

## STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Practical tips on how to talk to boys and young men about mental health.

## INTRODUCTION

Statistics indicate that boys and young men are more likely to be affected by poor mental health but that these difficulties are often undetected. In addition most mental ill health conditions that impact adult life, making men more vulnerable to depression, body image issues and suicide for example, start in early-mid adolescence.

Parents, carers and Educators are in a strong position to make a positive difference to the wellbeing of boys and young men terms of being able to provide the first line of support, start a conversation and seek effective intervention.

We hope that these practical tips will help you to feel prepared and confident to take that first step.



# 10 TOP TIPS FOR PARENTS IN HANDLING BOYS' AND YOUNG MEN'S MENTAL HEALTH

By Dr Nihara Krause, Consultant Clinical Psychologist

1

It's never too early to start talking about mental health with your son(s). Talking whilst sharing an activity, such as watching or playing a game, works better than simply sharing feelings and worries.

Boys and young men are more likely to use unhealthy coping mechanisms such as drinking too much alcohol or smoking more. Keep an eye and provide alternative, more helpful coping mechanisms such as going for a regular run with you or taking up a new hobby.

2

3

Research shows that many boys and young men act out their troubles through disruptive, aggressive or even violent behaviours. Work with them to help them understand and express what emotions they may be communicating through their actions.

Boys and young men may express their anxiety through physical symptoms such as headaches, gastrointestinal problems and muscle pain. Address any worries and anxieties alongside seeking support for the physical symptoms they present with.

4

5

Boys and young men may tend to present with a high level of sleep disturbance when their mood is low. Work with them on identifying what might be impacting their mood and agree on a sleep strategy that helps.



Many more boys and young men are presenting with body image worries and eating disorders. Connect them with help that enables them to work on underlying issues such as self-esteem or experiences of being bullied.

6

7

More boys and young men will 'escape' by spending too much time online or gaming to help soothe their mood or anxiety. Find out what being online and gaming means to them and work on some alternative behaviours they can use to self-soothe instead.

9

Research into Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Groups (BAME) indicates that BAME males may be less likely to access the support they need. This may be due to a number of reasons, such as fear of family or community rejection, discriminatory treatment experienced from services or a lack of BAME mental health professionals. Whilst action is needed to improve the experiences of BAME males, early intervention of any mental ill health issue is very beneficial so don't hesitate in asking for help.

10

Research indicates that gay, bisexual and trans people are more likely to report poor mental health, self-harm, social isolation and suicidal thoughts. Help them access relevant care which includes a focus on specific mental health needs from their perspective.

# TOP TIPS FOR BOYS AND YOUNG MEN

By Dr Nihara Krause, Consultant Clinical Psychologist

1

Choose to reject cultural or societal stereotypes by expressing or showing your emotions.



Be yourself, not just 'a man'.

2

3

Be strong and open up (see conversation starters).



Ditch the crutches! Boost your wellbeing by avoiding alcohol and drugs to cope.

4

5

Get active. Increase physical and mental energy by doing exercise, sport, or physical activity for at least half an hour a day.



Anger makes you smaller, words help you to grow. Weed out anger. Plant some words.

6

7

Talk, talk, and talk and don't give up until someone listens.



Ask for help – why wouldn't you grab a life raft in a stormy sea?

8

9

"You can't change the direction of the wind, but you can change the direction of the sails."



## Conversation starters:

- 'I've not been myself lately.'
- 'I've been low in mood recently.'
- 'I've not been on top of the world recently. In fact I've been quite down.'
- 'Do you think you could help me find some help to be less stressed/ anxious/depressed?'
- 'I've been sleeping really badly recently because I've been overthinking. I think I need some professional support.'
- 'I've not been holding up that well under all the pressure I've been under.'
- 'I'm not dealing well with (...) and would benefit from talking to someone. Do you think you might be able to help me find some names or tell me what I need to do?'

## PARENT TALK

By Dr. Nihara Krause, Consultant Clinical Psychologist

### Conversation starters for parents & carers:

- 'You've not been yourself lately.'
- 'You've been quite down, I'm listening.'
- 'Could I help you to get some support in being less stressed/ anxious/depressed?'
- 'You've been sleeping really badly recently, perhaps you've been overthinking?'
- 'You've not been holding up that well under all the pressure you've been under.'
- 'It's ok to feel upset/angry/sad/lonely. Let's explore what can be done about it.'
- 'I can sense something's not right, and I want you to know I am here to listen when you are ready to tell me.'
- 'Let's go throw a ball / fish / walk the dog / learn to drum...'



## Teachers' and Students' Discussion Points

Teachers' here are some topics for discussion in school/college that you might like to try:

**Q:** Do you think there are gender differences in how mental health is experienced?

**A:** The focus should be that we all experience the same types of mental health issues, but there may be gender differences in how they are expressed and managed.

**Q:** How might you notice that your mental health is being affected negatively?

**A:** Sleep and eating changes, getting stressed very easily, detaching from friends, not enjoying things you used to, drinking too much, work piling up...

**Q:** What would you do if you were worried about your own or a friend's mental health?

**A:** Have a chat, persist, catch things early, share concerns with other supportive friends, talk to a teacher / parent / older sibling / someone else who has experienced the same, check a trusted website such as [www.stem4.org.uk](http://www.stem4.org.uk), read the stem4 'Asking for Help Booklet'...

**Q:** What are your views on the 'man up' statement which infers that you need to be strong emotionally and cope on your own?

**A:** Explore historical/cultural perspectives, friends and their influence, worries about the consequences of telling someone they are not coping, the definition of 'strong' in the context of mental health...

You could also share your school's views on supporting all students' mental health, who students can go to formally (pastoral support team), but also who students can approach informally (head of year, maths teacher) if they feel they are easier to talk to.

\* Please ensure that students are aware of the school/college's confidentiality policy when discussing these topics.

## SUPPORTING AND PARENTING A YOUNG PERSON WHO HAS EXPERIENCED TRAUMA

A traumatic experience is an experience that is an out of the ordinary, terrifying event or a series of events that an individual experiences or witnesses. Children and young people who have experienced traumatic experiences present with a range of emotional responses which can affect them at different times in their lives. Most commonly, the first response is shock, followed by a range of responses including a refusal to accept it happened, anger, fear and sadness.

Children and young people express their emotions in a range of ways from becoming quiet and withdrawn, experiencing physical symptoms, having difficulties in sleeping, vivid nightmares, becoming clingy or fearful, having explosive outbursts, refusing to join in activities, especially ones that might remind them of the trauma, playing out what happened in their mind repeatedly or with their toys or through expression such as art or writing. Teenagers may find it particularly difficult to express what they are experiencing and it may lead to a range of behaviours to help them 'forget', including drinking and drug misuse and self-harm.

1. The first and most important step a parent can take is to make their child or young person feel safe. That might mean spending more time with them, helping them structure their day, providing them with predictable routines, helping them to feel less fearful of night times by asking them what might help, such as a night light, sleeping in the same room/bed as a family member.
2. Be guided by your young person as to whether they want to talk or not. It is not necessary to go over the event. In fact, if this is done too soon or in the incorrect way it can make the person feel worse. Do some comforting things with them instead, such as watch a childhood movie, do some cooking together.
3. Ask for support from school or college.
4. Have a break from looking at too much information about the trauma (for example, if it was natural disaster) on the news or online. If it concerns a person or an event, take a break from going over the event in your mind or, looking at letters/photographs of the person and do some positive things with current friends instead.



5. Discourage the use of alcohol or drugs to cope and provide alternative, positive self-soothing activities when things get too much, for example calling a friend, listening to a special soothing playlist, reading the words of a meaningful song
6. Discuss how to protect themselves when with others in case they are asked a difficult question (have a prepared answer), if they suddenly feel sad etc.
7. Address expressions of anger and help them understand what these expressions may actually be saying by giving them words.
8. Consider seeking professional help. Your GP is the first port of call.

There are many good psychological treatments to help with trauma. These focus on helping the person to learn they are safe and to create a safe space for themselves once more, to review what happened to them and explore any guilt or forms of negative thinking they may have and to learn to acknowledge and accept difficult emotions that accompany the trauma whilst also learning to care for themselves and change behaviours that might have emerged post trauma. Whilst it was thought years ago that help for trauma needed to be immediate, research indicates that a person responds better a little while after the event since there needs to be some natural healing that needs to take place in advance of this, usually 2-3 months.

9. Trauma affects everyone in the family, directly or indirectly, so notice any changes in how you feel in yourself and take steps to look after yourself too.

## HELPLINES

stem4 does not provide a counselling service and so regrettably we are unable to answer questions of a personal nature. Please contact your GP or call 111 or 999 should you have an urgent concern.

### Beat

Beating eating disorders.

- 0808 801 0677 (Helpline)
- 0808 801 0711 (Youthline)
- 0801 801 0811 (Studentline)

### Bullying UK

Information about bullying; verbal, physical and cyber bullying.

- 0808 800 2222

### Childline

A free point of contact for children and young people who need advice either online or via telephone on a wide range of issues.

- 0800 1111

### Frank

Confidential information for anyone concerned about their own or someone else's drug misuse.

- 0300 123 6600

### Kooth

Kooth CAMHS support provides free, safe and anonymous online support for young people.

- 0300 123 6600

### Mind

Provide advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem.

- <https://www.kooth.com/>

### NSPCC

Keeping children and young people safe from a wide range of abusive situations.

- 0808 800 5000
- 0800 1111 (ChildLine)

### Papyrus

prevention of young suicide  
Provide confidential support and advice to young people and anyone worried about a young person.

- 0800 068 41 41

### Relate

Relationship support for young people aged 16-25 including support with their own relationship or a family relationship. Free on-line chat with a trained counsellor.

- [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

### Samaritans

Talk to the Samaritans any time you like, in your own way, and off the record - about whatever is getting to you.

- 116 123

### Stonewall

Information and advice for LGBT communities and their allies.

- 08000 50 20 20

### Shout

Shout is a 24/7 text service, free on all major mobile networks in the UK, for anyone in crisis. It's a place to go if you're struggling to cope and you need immediate help. The number to text is 85258.

- <https://giveusashout.org/>

### Togetherall

Togetherall is an online community for people who are stressed, anxious or feeling low. The service has an active forum with round-the-clock support from trained professionals. You can talk anonymously to other members and take part in group or 1-to-1 therapy with therapists.

- <https://togetherall.com/en-gb/>

### The Mix

Online guide for 16-25 years olds. Support and information on everything from sex and exam stress to debt and drugs.

- 0808 808 4994

### Young Minds

Supporting children and young people with emotional health and wellbeing concerns, offering a wide range of resources across a whole spectrum of issues.

- 0808 802 5544 (Parents)

### Switchboard

(LGBT+ helpline; calls cost the same as those to 01 and 02 numbers; available 10am-10pm every day)

- 0300 330 0630

### Muslim Youth Helpline

(faith and culturally sensitive support service for Muslim communities; free to call; available 4pm-10pm every day)

- 0808 808 2008

### Campaign Against Living Miserably

(for anyone who needs to talk about life's problems; free to call; available 5pm-midnight every day)

- 0800 58 58 58

### Websites

stem4 — [www.stem4.org.uk](http://www.stem4.org.uk)

Mind — [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

Switchboard LGBT+ Helpline — [www.switchboard.lgbt](http://www.switchboard.lgbt)

The Black, African and Asian Therapy Network — [www.baatn.org.uk](http://www.baatn.org.uk)

Muslim Youth Helpline — [www.myh.org.uk](http://www.myh.org.uk)

Anxiety UK — [www.anxietyuk.org.uk](http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk)

Bipolar UK — [www.bipolaruk.org](http://www.bipolaruk.org)

Harmless — [www.harmless.org.uk](http://www.harmless.org.uk)

Young Minds — [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

## Some Helpful Resources

**'Asking for Help' Booklet:** a handy guide for young people that provides tips on ways to develop positive mental health, and practical advice on how to reach out for help.  
<https://stem4.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Tesco-Booklet-Web-Version-2.pdf>

stem4 Apps:



Calm Harm is a free app to help teenagers manage or resist the urge to self-harm.



Clear Fear is a free app to help young people manage the symptoms of anxiety.



Move Mood is a free app to help teenagers manage symptoms of depression.



Combined Minds is a free app to help families and friends provide mental health support.

Download today



Please note that none of the stem4 apps substitute for seeing a mental health professional / GP.  
Please see a suitably qualified professional for assessment and advice on treatment.

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