- feel lonely and isolated
- tend to avoid new things and find change hard
- can't deal well with failure.
- tend to put themselves down and might say things like "I'm stupid" or "I can't do that"
- are not proud of what they achieve and always think they could have done better.
- are constantly comparing themselves to their peers in a negative way

Trauma

‘Trauma’ is used to describe both one-off events and things that are experienced over months or years. A traumatic experience often involves a threat to a young person’s physical or emotional safety, and a sense of being trapped, powerless or unsupported in the face of a perceived danger or in the time afterwards.

- having memories, thoughts or flashbacks that seem to come suddenly from nowhere
- acting out or having angry or aggressive outbursts
- finding it difficult to calm down when they are distressed
- withdrawing from friends, family, school and activities they usually enjoy
- repeating certain behaviours or seeming agitated
- avoiding thinking about, talking about or being in situations which are related to a particular experience
- seeming sensitive or vigilant about anything that could be threatening
- seeming zoned-out or disconnected from themselves, their feelings and what’s going on around them
- having trouble remembering things
- not feeling able to sleep or having nightmares
- using drugs or alcohol differently to how they did before, or starting to for the first time
- eating significantly more or less
- self-harming

Self-Harm

Self-harm is when someone hurts themselves on purpose – generally as a way of managing distressing or overwhelming feelings and experiences. Someone who is self-harming might be dealing with lots of intense thoughts and feelings, and hurting themselves may feel like the only way to cope. Others may feel numb and hurt themselves in order to feel something.

Some ways that young people may self-harm include;
cutting , scratching, burning, biting, hitting themselves, banging their head, pulling hair, fighting, risky sexual relationships, self-neglect.

While it might feel hard to understand sometimes from the outside, self-harm can be a way for a young person to:

- manage, reduce or express very strong and upsetting emotions
- relieve tension and pressure
- experience a feeling of physical pain to distract from emotional pain
- gain a sense of control over feelings or problems
- stop feeling numb or 'zoned-out'

However, while it often feels like self-harm brings some relief in the moment, this is only temporary. As feelings build up again, so does the urge to self-harm. As this cycle continues over time, a young person may start to feel ashamed, confused or frightened about the fact that they're self-harming – increasing the load they're carrying on top of what they're already going through. This can become a cycle that's really hard to break, and a habit that's hard to stop.

Discussing Self-Harm

The most supportive first conversation is one where:

- the young person is the sole focus of your attention
- you spend most of your time listening, not talking
- the young person tells their story, you never guess or assume
- there is a feeling of acceptance and support, not judgement
- self-harm is not dismissed as attention-seeking
- unrealistic promises are not made about confidentiality
- this is recognised as the first step of a difficult journey
- clear next steps are identified and followed up promptly
- you recognise how hard this conversation must be for the young person
- you respond calmly – even if you don't feel calm

Helpful tips:

When talking about self-harm, adults can often first focus on the injury, or the way the young person harmed themselves, but - providing it's not life-threatening or needs immediate care - focus first on what's weighing on a young person so heavily that has meant they wanted to hurt themselves.

You don't need to have the answer straight away. When you go straight into problem-solving mode the young person can end up feeling like they're the problem.

The things that seem small to you are really big to the young person. Take time to listen.

IMPORTANT!

Make sure you know how to look after yourself after a young person discloses self-harm. Access support for yourself!

Suicidal Thoughts

Lots of young people will have thoughts about suicide at some point, and suicidal thoughts can affect anyone. This doesn't mean they are necessarily going to attempt suicide, but it does mean they need help and support. All suicidal feelings should be taken seriously.

A young person may be experiencing suicidal thoughts if they:

- express feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, sadness and/or guilt and shame
- withdrawing
- lose interest in daily life or things they usually enjoy
- say things like "I wish I wasn't here", "I can't go on", "I can't take it anymore", or "people would be better off without me"; or or talk a lot about death
- give away their possessions
- seem agitated and/or behave in ways that seem strange or out of character
- show changes such as eating or sleeping more or less than usual, or a lack of interest in their appearance
- use drugs or alcohol to help them cope when they're struggling, which can intensify thoughts, feelings and impulsive decision-making
- are self-harming, or have self-harmed in the past

IMPORTANT!

Talking about suicidal thoughts does not make the young person more likely to act on the thoughts.

What can you do?

Model Good Habits

- Young people often learn from copying what they see around them. Sharing with them the ways that you take care of your own mental health can help normalise the idea of looking after our mental as well as physical health.

Talk about Mental Health

- One of the most important things you can do is to talk to teenms about mental health in a non-stigmatising way, explaining that it affects us all and is not black and white but a spectrum.

Listen and Empathise

- If a young person shares their worries with you, try to empathise rather than giving advice or trying to 'fix' their problem. Empathy involves acknowledging what the young person is feeling, attempting to understand things from their point of view and avoiding judgement. There are websites and services you can access as a parent or carer for support and guidance later on in this pack.

Support

- Make the young person aware of the support in school: notice boards for self-help resources, Wellbeing Ambassadors, their Student Support Manager or the Mix Wellbeing Hub.
- Share some resources with them from our website for apps and websites they can access themselves.

Listen
Listen carefully when someone opens up to you about how they are feeling. Try to let them share without interrupting. Repeating back what they've told you can help both of you be clear about what they've said and how they are feeling.
If they are finding it overwhelming, you can suggest they write it down.

Reassure
Often, when someone has opened up about how they are feeling, they might immediately feel worried that you won't take their feelings seriously, or that they have said the wrong thing. Reassure them that they have done the right thing.

Validate
No matter what a young person is struggling with or whether you understand or not, their experiences are valid and it can be helpful to remind your young person of this. Let them know that their feelings are okay.

Act
When a young person opens up about how they are feeling, having that time and space to share their concerns with you may be enough. However, if they do need further help, there are a number of services that you can signpost them to. If you are worried about serious self harm injuries call 999 or go straight to A&E.

Remember it's not all on you
Young people aren't asking trusted adults to have all the answers, fix all their problems or be a mental health expert. One of the most valuable things you can do is simply to offer to be by their side for the journey.

Internal Student Support

Pastoral Support

- Students can access their Student Support Manager or Year Lead Team in a dedicated area for their year group.

School Curriculum

- Lessons will be taught across Life skills classes on topics such as the teenage brain, sleep and mental health support.
- Assemblies and notice board will contain information of signposting and support available.

Wellbeing Ambassadors

- Student wellbeing ambassadors can provide peer supprt, help signpost students to support and gain feedback on what the school can do to improve the provision.

Interventions

- Students can be referred by their pastoral team for further interventions, which may include group work or 1:1 work with trained staff or the Mental Health Practitioner.
- Students may also be referred to external services if they require a more specialist level of support.

Apps / Websites for Young People

Kooth

Kooth offers free, safe and anonymous online support for people aged between 11 to 25. It provides:

- Virtual chat sessions with friendly counsellors.
- One-to-one text-based chats.
- Peer-to-peer support.
- Live online moderated forums.
- A range of self-help materials.
- Journals and goal trackers to reflect your thoughts.

CalmHarm App

- Calm Harm is a free app that helps you manage or resist the urge to self-harm.

Moodwise

- Moodwise is a website for 16 to 25 year olds that offers advice on topics such as mental health and relationships.

ChatHealth

- ChatHealth is your school nursing text service.Text a school nurse for confidential help on 07507 333356.
- This service is available from Monday to Friday, between 9:00 and 16:30, excluding bank holidays.

Stay Alive App

- The Stay Alive app is a Suicide prevention resource for the UK. The app is full of useful information and tools to help you stay safe in a crisis.

Additional Services in School

School Nurse

- Offer a drop in once a week in school for students to access health advice.
- Offer ChatHealth text service
- https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/children-families-and-learning/childrens-health/school-nursing
- ChatHealth Youtube Video: https://youtu.be/NzTD-0QHB18

Mental Health Support Team (MHST)

- Come into school to provide 1:1 or group work sessions for young people struggling with their mental health.
- By referral only.
- https://www.nsft.nhs.uk/service-details/service/mental-health-support-teams-mhst-east-and-west-suffolk-50/

The Mix Wellbeing Hub

- A dedicated area within school students can access for support as and when they need it and gain advice.
- A worker from 'The Mix' in Suffolk will be based here in school 3 days a week.
- A 'Mental Health On Call' system will be in place every day to ensure students are given timely and effective support when struggling with their emotional wellbeing.

External Support Services

The Mix

- The Mix is the UK's leading support service for young people. They help young people take on any challenge they're facing - from mental health to money, from homelessness to finding a job, from break-ups to drugs. They have a free, confidential helpline or our counselling service.
- https://www.themix.org.uk/

The Source

- The Source website has been created to provide information, advice and sources of support to young people in Suffolk – when they need it, on a range of issues that impact their lives.
- https://thesource.me.uk/

Suffolk 4YP

- Through advice, guidance and practical support we help young people develop the skills and knowledge to lead healthier, happier, safer and more resilient lifestyles. We give young people the confidence to make better informed choices and enable them to reach their full potential.
- https://4yp.org.uk/

Emotional Wellbeing Hub Suffolk

- The Emotional Wellbeing Hub provides information, advice, and guidance to families and young people in East and West Suffolk, who are worried about the mental health of a child or young person.
- Call the Emotional Wellbeing Hub helpline on 0345 600 2090 and press option 3.
- Referral form: https://gateway.mayden.co.uk/referral-v2/2703a180-2ff7-4779-8b6b-6de81ecd8b1b

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Questions & Information

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