

## Tackling stigma about mental health for young people

**Time to Change, the mental health anti-stigma campaign run by the charities Mind and Rethink Mental Illness, is launching a new campaign to put an end to the stigma that young people with mental health problems face. Here, they talk to us about the issue – and how parents can help.**

### **Stigma and discrimination**

1 in 10 children will experience a mental health problem.

That's around three children in every classroom in the UK. A survey found that 90% of young people also said they experience stigma and discrimination as a result of their mental health issues, and that this prevents them from doing the everyday activities that they would typically enjoy.

Stigma and discrimination due to mental illness disrupts everyday life for a lot of people – it stops people from seeking help, from going to school and from socialising with friends. Those of us with mental health problems often don't feel able to talk about it with family members or friends, through fear of their reaction.

Recent research revealed the devastating effects mental health discrimination can have on young people:

- 54% felt that they couldn't hang out with their friends.
- 40% felt that they couldn't attend school.
- Worryingly, just over a quarter (26%) said negative reactions from others had made them want to give up on life.<sup>1</sup>

This has to be the generation for change.

### **Her friend's mother thought she would harm her children**

One young person who has worked with us for the last couple of years told us that although we have come a long way in terms of tackling the stigma that surrounds mental health problems, she still finds that she is discriminated against because of her mental illness. She describes the stigma and discrimination she has faced as being worse than the illness itself.

Shortly after being discharged from hospital, she asked if she could stay with her friend's family. Her friend's mother refused. As one of her symptoms had been hearing voices, her friend's mother felt she was a danger to her children and that the young person would harm them. Her hopes for this new campaign are that everyone, especially young people, will be able to talk more openly about mental health without being judged.

## **'I felt let down'**

Another young person, who had mental health problems at the age of 12, explained how her friends accused her of being attention seeking, and a 'drama queen':

'Comments like this made me feel even more isolated. I felt so different from everybody else, and comments like this just made me feel worse. I was already so confused by how I felt, but people's reactions made it seem like my feelings weren't valid and something I should feel guilty for...'

A parent whose daughter had experienced mental illness in her early teens, said:

'Parents at the school were initially understanding and supportive about Emma's issues, but as time went on many of them started to avoid me. I felt quite let down by people, who were quick to judge without asking me about what was really going on. As a family, we all felt stigmatised.

'Being a parent isn't easy and it's sometimes difficult to gauge if your child is experiencing a mental illness or being a typical teenager. My biggest piece of advice - make mental health part of everyday conversation with your child. Even if your child isn't experiencing any issues, if something does crop up further down the line, at least then they feel like they can have an open conversation with you about it. There also needs to be more education around the topic at school; the more openly this is discussed in the classroom, the less of a taboo mental health will be.'

## **What parents can do to help**

Over half (55%) of parents have never spoken to their children about mental health (including stress, anxiety and depression).

There may be many reasons a parent would find it difficult to talk about mental health problems. It may not be relevant to their family or they may not feel they have the right information.

If you are a parent, remember that you don't have to be an expert to start a conversation about mental health. Talking is important because it breaks down taboos and helps destigmatise a subject. You can start by asking them what they know about mental illness. You can also view this [film](#) ([link is external](#)).

## Struggling to cope

An important thing to include is that **they should respond to mental illness in the same way they respond to any other physical illness: with compassion, sympathy and understanding**. Also, make sure they know that if they're ever feeling sad, or are finding they are struggling to cope with normal life in any way, they should tell you about it so you can help.

By discussing it openly, it means your child will feel comfortable coming to you if they think they are experiencing mental illness. It also means they are better equipped to support a friend or peer in a similar situation.

You can find more tips on how to start that crucial conversation with your children [here](#) ([link is external](#)).

## The campaign

Time to Change is working with Young Minds to deliver training in 60 schools across six areas in England. Time to Change Young Champions will be helping to deliver these sessions in secondary schools. Alongside this training, a new social marketing campaign will be launched to target young people to raise awareness of mental health problems and the stigma that many face. A second campaign will also target parents, to make sure they feel equipped and have the confidence to speak with their children about mental health.

Coinciding with the national campaign is our Make Time 4 Mental Health programme. Launched separately in early November, the programme is made up of four simple, scripted 10 minute sessions which can be delivered in assemblies, form time sessions or PSHE classes in secondary schools across England.

We have already seen significant attitude and behaviour change amongst adults in England, and we've seen positive results from the work we've been doing with children and young people and schools in recent years. We hope this campaign will help to reach a new era of openness and support.

For more information about Time to Change, or on how to access resources for parents and teachers, please visit <http://www.time-to-change.org.uk/november> (link is external).