

A Teenager's perspective on mental health

by Anna Dutton

As a teenager who has experienced mental health issues you'll know how tough it is to help. It can be difficult enough getting a standard "How was your day?" conversation let alone a chat that involves emotions or opening up. This can leave parents feeling hopeless and at a loss as to what to say and do for the best when their children are suffering from depression, anxiety or other condition that seriously affects their mood and wellbeing.

I started to suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) when I was 17 whilst studying for my A Levels. PTSD comes with a whole host of debilitating illnesses, such as depression, panic disorder and anxiety, some of which I am still dealing with almost five years later.

I've been there as a troubled teenager and my parents were there with me. To shed some light on what could be helpful for your child, I've come up with some tips from my own personal experience:

- ✓ **Do:** remind your child that they are completely normal. They may not feel it and mental illnesses, such as anxiety can be really scary, especially if they don't know why it's happening or how to control it.
- **Don't:** be over dramatic. Keep calm, collected and understanding even if you are a worried bundle inside.
- ✓ **Do:** send loving, thoughtful text messages or phone calls, especially if your child is away at university. A reminder that they have a support network is essential.
- **Don't:** bring up the topic of their mental health every time you communicate. Being reminded that something is wrong all the time is not helpful and actually may be more damaging.
- ✓ **Do:** encourage openness. Before I spoke to my parents I had been suffering in silence for months. I was scared to speak to them because I didn't want them to be upset and I was worried they wouldn't understand. When I did actually tell them a huge weight was lifted and I stopped having panic attacks because I didn't have to hide them anymore.
- **Don't:** be overbearing. Give your child some space to heal on their own, just let them know you are always there to listen and they will come to you.
- ✓ **Do:** encourage them to seek help, whether by talking to a counsellor or therapist. As soon as my parents found out what was going on they got me some professional help where I learnt important skills to help manage the illness, which helped me to move on. I also saw the counsellor at college, which was really comforting.
- **Don't:** make them speak to a professional if they really don't want to – therapy will not work if the recipient is not comfortable with opening up.
- ✓ **Do:** make sure your child is social. The wider the support network the better, so make sure they don't isolate themselves and ask them to be honest with their friends so they have at least one supportive person at home, at school/university and on social occasions.
- **Don't:** make them tell the whole world or go into more detail than they're happy with. Their mental health is their story to tell when they're ready. If they are not particularly social, try to introduce them to someone who understands, such as an organized support group.

Most importantly: always provide what I call "no-questions-asked hugs". Sometimes, especially with depression, you can just be crying or sad just because your heart is heavy and having to explain that every time it happens is draining and off-putting. Knowing that I could go downstairs in floods of tears to my mum or dad and get some comfort in the form of a cuddle is unbelievably valuable and it meant that if I wanted to talk about it, I could do so in my own time.

My parents were, and still are, absolutely brilliant. Of course it was a steep learning curve for them and by no means easy. I do often wonder how they managed to do it – probably with many a sleepless night! But do remember that it will get better.

Getting help

- ✚ Start with your GP or school/college/uni counsellor.
- ✚ BACP (bacp.co.uk) has a list of registered counsellors and therapists; most offer a free telephone introduction first.
- ✚ Youth Access (youthaccess.org.uk) offers free counselling and advice.
- ✚ The Mix (themix.org.uk) for 16-25 year olds provides online self-care advice and emotional support.
- ✚ Youngminds.org.uk has a Parents Helpline and tons of practical advice.

See anxietyuk.org.uk for more help

See Anna's blog at themindfulplanet.com