

COMPLEX LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AND DISABILITIES RESEARCH PROJECT (CLDD)

MENTAL HEALTH

What are mental health issues?

Mental health issues can be present in a number of ways. They are sometimes divided into mental health problems, mental disorders and mental illness. Having the right diagnosis is important, so that students can be given the appropriate support in school.

Mental problems

30–40% of children at some time during childhood may have a mild mental health problem. They occur for a variety of reasons and are not likely to last for long.

Mental disorders

Mental disorders include emotional disorder (such as anxiety), conduct disorder (including anti-social behaviour), hyperkinetic disorder (such as ADHD) and other disorders (such as autism).

Mental illnesses

This term is sometimes used to refer to more severe conditions that affect a smaller number of children at some time during childhood. It includes severe depressive illness, eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, and psychotic disorders (loss of contact with reality) such as schizophrenia.

Many symptoms of mental distress, such as self-harming, frequently occur in people with learning disabilities as a result of frustration.

Difficulties

These may include:

- difficulties in taking part in school life
- an inability to concentrate on their work
- an impaired memory making it hard to learn new material or to remember what they knew before
- frequent absences from school.

All these factors make it hard for them to learn and to make progress, meaning that they are likely to underachieve.

Supporting students with mental health issues

There are two important ways of helping students who have poor mental health or a mental illness – first, by helping them to become engaged with learning, and second, by helping them to become more resilient, so that they are able to concentrate on their work, despite their other problems.

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Engagement with work

These are some of the ways of encouraging students to want to learn, despite their mental health issues:

- having a topic-based approach that is more likely to capture their interest
- creating activities that are relevant to them and knowing whether they prefer information to be presented orally or visually, and whether they like to remain seated or to have plenty of scope for active learning
- involving them in discussions about the work they want to do and how they want to do it, so that they feel their opinion matters
- making sure that some activities are shared with others, so that they build up relationships with their peers and their teachers; this will help them to feel that they belong to the school

Emotional resilience

Emotional resilience is concerned with students' ability to cope with stress, unpredictable and unforeseen events, and disasters. Students with mental disabilities may be at increased risk of facing such situations, so building emotional resilience is key to meeting their educational needs. This might be achieved through the following strategies:

- Early intervention: the sooner intervention begins with students who have mental health issues the better. These students may need help from different professionals, such as general practitioners (GPs), educational psychologists (EPs) and CAMHS (the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services).
- Support in school needs to include having someone to talk to about their worries and fears. This could be through having a mentor (peer or adult, depending on their age), or a particular member of staff to whom they are happy to talk.
- Support, in the form of, art therapy, play therapy, music therapy or drama therapy, can be extremely helpful as a means of expressing their feelings. Relaxation training and social skills training may also be useful. In addition, some of these students may benefit from speech and language therapy or occupational therapy.

Whether or not these students are keen on physical education and games, they should be encouraged to be active in some way, as this reduces anxiety and increases emotional wellbeing. It may also help them to get a good night's sleep, thus further reducing their stress and anxiety.