

Section 1 – Mental health, the return to school and covid-19

Use the information in this document to support you to deliver the content in Section 1 of the Jigsaw toolkit. In this section, you will support your class to define what is meant by mental health, explore what can challenge and support their mental health and discuss the impact that covid-19 may have had on their mental health and wellbeing.

How do we define mental health?

Mental health is something we all have. It is an essential part of all of us which includes our thoughts and feelings, how we are getting on with other people and how we are managing day-to-day life.

Having good mental health is about feeling positive about ourselves, or sometimes just good enough. It is about being able to do the things that matter to us. Just as everyone has physical health, everyone also has mental health. The state of our mental health does not stay constant but changes, often in response to things that are happening in our lives.

All of us will experience both good and poor mental health during our lives. The more we understand and accept this, the easier it will be for people to seek support when they are experiencing difficulties with their mental health.

How our thoughts are affected

Mental health difficulties and distress can show in different ways. They can affect our thoughts and feelings or relationships. Our ability to manage the everyday tasks

and challenges of life may also be affected.

Some people feel very sad or worried. Some might find it really hard to deal with school, work or college. Others might have a difficult relationship with their own body, or unusual experiences such as hearing voices.

Our mental health includes moments of great distress and pain as well as our everyday sense of wellbeing and resilience.

What is going on can be obvious to others, like when someone is getting very angry or upset a lot. Or it can be something that stays hidden and may be difficult for others to see or understand. If someone is feeling very worried or thinking negatively about themselves, it could remain private and it may not be noticed by others.

What challenges our mental health?

Challenges to our mental health can be relatively brief, or persist for many years and come and go over time. Mental health difficulties rarely have one definite cause. They usually involve the combination of a lot of different factors.

To get a good understanding of what is going on with someone's mental health we need to look broadly at what is going on in their life now.

We also need to consider what has happened in the past. Relationships, levels of stress, physical health, experiences

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growing up, our style of thinking and significant life events are examples of some of the things that might contribute to our mental health, either positively or negatively.

Mental health difficulties and emotional distress are often an understandable response to events or circumstances in our lives. In Jigsaw, we believe that we all have mental and emotional health that we need to look after as best we can.

Mental health will change depending on our life experience and circumstances. We also know that we will all experience difficulties and distress at times in our lives.

How we talk about mental health difficulties

There are a range of different ways of thinking about and talking about mental health. In Jigsaw, we prefer to use everyday language to describe mental health difficulties. We tend not to use medical words like 'illness', 'diagnosis' or 'disorder'.

However, we know that this way of understanding mental health fits for some people, and that is OK. In our experience, we find it more useful to use the language of the young people we work with.

This helps us to remember that each person has an experience of difficulties that is unique to them. Everyone experiences sadness at times. But because we all live unique lives, the feelings, thoughts and responses we have will be personal to us.

So, instead of trying to answer the question 'What is wrong with you?' we find it more helpful to ask questions like:

- **What would you like to be different?**
- **What is still going well, despite the difficulties?**
- **What has happened to make you think or feel this way?**
- **What are you good at?**
- **What do people appreciate about you?**
- **Who understands you best?**
- **Who could help and support you with it?**

Responding to young people – REAL approach

It is important to note that if you have concerns about a young person, you should always follow your school's policies and procedures on how best to respond.

As a teacher, you may be faced with young people who experience difficulties with their mental health. Often, you may respond to this intuitively, but it can be



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reassuring to have a framework to guide your response to them.

Jigsaw has developed a framework to support you in your response to young people who are in distress. This framework is called the REAL approach.

Recognise when a young person is struggling with their mental health. You may notice signs of anxiety, lack of interest, sadness, irritability, withdrawal or reduced attention span. You may also be made aware of sleep difficulties, appetite changes or self-harming behaviour.

Encourage students to engage in activities that protect and promote their mental health. Think about ways your school could promote and support mental health across the whole-school community.

Actively Listen: Students have reported the importance of having adults who will actively listen to them. Active listening can occur during everyday classroom discussions, during practical lessons or in a one-to-one setting.

Let someone know: This may be crucial for a young person who requires more support than can be offered within the remit of their teacher. It is important for teachers to pass concerns on to the appropriate person when they feel a young person requires a higher level of support.

Covid-19 and youth mental health

Looking after your mental health is always important. But with the global pandemic, young people may have had to deal with:

- **Uncertainty about the future**
- **Loss of routine**
- **Fear of contracting coronavirus**
- **Isolation because of social distancing**
- **Losing loved ones**
- **Spread of misinformation**
- **Worry about the actions of others**
- **Boredom**
- **Family conflict**
- **Worry about online learning**
- **Return to school**

As an important person in the life of young people within the school setting, there are some things that you can do to support them at this time:

Role modelling

Young people tend to learn from the adults in their lives. This is from the behaviour they see rather than the words they hear. With this in mind, we can help the young people in our lives by modelling the behaviour we would like to see in them.

If our young people see us responding to this challenging time in a calm way, this helps give them a sense of security. Demonstrate positive coping strategies you are using to try and cope with the current situation.

Acknowledge feelings

Like us, young people will be feeling different emotions such as fear, frustration and sadness. Our instinct may

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be to try and soothe them, tell them not to worry or tell them it could be worse.

Before doing this, take a deep breath, pause, visualise yourself in the young person's shoes. Their emotions are real and scary. They will need your reassurance. But first, they will want to feel heard and have their feelings validated. Let them know you understand how difficult things are for them right now and that it can be unfair and upsetting.

Be guided by them

Instead of guessing, don't be afraid to ask the young person what they need from you right now. Do they just want to be listened to? Maybe they need some guidance or help to solve a problem? Or perhaps they are looking for advice or a new perspective on things. At times, it

might be distraction and cheering up that is necessary.

If it is the case that the young person can't tell you what they need or want, trust your own instinct. You know them best. The fact that they know you want to be there for them is the key thing.

Focus on strengths

Help the young people in your life to identify their strengths, skills and qualities that will help them get through the current situation. Remind them of difficulties they may have coped with in the past. Encourage them to remember the strategies or techniques they drew on during those times. Support young people to recognise what has helped them before and implement these strategies again.



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