



Supporting mental wellbeing

By Mike Hussey



Helping neurodiverse young people with mental wellness

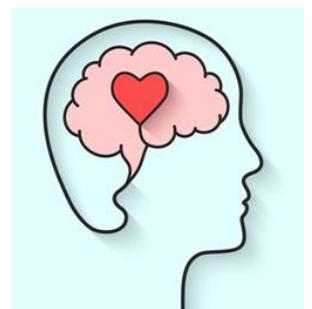
According to Young Minds (2020), in a survey of 2,111 young people (under the age of 25) with a history of mental health needs, they found that 32% agreed that the health crisis had made their mental health much worse. 51% agreed that the health crisis had made their mental health a bit worse.

Dr. Lynne Friedli talks about how mental health “influences how we think and feel about ourselves, others, and how we interpret events. It can affect our capacity to learn and communicate. It is also a part of our ability to form, sustain, and/or end relationships”. Therefore, our level of mental wellness will impact our ability to cope with change, transition, and life events.

“Anxiety is a key block to learning. It can prevent the imprint on the brain” (A. McCulloch).

Signs of positive mental wellness:

- Using and enjoying solitude
- Initiating and sustaining healthy relationships
- Playing and learning. Improvement in focus and outcomes of tasks
- Becoming aware of others and empathising with them
- Ability to resolve problems and setbacks, and being able to learn from them
- Developing as well-rounded people: emotionally, intellectually, physically & psychologically



1 in 5 young people have a Special Educational Need (SEN). Learners with a SEN are three times more likely to have a mental health problem (ONS, 2010). We also know that 1 in 5 human beings are neurodiverse. **Neurodiverse pupils are more likely to be facing challenges than their peers, such as:**

- Managing and coping with changes in routines,
- Lack of, or limited, open space and opportunities for movement
- Fears over the health of themselves and/or loved ones,
- Reduced face to face interactions

A good way to talk to neurodiverse learners about mental wellbeing is the analogy of a bucket. The size of the bucket is their ability to cope (resilience). All the challenges they are facing are adding to their bucket, and so it is important to find ways to ‘open the tap’ and let out any stresses or anxieties that are building up. Otherwise the ‘bucket’ fills up and we can find ourselves with a limited ability to regulate our emotions and behaviours.

8 elements of good mental health include:

<p>Communication, reassurance, and information: help to interpret the feelings for young people who struggle to understand their emotions. Be aware of your own reactions. Limit exposure to media</p>	<p>Exercise: ideally 60minutes a day. Get creative and mix it up to avoid boredom and repetition – online workouts, yoga, home made gyms or assault courses, dances, and competitions?</p>
<p>Nutrition and hydration: 6-8 glasses (roughly 1.5litres) of water everyday. Involve young people in the planning, preparing, and experiment with meals.</p>	<p>Sleep: recommended 7-11 hours, depending upon age. With increasing changes and uncertainty, maybe have a calming bedtime routine like yoga or soothing music.</p>
<p>Be creative: learn something new. Be collaborative and use the time to develop life skills that are not necessarily taught in schools – cooking, gardening, DIY, etc.</p>	<p>Connect: community initiatives? Encourage online connection with trusted friends and family members – rehearsing/planning with young people who might struggle to communicate.</p>
<p>Maintain routines: plan with the young person, for the next day. Schedules could include – wake up time, meals, lessons, free time, exercise, sleep, their own space, and family time.</p>	<p>Be kind to yourself and have fun: play games as a family, use treats to celebrate positives moves forward and good things that happen – reading, games, jigsaws, etc.</p>

Specific guidance on COVID-19 for those with learning difficulties can be found on the ‘Mencap’ website – includes easy reading materials.