SUPPORTING A YOUNG PERSON

experiencing mental distress

A guide for parents and supporters of young people (12+)

Mental Health Foundation
OF NEW ZEALAND
mauri tū, mauri ora

Young people and mental distress

Adolescence is a period of growth and change, both physically and emotionally. Along with navigating their developing brains and changing bodies, rangatahi/young people can face challenges including academic pressures, shifting friendship and relationship dynamics, and uncertainties about their future.

"Adolescents experience their feelings a lot more strongly than adults. They are learning how to manage their emotions through new experiences – like first love and building their identity."
A social worker from Tāmaki Makaurau

Being anxious, sad or angry are all normal emotions, but if you think emotional distress is significantly affecting your young person's life, it's time to reach out for help.

When to seek help

Your young person may need some additional support if they:

- experience distress that lasts longer than four weeks
- are isolating from their friends and peers
- no longer enjoy activities they usually would
- experience high levels of anxiety that stop them from doing things
- seem to have changed eating habits
- have difficulty managing emotions, and can express anger in ways that can harm themselves or others
- experience psychosis (such as hearing voices or hallucinations)
- self-harm (through self-injury or reckless behaviour with drugs, alcohol and sexual activity)
- express suicidal thoughts.

If your young person is in immediate danger or is experiencing a mental health crisis, ***call 111*** *or go directly to the nearest* ***hospital emergency department.***

Being neurodivergent, such as being autistic or having ADHD, isn't a mental health issue – it simply shapes how a young person experiences the world. These differences can be enriching and positive but may also lead to additional challenges if their needs aren't understood or supported. Your āwhina/support and positive attitude will make a big difference as you walk alongside your rangatahi.

Find out more about mental health conditions, including self-harm, at ***www.mentalhealth.org.nz/conditions***

How to start the kōrero

If you are concerned about your young person, pick a private moment when you are both calm – it could be while walking together, or in the car. Ask them how they are, and let them know that you are there to support them.

You could ask, *"I noticed you don't really seem yourself lately. How are you feeling? Are you okay?"*

Don't try to offer solutions or take over. Encourage them to make decisions about their own wellbeing.

Listen and take notice. Make it safe for them to talk to you about anything.

Where to find help

If you are worried or feel your young person needs more support, reach out to people and services around you. **Call 1737 anytime, or find more helplines at mentalhealth.org.nz/helplines** to talk things through, confidentially.

Contact their school and school counselling team. Talk to your general practitioner (GP), local youth health hub and social service organisation. **Find local youth health services at wellbeingsupport.health.nz**

Many GP clinics have extra supports such as health coaches or health improvement practitioners (HIPs) who can work alongside a young person to help them learn new strategies and overcome challenges.

Your GP will assess if your young person should be referred to specialist mental health services (CADS). If they are diagnosed with a mental health condition, treatment usually entails a combination of medication and talking therapy. It's best if the whole family can be part of talking therapy, as agreed with your rangatahi.

Build a support network

If your rangatahi is not opening up to you, don't take it personally. Encourage them to talk to another trusted adult, like a whānau member or health professional.

Rangatahi often speak to their friends first. Let their friends know they can call on you for support if they are worried.

Social media can be a supportive space for young people, helping them find connection and insights from others. Remind them to check any advice against reliable, evidence-based sources, and ensure they balance personal stories with credible professional information.

Supporting your young person

Walking alongside someone experiencing distress can be challenging at times. Your aroha and āwhina will make a huge difference.

If your child is physically sick, you wrap them up in aroha and take care of them. Think of this the same way.

- Remember that they are going through difficult changes in a complex world. **Be gentle** and let them know you are there for them.
- **Keep connected** and keep them included in usual activities – even if it doesn't seem they want to be. Make sure they know they are not a burden.
- Experiencing mental distress and/or illness is not anyone's fault. It is important **not to blame or judge** your young person, even when you don't understand what is going on for them.
- **Listen without lecturing**. What is happening is very real for your young person, so try to listen with an open mind. You don't need to have all the answers.
- **Make a plan** to keep in touch and have regular check-ins. Take note of how your young person is doing, and have a plan for who to turn to if things get worse.
- **Be supportive** and adjust your expectations around things like success at school or work. Their wellbeing is the most important thing right now.
- Mental health can be viewed differently across cultures. **Connecting** your rangatahi with culturally responsive services can help them feel understood and respected.

Look after your own wellbeing

Find support for yourself too. It's important to look after yourself to make sure you have the energy, time and perspective to be there for your young person. Ask friends and whānau for support, talk to a doctor or therapist, or call a helpline to talk things through.

Set reasonable boundaries – you can't do everything. Be clear about what you can offer, and when to ask for help from others.

Strategies for your young person

Remind your young person that they are not alone. It's always okay to talk about how they are feeling. They can reach out to someone they trust – a friend, family member, counsellor, doctor or teacher. Getting support is a brave first step.

*Call **Youthline** on **0800 376 633** or free text **234** to speak to a trained counsellor.*
Calls are free, confidential and available 24/7.

Recovery is not always straightforward. Sometimes it will be more about managing, and getting through. Below is a list of strategies you can share with your young person. You can offer to support them, or practise these strategies together.

Wellbeing strategies to manage distress

- Sometimes it's hard to see that things will get better. Remember your strengths, what makes you happy, what helps. See our booklet *Ko Wai Ahau?* at mentalhealth.org.nz
- Reflect on your **early warning signs** or triggers, so you can identify and reduce your exposure to stress.
- Develop strategies to use when you feel things are getting worse. Work with a trusted person and your doctor or therapist. **Make a plan** for difficult times.
- **Look after your health**. Eat well, get enough sleep, stay physically active and avoid drugs and alcohol. A daily routine can be very helpful to manage your mood.
- **Connect** with cultural healing practices that are meaningful to you, such as mirimiri/massage or karakia/prayer. Try grounding activities like meditation or breathing exercises.
- Spend time on activities that bring you **purpose and joy**, such as time in nature or creative hobbies (like music, art or kapa haka). Try to stay as **active and connected** as you can - each little bit helps.

Keep learning

To learn more about mental health and wellbeing, see websites such as **mentalhealth.org.nz**, **healthify.nz** and **depression.org.nz**, and find books at your local library.

Online tools

Use digital tools and support programmes available for free online. Visit **smallsteps.org.nz**, **headstrong.org.nz**, **thelowdown.co.nz**, or **justathought.co.nz**

You can also try sleep, mindfulness or breathing apps on your phone.

Resources

The Mental Health Foundation has a range of information on mental health and wellbeing including pamphlets, booklets, postcards and posters available to order for free: **www.mentalhealth.org.nz**

Disclaimer

This brochure should not be used in place of an accurate mental health diagnosis or assessment. If you think you may have a mental health condition, or would like further information or support, please talk to your GP or Māori health provider.

Find us online

Find out more about our work:

resource@mentalhealth.org.nz

www.mentalhealth.org.nz

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