

Approaching a Young Person about Your Concerns

If you do feel the need to approach a young person with your concerns remember to do so in a way that won't cause the young person embarrassment and try and choose a space that they feel safe in.

Although you might have noticed a change, the person themselves might not realise that anything is different so don't suggest to them that they have a problem but do state that you have noticed a change and wonder if anything is bothering them.

Give some thought as to your relationship with the young person and if you are the right person to approach them.

Your co-worker may have a closer relationship with them and so may be in a better position to engage them.

Focus on how the person might be feeling and try to stand in their shoes. It is best at first to focus on problems which the person will feel comfortable about discussing, for example – "I know you have been having trouble sleeping / concentrating lately, would you like to talk to about it?" " You've been feeling very down in the dumps lately?"

In instances where young people do look for support from you and you feel it is an area you have limited experience in, try to do some preparatory work before hand and be clear as to what steps you can take to help them.

If you feel uncomfortable just think about how you would want someone to treat you in a similar circumstance and empathise with the person in front of you.

For more information see www.headstrong.ie



Youth Mental Health and Well-being

Youth Mental Health is a major issue for anyone who regularly works with young people in a supportive environment.

This is unsurprising as our teens to our mid twenties is a time when young people begin to form their own identity and face various challenges as they learn to be more independent and self-reliant.

Based on international and Irish research, it is estimated that at any one time 1 in 5 young people are going through a difficult time in their lives which is impacting on their mental health.

Although this figure is high only 2 percent of these young people are likely to need specialist intervention to support them on their journey back to mental health and well-being.

Some of the most prevalent mental health issues that affect young people are: depression, anxiety, self harm, eating disorders, and addiction. Where these and other mental health problems begin to emerge, the earlier we can get a young person to the support they need, the more likely they are to have a speedy recovery with better outcomes.

Outlined are some basic steps that you as a professional can put in place to make it easier for a young person to approach you with a concern. Naturally you will have to tailor it to suit the role that you and your organisation play in the life of young people and will depend on the resources available to you.

However, remember that in your role you have the potential to prevent a young person from slipping through the cracks in the system and guiding them to the support they may need.

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1. Make your organisation 'Youth Friendly'

Very often this means friendly for everyone else too and can mean taking small steps like ensuring a young person will always get a welcome when they walk through the door. At the heart of a youth friendly organisation is the belief that young people should be treated with respect and dignity.

Youth friendly organisations listen to young people's views about how the service could be improved and they act to implement those improvements where possible.

2. Confidentiality and Sensitivity

Having created a welcoming environment with the support and advice of young people, it is important to establish a culture of confidentiality and sensitivity. Many young people have reported to us that one of the reasons they don't disclose their concerns is that they are afraid what they are going through will become the office gossip or prejudice people against them.

Young people need to be assured that any disclosure they make will be treated with sensitivity. Remember under Child Protection guidelines you cannot promise not to act on information if you think the young person is in danger.

3. Awareness

As mid teens to mid twenties is the age range where underlying mental health issues will emerge it is important that you are aware of some of the signs and symptoms of common mental health problems.

There are several excellent websites listed on www.headstrong.ie where you can find information on any issue that might concern you - e.g. the impact of cannabis use on mental health, eating disorders or how to manage stress.

4. Identify local supports and develop relationships with relevant agencies

Every community will have some resources to help young people through a tough time. Taking time to identify what agencies might be able to support the young people you come into contact with and develop co-operative links with them will reap dividends for young people in your community.

Increased co-operation between agencies means that less young people will get lost in the system and it simplifies making referrals. Developing a link with the local G.P., primary health care team or health nurse will prove to be vital if you ever need to support a young person in crisis.

5. Listen

When a young person approaches you to talk about a problem the key thing they will want from you is to listen. Reassure them that you will treat the information sensitively but if you have a concern you will have to take steps to make sure they are safe. Don't jump in with solutions but point out the positive things in what they have done so far, such as taking the step to talk to you. If you feel you can't support them put them in touch with those who can.

You may need to help them to take this step and help them identify what steps they can take to help themselves.

Signs and Symptoms to Watch for If you Have a Concern

Workers are not encouraged to make their own diagnosis's about a young person's mental health, however in your role you may notice changes in a young person's behaviour that will concern you. The following checklist was drawn up by an Australian organisation called SANE. (www.sane.org)

CHECKLIST

Behaviours which are considered abnormal for that person.

People may –

Withdraw completely from family, friends and workmates.

Be afraid to leave the house (particularly in daylight hours).

Sleep or eat poorly, sleep by day and stay awake at night, often pacing around.

Be extremely preoccupied with a particular theme, for example, death, politics or religion.

Uncharacteristically neglect household responsibilities or personal hygiene and appearance.

Deteriorate in performance at school or work, or leave jobs.

Have difficulty concentrating, following a conversation or remembering things.

Talk about or write things which do not really make sense.

Panic, be extremely anxious or markedly depressed, or suicidal.

Lose variation in mood, be flat. Lack emotional expression, for example, humour, friendliness.

Have marked changes in mood, for example from quiet to excited or agitated.

Have inappropriate emotional responses, for example, giggling on hearing sad news.

Hear voices that no-one else can hear.

Believe, without reason, that others are plotting against, spying on, or following them and have extreme fear of, or anger at, those people.

Believe they are being harmed, or influenced by or do things against their will – by television, radio, aliens or the devil, for example.

Believe they have special powers, for example that they are important religious leaders, politicians or scientists when this is not the case.

Believe their thoughts are being interfered with or that they can influence the thoughts of others.

Spend extravagant and unrealistic sums of money.