

Emotional Wellbeing Parental Evening

23rd January 2018

Below is a summary of the discussion points that Liam Laughton (Primary Mental Health Team Manager) covered in the parental awareness evening on 23rd January 2018. The notes below are condensed and are reflective of the discussion and are not word for word guidance.

Liam introduced the *concept* of Mental Health first and stressed that the most important thing to recognise is that we all have mental health. Mental health exists along a similar spectrum to physical health, ranging from being fully fit, to having a slight cold to having a debilitating life-threatening illness. Many of us have very positive mental health but unfortunately the term 'mental health' often elicits negative connotations. This information evening, together with the work that we are doing in school, is aimed at removing that stigma and helping our students and families to better understand the area of mental health.

Liam identified that 1 in 4 people will suffer with some form of mental ill-health and stressed that it does not discriminate and can affect anyone.

Discussion around the identification of emotions being important and remembering that we will all feel different emotions, sometimes joy, sometimes sadness, and that these feelings are normal and are not indicators of someone struggling with their mental wellbeing.

We identified the need to build resilience and understanding of this, so that our young people understand what mental health is and become better equipped to cope with the challenges in their lives.

Liam stressed that we do not want to create a society that is dependent on therapy and to instead recognise that we ourselves have the ability to regulate our mental health. Through support, understanding and building resilience, we are aiming to equip our children with the skills and knowledge to navigate life, whilst maintaining positive mental health.

Specific Questions:

1. How do we, as parents, recognise a mental health concern over and above what could be considered as "normal teenage angst" and hormonal related issues? Teenage years are renowned to be very hard and I imagine some young people cope better than others. However, how do we recognise the triggers where we must consider seeking professional support?

The message delivered from Liam on this was very much that *you know your child*. Maintaining an open dialogue, taking the time to talk to your children and being ready and willing to listen when a teenager does want to talk is a crucial role of us as parents. An offer of support, and a reminder that you are there for them and want to help them if they need it, is always a worthwhile message to give to your children.

If you feel that the level of support your child needs is beyond what you can help with, or that their behaviour/mood is so out of the normal range, then parents can refer to SOLAR for assessment and support. Liam was very clear that a referral from a parent is far better than a referral from a GP, as a parent can better identify the concerns, the changes that have been noticed and the symptoms that are displayed.

<http://www.bsmhft.nhs.uk/our-services/solar-youth-services/parent-or-carer/>

2. How do you know if your child is reacting to 'normal' stress or whether their emotional wellbeing is being challenged and they have a mental health concern i.e. depression? Is there a checklist or guidance of what parents should be looking for?
3. How should young people support a best friend with mental health issues? They can be torn between loyalty to their best friend and knowing that they should tell someone. They can also be confused about how much to agree and whether or not to challenge behaviours/attitudes that are the result of mental health issues.

Liam stressed that mental health illness is not contagious; we should not be concerned about copying behaviours and recognise that young people are negotiating the most challenging time of their life in understanding relationships and understanding their own identity.

Whilst supporting a friend is challenging for a young person, it is equally a very nice characteristic and is one that we should applaud. As parents, we can support that process by talking to our children, asking them if they are ok, asking them if they need any help or support.

4. Building a child's confidence v getting a child to improve.

A clear message that the most important role in this for parents is ensuring that we do all we can to make sure our children are happy and healthy. Making this our priority will help to ensure they are better equipped to manage and deal with the challenges they face in everyday life and to make the most of their education.

Practical Tips:

It was stressed that anxiety is a natural response within the human body. We should remind our children that the release of adrenalin is a natural and a positive process within the body. Whilst in some cases it can become a problem, the feeling of being nervous and anxious is a normal occurrence that children should understand and recognise. For example, our Year 11's this summer will feel some anxiety prior to exams. It is understanding that this a natural process that everyone will feel to an extent and recognising that, as with all mental health, the level of anxiety sits on a spectrum. Recognising the tipping point where it is becoming unhealthy is the really important thing to identify.

Breathing control mechanisms were trialled as a demonstration that we can take control back of our body. When feeling a little out of control or anxious, recognising that we can take control back is important. Exercises and support on this can be found in the worksheets in the appendix.

It is important to realise that if you are feeling a little anxious, you will also feel an increase in body temperature. Simply by taking off a blazer or having a cold drink will help to regulate body temperature and reduce the increase that is making us feel different to normal.

When we recognise that we are tense, we can tense all of our muscles in our body, hold them for a short while and then release them. This enables us to recognise the change and to visualise the release of tension from our body.

Avoid saying “Don’t worry”: Liam identified that when a child tells you that they are worried about something we must fight our instinct to say “don’t worry”. Whilst our aim is to tell them that it will be ok, that we can help them and that the situation/concern can be resolved what they often hear is “I’m silly”, “my feelings aren’t valued”, “you’re not interested”.

Instead we should aim to listen and encourage them to talk about their worry so that we can try and work with them to identify ways of overcoming this.

Mindfulness: Liam explained the use and purpose of mindfulness as being to focus on ourselves, our body, our breathing, in order to bring our thoughts back to where we are at that exact time and to focus on that moment. Liam identified that this is a good method of refocusing and getting away from a feeling of being overwhelmed by a mixture of thoughts. Although it is popular, it is not useful for everyone but may be worthy trialling with your children.

As a school many of our pupils have trialled mindfulness and we do offer sessions that the children can attend. Headspace is a mindfulness club that is run at school for pupils in Year 7 and Year 8. They learn breathing techniques, positive self-talk and guided meditation as ways of taking control of stress and anxiety. We do not discuss the sources of stress but the children benefit enormously from learning how to manage their feelings and relax. Sessions run on **Wednesday mornings at 8am** and **Friday lunchtimes at 12.30pm**.

There is also a recommended app below that can be used on your phone:

<https://www.mindcharity.co.uk/advice-information/how-to-look-after-your-mental-health/apps-for-wellbeing-and-mental-health/>

Social Media:

Social media plays a significant role in our children’s lives. We cannot and should not try to say that we understand what it is like to be a teenager in the current world of social media because the world was different when we were teenagers. When supporting our children, we should recognise this and say that whilst we can’t fully understand, we do want to try and understand more to help and support them.

Although it may be concerning, we should recognise that much of a child’s self-esteem may come from their online world and profile. They use this forum to seek acceptance and positive comments. Photo-shopped pictures, staged photos and displaying “their highlights reel” can create a belief that everyone else’s life is perfect, leaving some feeling low and decreasing self-esteem.

Whilst we cannot change this, we ought to try and encourage boundaries around social media; for example leaving a phone downstairs at bedtime can help to ensure better sleep and reduce distractions. We should also remind our children that in many cases, the life they see of people online is not entirely accurate.

We should also consider the behaviours that we, as parents, role model; do we maintain boundaries, do we prioritise conversation and interactions with our children without the interruption of our mobile devices?