

## Section 2:

# Supports and challenges to our mental health and wellbeing

**This section of the toolkit will support young people to understand what can help, and also challenge their mental health and wellbeing. It will highlight how their mental health can be affected by what is going on for them.**

### 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 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.

**For information, support, or just to find out more about what we do, visit [jigsaw.ie](http://jigsaw.ie)**

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.

Use the resources and activities to explore supports and challenges in your class.

### 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 member of school staff 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 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.

#### **REAL approach**

Recognise

Encourage

Actively listen

Let someone know.

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**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.

