

# Mental Health and Trauma

Life can be difficult at times for any child, young person or adult. Neurodivergent individuals might have increased vulnerability to mental health difficulties. With adequate support from families, peers and outside organisations, there is every possibility that mental health difficulties can be managed and overcome.

## Definition:

### **Mental health refers to:**

- How we feel about ourselves and others.
- Our ability to make and keep friends and relationships.
- Our ability to learn from others and to develop psychologically and emotionally.
- Having the strength to overcome the difficulties and challenges we face in our lives at times; and
- Having the confidence and self-esteem to make decisions and believe in ourselves.

When any or all of the above are negatively affected, it can lead to mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, panic attacks, self-harm, suicide, and trauma.

ND children and young people are particularly susceptible to mental health problems, especially Autistic, PDA, or ADHD children and young people, due to the following reasons;

- Social isolation/rejection from peers
- Social communication impairments
- Lack of social skills or understanding of social rules.
- Socially naïve and not being able to recognise deception easily.
- Prevention of or punishment for repetitive movements (stimming)
- Punishment for behaviour that is out of their control.
- Sensory sensitivities that are not being supported
- Poor or undeveloped sensory regulation skills
- Difficulties coping with change.
- Poor emotional regulation
- Potential lack of recognition and understanding of their and other people's emotions
- Pre-existing anxiety
- Autistic children and young people have an exaggerated cortisol (the stress hormone) response to new or (perceived) threatening situations and sensory input.
- Difficulties disengaging from negative thoughts, distressing or stressful memories due to problems shifting attention.
- Not being able to keep up in school due to processing speed differences, distractions, or diagnosis difficulties.
- Knowing that they are different and feeling that they do not fit in with their peers.
- Feelings of powerlessness
- May lack the same social interests/skills/friendships with their peers and do not feel understood, supported or comforted by others when dealing with problems.

- Lack of correct support at school or home
- Not understanding what makes them different (if not diagnosed or do not know they are Autistic/PDA/ADHD/Dyslexic/Dyspraxic/Dysgraphic/Dyscalculic and what that means)
- A belief that they are stupid or incapable due to their diagnosis difficulties.
- They are focusing on what they struggle with rather than their strengths.
- Feeling shame because of their impairments or wanting to be like their peers
- They are being kept separate from their peers at school or working in the hallway, or elsewhere.
- Reactions and lack of understanding from others to them experiencing a meltdown.
- Family stress or problems at home due to their specific needs that they feel responsible for
- Being in an environment that they are unable to cope with nor escape.
- Being non-verbal and being unable to communicate their needs easily or at all.
- Feeling that there is something wrong with them.
- Not being in control
- Masking excessively leading to identity confusion
- Having their needs dismissed, belittled, misunderstood or ignored.
- Professionals, teachers, or parents have low expectations of them as they do not think they can achieve more.
- Poorly organised transitions
- Being labelled as 'naughty' or 'lazy' or 'stupid.'
- Death in the family or death of the family pet

The more recognition, understanding and acceptance of diversity, the more hope that these difficulties will become less frequent and have less impact on a person's quality of life.

Everyone experiences stress at times. If individuals are exposed to stressful environments over extended time periods, their mental health could be affected. ND children and young people may have negative or highly stressful experiences with their environment or interactions with others, if rejected or poorly understood, as trauma. A person experiencing frequent trauma can become hypervigilant, angry, have recurring nightmares and other sleep issues, or lead to depression, persistent fear, aggression, irritability or difficulty concentrating or remembering things. Some ND characteristics may be more intense: regression of skills, increased communication issues, increased anxiety and meltdowns, reduced emotional regulation, etc.

Providing children with adequate support may be the key to reducing the impact of any ND characteristics on the child's mental health. Strategies like using a child's strengths and recognising any weaknesses requiring support may be the key to building a child's self-esteem and the resilience to overcome negative experiences.

Some of these strategies may include:

- Educating adults and carers to recognise a child's difficulties
- Supporting a child to ask for help when they find tasks difficult.
- Helping a child to understand and take pride in what makes them different

- Praising for effort and celebrating achievements. Supporting an individual to recognise their strengths, along with any difficulties.
- Providing ample opportunities to take breaks from situations that can be stressful
- Supporting family members affected by neurodevelopmental disorders and developing coping strategies for managing stress
- Develop alternative means for communication when verbal skills are very limited.
- Addressing situations where needs are dismissed, belittled, misunderstood or ignored.
- Prepare well for transitions
- Provide an opportunity for appropriate challenges and expect achievement is possible in time
- Offer support when experiencing bereavement, including the death of a pet

If you are worried about your child or family member's mental health, many resources are available to your child, young person and family. The first step would be to speak to your GP, Health professional or education professional.

The different levels of mental health services and support are referred to as 'Tiers', ranging from Tier 1, where mental health problems are relatively low, to Tier 4, in-patient mental health facilities.

Below are the details for each Tier that is available in the Southend borough.

Tier 1 – Universal mental health services provided by professionals who do not specialise in mental health, i.e. Teachers.

Tier 2 – Mental health services provided by practitioners who specialise in mental health, i.e. counsellors.

Tier 3 – Specialist Child and Young People's Mental Health Services, EWMHS

Tier 4 – Inpatient / Highly specialised mental health services.

There is a difference between feeling a bit low from time to time and a severe emotional or mental health problem. If your child or young person is feeling unhappy and low for a prolonged period of time, or if you have any other serious concerns about your child or young person, it is time to seek more professional help.

### **Other Resources**

There are also free listening services, where you can speak confidentially to a trained volunteer about anything troubling you, no matter what that is, and they can help support you or your child/young person.

Call 116 123 to talk to the Samaritans or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org) for a reply within 24 hours. Text SHOUT to 85258 to contact the Shout Crisis Text Line, or text YM if you are under 19 years old.

If you are under 19 years old, you can also call 0800 1111 to talk to Childline. The number will not appear on your phone bill.