Kooth: A handy guide for parents and carers

kooth.com

Welcome

It can be difficult for parents and carers to recognise when a child or young adult is struggling with a mental illness. This brochure, developed by Kooth's clinical team, will help you better understand and be aware of the warning signs of mental illness in young people as well as signposting you to organisations that can provide support. You will also find practical tips on how best to support your child's mental and emotional health and advice for starting a conversation with a young person about their mental health.

Accreditation

Early warning signs

Top tips on how to talk to your children about their feelings

Frequently Asked Questions

Kooth's Accreditation

Kooth is a fully accredited counselling service with the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). All counsellors receive regular clinical supervision in accordance with BACP guidelines.

For the past two decades, we have worked in tandem with the NHS to improve mental health in England and Wales. As a trusted delivery partner of the NHS and with over 19 years of data, Kooth is able to deliver support in line with LTP priorities.

NHS
Providing NHS Services

bacp | Accredited Service

Early Warning Signs

How you can support your child/signpost them to support (anxiety, depression and other key presenting issues)

Anxiety

Anxiety often presents in a way that causes both psychological and physical symptoms. For example, the person may experience:

Psychological symptoms:

- Feeling uneasy, tense or worried
- Feeling unable to relax
- Feeling out of control
- Feeling a sense of dread
- The need for reassurance from others
- Rumination over thoughts or previous experiences
- Worry about the future

Physical symptoms:

- Problems sleeping
- Feeling restless
- Headaches or tension in their body
- An irregular heartbeat
- Sweating
- Grinding of teeth
- Butterflies in the stomach or feeling sick
- Panic attacks

Panic attacks are a form of fear response, and occur when the individual's body experiences an intense rush of these physical and psychological symptoms. They tend to last between 5 and 20 minutes, and can be very scary and debilitating for the individual.

What are the signs that my child might be experiencing anxiety?

- Talking quickly or switching from different points
- Describing feeling a sense of dread, or worry about something
- Apologising for taking up time or for wasting time
- Seeking reassurance
- Description of any of the physical or psychological symptoms above
- Getting ‘stuck’ on a particular thought or concern

Presentations of anxiety can be on a spectrum, with some people presenting with ‘every day’ anxiety, whilst others may be experiencing more of a severe anxiety disorder. It’s important not to be dismissive of either experience, and to recognise the significance of what the person is experiencing to them.

Depression

Experiences of depression and low mood can also be experienced at different levels of severity. Sometimes a child or young person will experience more mild symptoms that may be seen as ‘every day’ low mood and others may experience clinical depression. Clinical depression is diagnosed when an individual experiences five or more of the following symptoms, over a two week period; with someone having a low mood or loss of pleasure or interest.

- Depressed (feeling low) most of the day, nearly every day
- Diminished interest or pleasure in all or almost all activities, most of the day, nearly every day
- Significant weight loss when not dieting, or weight gain, or decrease in appetite nearly every day
- Insomnia or hypersomnia nearly every day
- Psychomotor agitation (e.g. foot tapping, pacing) or retardation (slowing down of movements) nearly every day
- Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day
- Feelings of worthlessness or inappropriate guilt nearly every day
- Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, nearly every day
- Recurrent thoughts of death, suicide ideation or a suicide attempt/ plan

These symptoms will cause significant clinical distress or impairment to functioning.

There can be some unhelpful narratives around clinical depression, for example, the idea that the individual needs to 'snap out of it or 'pull themselves together',' or the idea that we all experience clinical depression, since we can all have 'bad days'. These can diminish the experiences of the individual and take away from the distress that they are experiencing. These misconceptions can also stop individuals from seeking help, as they may feel like they don't need it or 'should' be okay.

How might clinical depression present online?

There are a variety of ways that clinical depression may present online, so this list is not exhaustive:

- The individual may express feeling low in mood
- The individual may express thoughts of worthlessness or hopelessness
- Expression of feeling suicidal, having attempted to end own life, having a plan to end life
- Slow typing or feeling like the answers are taking a lot of effort from the person
- Expressions of feeling drained or exhausted or like things are too much
- Expressions of feeling guilty for things, such as being a burden or being alive
- Negative self-talk
- Expressions of not getting pleasure from things or being interested in trying things
- Reports of change in eating habits or appetites

Top tips on how to talk to your children about their feelings

It can be so tricky to bring up difficult topics, and talking about emotions with your children can sometimes feel more than a little daunting for parents and carers. You may worry about saying the wrong thing, making your child feel uncomfortable, and even worry about making them feel worse. But the fact you want to explore emotions with your child is enough, even if sometimes it doesn't go as you planned!

If this feels familiar for you, you are definitely not alone!

As many of us here are parents ourselves, we wanted to put together some handy tips on how you could begin talking to your children about their feelings.

Why you might want to talk to your children about their feelings

There can be a number of reasons why you want to talk to your children about their emotions. These may include the following:

- You've noticed your child is acting differently, and you are concerned about them.
- Something has recently happened that might have affected your child, and you want to check in to see how they are doing.
- You want to help your child to feel more comfortable talking about their feelings in general.

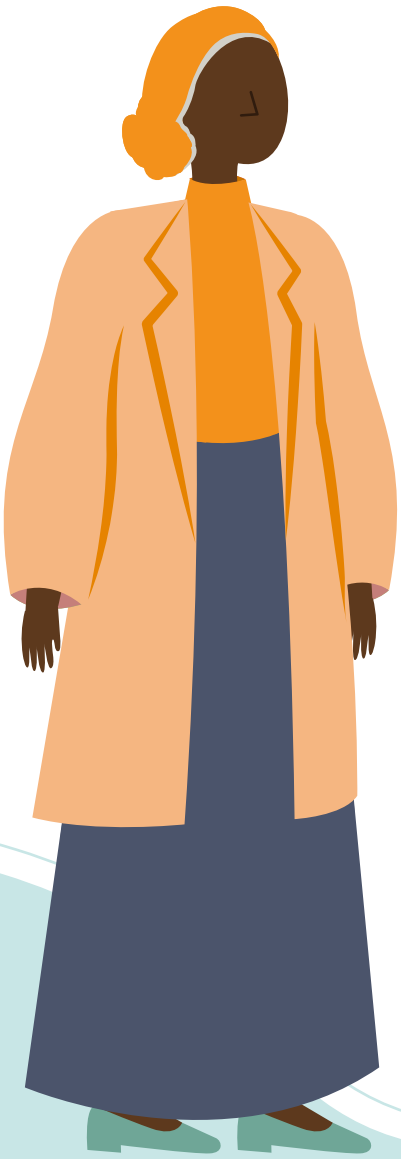
Our top tips to get you started:

1 Think about whether your child feels ready to talk

Just because you want to talk doesn't mean they feel ready to. Look out for the things they say, and their body language, too, for indicators on whether they really want to talk about their feelings.

2 Think about the setting

Talking about feelings can be really sensitive, so making sure the space is private, comfortable, and feels safe for your child can be key to a positive outcome.



"I know when my son isn't in the mood to talk, as his whole body is saying, 'Not now, Mum!' I always respect that, though, and never push. As a result, I think he feels more able to talk to me when it feels right." ~ G

3 Choose your timing wisely

Talking about feelings, or any difficult subject, can be quite sensitive. Choosing a time when you are both calm and relaxed can be more useful than choosing a time when there are any heightened emotions already at play.

"I always find discussing something important when my child is upset or angry often doesn't end as well as I hope. Both being relaxed has much better results and helps us both reflect on and express our feelings with more consideration." - H

4 Practice asking open questions (rather than closed ones)

Closed questions usually encourage yes or no type answers. For example, Do you like school? is a closed question, because the response is likely to be either ‘yes’ or ‘no’. The finality and brevity of such a response doesn’t allow the conversation to go much further.

Open questions, on the other hand, go a bit deeper and encourage more thinking and exploration. Instead, try saying, tell me about school.

This simple difference in style might help your child consider their own thoughts and feelings a little more and encourage them to share more of their story or problem with you.

5 Take away the intensity

It can be pretty daunting (on both sides!) to sit down to talk about something as important as feelings. But decreasing some of the intensity can sometimes reduce the pressure and make things a little less stressful. Here are some examples:

- Have a chat while on a dog walk or stroll together. Doing something shoulder-to-shoulder might mean there's less intense eye contact, which can feel more comfortable, especially when there's big emotions at play.
- Have a chat while doing an activity together, such as playing a board game or working on a craft project. The distraction of keeping everyone busy can take the pressure away.
- Have a chat during a car journey. Not feeling the pressure for eye contact or hyperfocus on the conversation can be helpful. Just be sure that emotions are not too heightened for you to concentrate on the road and drive safely!

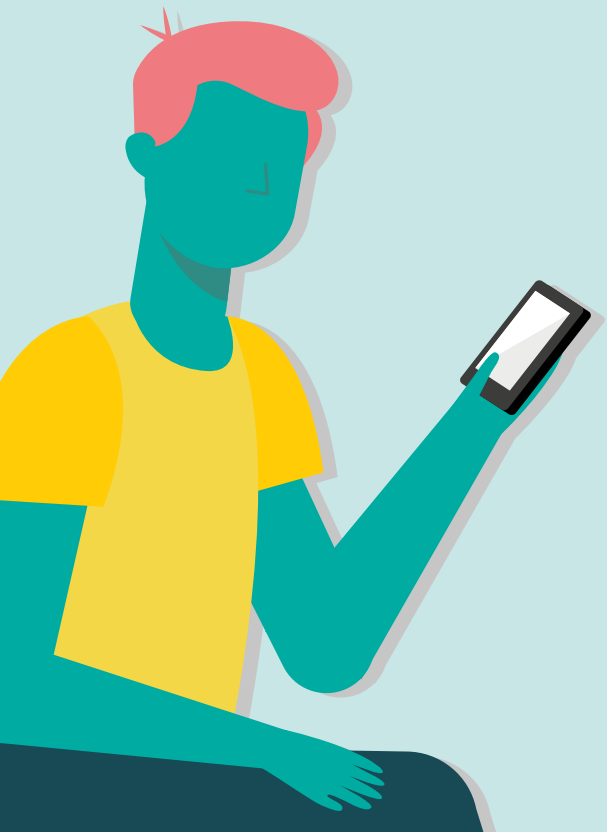
"I avoid sitting them down and instead do it during an activity like washing up, cleaning the car, or cooking together, as I find they are much more likely to open up." - N

**Please note - It might also be useful (and less intense) to start slowly with any difficult topics. So instead of going straight in with the big topics, maybe talking about something else first to break the ice.*

6 Model it

Being more open and honest about how you yourself feel (in an age appropriate way, of course) can normalise the idea of talking about emotions. Children who see that adults also have big feelings, doubts, get scared or anxious, get frustrated with others at work, etc. might feel more comfortable opening up themselves.

"When I was a child, I can't remember my parents showing their feelings. Understandably, I had a hard time doing it myself. With my own children, I try my best to create an environment where we can all talk about how we feel, so when things are difficult, reaching out doesn't feel so tough." - S



7 Name it

Sometimes it can be hard for children to identify their feelings. Naming what you observe can help them to do this. For example, when talking to a young child, you might say, 'You seem really angry today. I can see you are clenching your hands, and you don't have a happy face. I wonder if anything has made you angry or upset?'

**This advice mainly applies to younger children who are still developing their emotional vocabulary and may need assistance in identifying their feelings. However, this technique can work for older children as well; just take care that you don't come across as condescending. Something like, "You've seemed pretty quiet and withdrawn lately; can you tell me what's bothering you?" can be a good approach.*

8 Ask them what they need

It can be tough to talk about how you feel, and when we want to talk about things as parents, children don't always want to or feel ready. Asking what a child needs from you can help them feel more in control, heard, and respected.

Children might also not know what they need, so suggesting a few options can be a good starting point. Examples include: Do you need some space right now? Do you need a hug? Would you like for us to do something together to take your mind off things?

"Sometimes, even when I want to talk about something, my child doesn't. As hard as that is, I try to respect that. Sometimes they just want a cuddle, and I can definitely provide those!" - L

9 Listen carefully

This sounds pretty straightforward, but sometimes, when we care, we may jump into problem-solving mode a little too hastily. And while it might come from a really good place, it's not always helpful.

"Listen, like really listen to what they're saying without jumping in with advice or guidance (as much as you want to)! When you really take the time to listen without judgement, it can show your children that you love them, what they are feeling is valid, and that sharing when they are ready is a really good thing." - P

10 Get creative

We might feel a pressure to have all the answers and say the right things, but sometimes, we just need to think a little differently. Helping our children express their feelings through play or using art materials can be just as important and useful, especially for much younger children whose natural language is often play.

"I use 'worry monsters' with the little people in my life. They are small toy figures that 'listen' to worries. They love them! When they feel worried about something, they go somewhere quiet and talk to their worry monster, who, in their minds, swallow up the worries and help them get back to playing. It really helps them to express how they feel in a language they understand." - O

It's important to note that when it comes to parenting, (and actually any relationship) things aren't always perfect all the time. And that's OK. There's sometimes a lot of pressure to get things right. But actually being a parent who is trying their best to meet their child's needs, whatever their circumstances is good enough. Not having all the answers and getting things wrong, certainly doesn't make you a bad parent. It makes you human.

Is there anything that works for you that we haven't covered in this article? If you'd like to share any tips of your own or perhaps something that helped you in your childhood, we'd love to hear from you in the comments below.

If you are struggling to talk to a child in your life about their feelings, or you want to talk to the team about anything at all, you can reach out to us by messages or live chat here.

Frequently Asked Questions

We've put this together in the hope that it helps you gain a good understanding of exactly what children and young people can expect to find on Kooth.

We also hope it helps you understand how we can support the mental wellbeing of children and young people in a safe and anonymous way.

What is Kooth?

Kooth is a free, safe and anonymous online wellbeing service for children and young people. Young people using the site are able to access a range of support services including one-to-one counselling sessions, discussing issues with their peers through online discussion boards, reading and contributing to self-help content and recording their feelings via journals and goal trackers.

The online nature of Kooth means that young people can access help in a way that is most suitable for them, at a time that is convenient for them, 365 days of the year.

What's on Kooth?

Kooth.com offers a wide range of therapeutic tools to help children and young people and support their mental wellbeing.

Chat with our team:

Our team of accredited counsellors are here to provide safe and effective support to children and young people. The chat session can be up to 1 hour long and can be used to talk about whatever issues are on a young person's mind.

Kooth Discussion Boards:

On the discussion boards, children and young people can start a discussion about anything they're interested in, such as, asking for advice or just having a rant about something on their mind! By starting a new discussion, users can share their thoughts and views, or ask a question to get answers from other young people.

Send us a message:

We know some users prefer to engage in support via messages instead of a live chat. Our Kooth counsellors are well trained professionals who will assess the service users needs and provide them with the required support. The support received through messages varies according to each specific case.

Live chat:

Live chat: Our Kooth counsellors are well trained professionals who will assess the service users needs and provide them with the required support. The support received through messages varies according to each specific case.

Kooth Magazine

Kooth's online magazine is packed with helpful articles covering everything from mental health issues to more general subjects such as holidays and gaming. Over half the content is contributed by children and young people, all of which is moderated before being published on the site.

Mini Activity Hub

Mini Activity Hub: Kooth also offers a mini activity hub with the aim of encouraging children and young people to express their feelings. The activities cover a wide range of mental health topics including good sleep hygiene practices, mindfulness techniques and breathing exercises.

Content

Are children and young people able to see all content on the site?

There are restrictions in place to ensure that children and young people using Kooth only see what is age appropriate for them. This also helps us to ensure people find the content that is most useful to them. Any comments are pre-moderated to ensure that only safe comments are posted and visible.

Can children and young people create content on Kooth?

Children and young people can submit content and post on our discussion boards to share their experiences and support others within the Kooth community. We also encourage feedback and consult with children and young people to ensure that they can share their views of how we deliver our service.

Being a safe and anonymous service

Can children and young people message each other on Kooth?

The safety of our users on Kooth is really important to us. Therefore, children and young people cannot add friends or directly message other young people on the site in the same way they can on gaming platforms or social media sites. This is because we are an anonymous service and we need to make sure everyone using the site is safe.

Keeping Kooth Safe

We are an anonymous service. It means that neither we nor other service users know the identity of a young person on the site. For many young people this enables them to talk freely about their experiences without having to worry about being judged.

All of our discussion boards and live forum discussions are moderated by our team of moderators, further ensuring the platforms remains safe.

Accessing Kooth

Do children and young people need to be referred by a GP?

Children and young people do not need to be referred to Kooth to access the service. Kooth users are invited and welcome to join Kooth as long as they fall within the age range that is available to their area.

Talking to our team

When can children and young people talk to someone? The Kooth team are available to chat 7 days a week, 365* days of the year. Kooth users can access the magazine, discussion boards and any other online content whenever they like, from wherever they are. Our friendly online team are available to chat during the following times:

From 12 noon until 10pm weekdays.
From 6pm until 10pm weekends.

How long a child or young person will have to wait in the chat queue depends on how busy the site is so we kindly ask for service users to be patient with us!

Children and young people can send a message to the team at any time and it will be responded to during service working hours. Our counsellors are employed by us and are fully qualified with the BACP or equivalent.

*We offer a reduced service on bank holidays.