

What is normal and what can be a sign of a mental health problem

“It is vital that we don’t pathologise ‘normal’ reactions to an ‘abnormal’ set of life circumstances: sadness is not depression and feeling worried and stress is not an anxiety disorder.” Tanya Byron

If a child or a young person is sad, irritable and does not enjoy doing things they normally like to do it does not mean they are depressed. Just as clinginess, agitation or negative thoughts do not mean that a child or young person is suffering from anxiety. These can just be temporary reactions to current circumstances. But sometimes these new behaviours, including eating difficulties and self-harm, can be a sign that something is going on and a child or young person needs support. [Click here](#) to find out more about how to recognise that something is wrong.

Depression causes a prolonged sadness, increased irritability, lack of pleasure in things previously enjoyed, no motivation, poor sleep and constant exhaustion, social withdrawal, poor concentration and decision making, change in appetite, feelings of worthlessness and guilt, emotionally numb. [Click here](#) to learn more about the symptoms of depression in children and young people.

Anxiety can present similarly but often with greater agitation, clinginess, sleep disruption and bad dreams, bed wetting, fear and panic attacks, cognitive problems, angry outbursts, constant negative thoughts and complete withdrawal.

Self-harm a coping strategy and is used to relieve repressed feelings and emotions, distract from distress, punish oneself or others. Most self-harm involves cutting arms or legs but also includes burning, biting, head banging, hitting self, hair pulling or overdosing. As a parent or carer calmly let them know that you are aware that they are harming themselves and gently open communication to understand what they are struggling with. Help them take care of wounds and seek professional help. [Click here](#) for more advice on how to support a child or a young person who is self-harming themselves.

Eating difficulties

Eating difficulties are a symptom of underlying distress and feeling out of control. Make sure mealtimes are regular and stress free. Support your child to eat little and often if that’s easier and to eat when distracted if that helps. [Click here](#) for advice on how to spot signs that a child or a young person needs professional help. Speak to your GP if you are concerned and if your child has been diagnosed with an eating disorder you can find some useful advice and guidance [here](#).