

Youth Mental Health Animation Series

Educator Notes



ABOUT

This is the educator resource to accompany the exercise sheets developed for young people to reflect on and discuss the issues raised in each of our Youth Mental Health animation series. Exercise sheets for young people are available on the Mental Health Educate website. These can either be downloaded and distributed to young people or emailed to young people if classroom learning is not possible.

OBJECTIVES

As with all of the material on Mental Health Educate, the animations and associated exercises have been developed to encourage young people to reflect on and discuss mental health issues in order to:

- Improve their mental health literacy
- Enhance their ability to recognise signs of mental health difficulties in themselves and others
- Improve their knowledge on how to look after their mental health
- Promote help-seeking behaviours
- Encourage self-compassion and empathy for others

For each animation, young people are invited to reflect on and/or discuss a series of questions. Some questions refer to the character in the animation. Externalising the issues in this way helps ensure the safety and confidentiality of young people as they explore the issues. Other questions explore how young people might support a friend who is struggling. This is to encourage self-compassion, empathy for others and help-seeking behaviours. There are also some general questions about local supports and activities in the local area. Each exercise sheet provides a link to two known websites that provide mental health and related information for young people and can signpost them to support.

WHAT IS CONTAINED IN THIS RESOURCE

This resource contains the full series of questions for each animation. For each, we:

- Highlight relevant Irish research findings related to the animation theme
- Note the learning objectives relating to each question on the exercise sheets for young people
- Provide some additional information notes to support you in facilitating a discussion about the issues and themes

The animations give voice to the lived experience of young people, offering young people an authentic insight into common issues affecting young people and a variety of ways to both mind their mental health and access support. As such, just watching the videos can benefit young people. Any discussion that follows has the potential to enhance young people's awareness of their mental health and encourage them seek help if they need it. As we highlight in our 'Tips on Running Mental Health sessions with Young People' video, we understand that you are not facilitating these sessions as a mental health expert. We are also aware of the increasing expectation on educators to explore these issues with young people. In this context, the aim of this resource is

to provide you with evidence-based information, which we hope will be useful for facilitating group discussions about the issues raised in the animations.

The most important thing is to try to encourage young people to think about their own mental health and that of the people around them. The information we provide below addresses key aspects of the exercise sheets we have provided for young people that we hope will give you enough background information to facilitate discussions with young people. It may also assist you in responding to any queries and debunking any myths that may be expressed by young people in your group.

IDEAS FOR HOW TO USE THE ANIMATIONS

We do not offer a prescriptive approach to facilitating sessions as we believe it is important to adapt the material to suit your own comfort level in exploring these issues, your own engagement style and the context within which you are using the material.

However, we offer the following broad suggestions about how you might use the animations in an educational context

1. Integrate the animations into any mental health presentations, playing selected videos during a presentation to illustrate a theme, idea or issue.
2. Run group-based sessions in the classroom (or via online class sessions that enable group breakout sessions). Break the full group into small groups. Provide each group with the reflective exercise sheet related to the animation you wish to explore. Play the animation (you can pause it at points if you wish to explore the themes sequentially). Invite small groups to discuss the questions on the exercise sheet, one question at a time. Elicit feedback from each group and then reflect on the responses. Continue with each question in this way.
3. If full group sessions are not possible (e.g. during Covid-19 lockdowns), ask each young person in your group to watch one of the animations. Share the exercise sheets online and ask each young person to go through the questions in his/her/their own time. Invite responses during an online group sessions and explore as a group at that time.
4. Invite young people in your group to choose an animation of their choice. Give them time to research the theme in the animation and to either write a short essay about that theme or to put together a presentation on it. This can also be done as a group project.

IMPORTANT NOTE: We encourage you to be particularly mindful of young people in the group who are at risk of or who you know to be experiencing bullying, exclusion and isolation. Ensure that any such young person is not placed in a group with young people who are alleged, suspected or known to have bullied or excluded them.

BEFORE YOU USE THE ANIMATIONS

Please watch our short 'Tips for Running Mental Health Sessions with Young People' video on the 'Tips and Supporting Material' page of our website. For more information about how the animations were developed and their authentic representation of the lived experiences of Irish youth, we encourage you to read our 'About the Animations' document on the 'Youth Mental Health Animation Series' page of our website.

www.mentalhealtheducate.ie

Ben's Story (Anxiety)



EDUCATOR/FACILITATOR NOTES

RELEVANT IRISH RESEARCH FINDINGS

- The My World 2 survey found that 49% of adolescents reported anxiety. Females reported higher rates than males.
- The Mental Health of Young People in Ireland report found that over 1 in 4 people reported had experienced clinically significant anxiety by the age of 24.

QUESTION

What mental health issue do you think Ben is struggling with?

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Increase mental health literacy

DISCUSSION POINTS

Mental health issue is **anxiety**

Anxiety is common in young people - 1 in 5 second level students in Ireland report high levels of anxiety (My World survey 2019)

Anxiety worsened at point of **transition** to secondary school – consistent with research that points of transition increase vulnerability to mental health difficulties

QUESTION

In what ways was Ben affected by how he was feeling? Think about this under the headings: emotions, thoughts, actions and physical signs in his body.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Increase mental health literacy

Recognise signs of mental health difficulties

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Mental health difficulties affect more than our emotions

Signs of anxiety:

Emotions – fear, worry

Thoughts – negative, future-focused (i.e. anticipating things that person believes will or might happen)

Behaviour – typically avoidance of situations or places that individuals believes will result in anxiety and associated thoughts, feelings & physical sensations

Physiological – including increased heart rate, sweating, shortness of breath, tension, headaches, gastric difficulties (increased arousal & expectancy resulting in autonomic and neuroendocrine activation)

QUESTION

Ben called himself an idiot. What do you think made it hard for Ben to accept he was struggling and to reach out for help?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Promote recognition of mental health difficulties

Promote help-seeking behaviours

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Research evidence suggests low levels of help-seeking among young people. Issues affecting help-seeking include:

Lack of mental health literacy – not recognising what was happening or significance of difficulties

Minimising of difficulties by young people

Stigma – self-stigma and perceived labelling and judgment by others

Fear – many young people worry that they won't be taken seriously and will be told they are overreacting if they share their concerns

Lack of access or knowledge – young people often don't know who or where to turn to for help and support or may not have access to a trusted adult or support services

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QUESTION

Ben's friends advised him to get support. What advice would you have given Ben if he was your friend?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Promote help-seeking behaviours

Promote self-acceptance and empathy for others

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Encourage ideas such as talking to trusted adult, looking up information online (but highlight to only use trusted websites), attending a youth mental health service (such as Jigsaw, if available), talking to a parent/guardian about getting support.

Challenge ideas that do not demonstrate empathy, in particular feedback that simplifies Ben's difficulties or suggests that there is a simple way to resolve his anxiety

For example, an idea like, 'I'd tell him to think more positively' lacks empathy and simplifies the issue. While it is true that more balanced (and less negative or skewed) thinking can positively influence mental health and anxiety, changing thinking styles and patterns is difficult and often requires support and time to do.

Discussion of these issues can help to reduce self-stigma, enhance mental health literacy, promote help-seeking and encourage empathy.

QUESTION

At the end of the video, Ben said he still struggles with anxiety some of the time. Why do you think that is?

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Promote mental health literacy

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Mental health is part of being human and we all need to keep doing what we can to care for and mind our mental health

Many people who experience anxiety continue to struggle with it to some degree, even after getting help or support (and all of us experience anxiety at some times of our lives).

Anxiety is something that can be managed. There are lots of techniques and things that we can learn to help us to manage it very well.

QUESTION

What kinds of things do you think might help someone to manage times when they feel anxious?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Enhance knowledge about mental health self-care

Promote help- and support-seeking

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Strategies can be broken down into: General and Specific.

General – things we can all do to promote good mental health and a sense of wellbeing and to care for ourselves when we're struggling. For example:

The five-a-day for mental health and wellbeing: Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning, Give (see our Mental Health Educate Introductory videos for more details)

Not judging ourselves. Accept that we're struggling without criticising or blaming ourselves. Show empathy to ourselves as we would to others.

Get information – check out information on SpunOut.ie or jigsaw.ie

Seek help or support – talk to a trusted adult or get professional help from a counsellor, therapist, youth mental health service or a specialist mental health service. Some supports can provide intervention online as well as in person.

Learn anxiety management techniques – there are many things that can help with anxiety. Learning calming breathing techniques, challenging negative thoughts that come with anxiety, distraction techniques, findings ways not to avoid situations that evoke anxiety. Often, people need help or support to learn, practice and master these techniques

END OF SESSION

SIGNPOST YOUNG PEOPLE TO FURTHER INFORMATION & SUPPORT. ENCOURAGE SELF-CARE.

Beth's Story (Feeling Different)



EDUCATOR/FACILITATOR NOTES

RELEVANT IRISH RESEARCH FINDINGS

- The My World 2 survey found that most adolescents reported feeling some level of connectedness to their schools and peers. Females were more likely to report feeling connected to their schools than males. Levels of school connectedness fell after 1st year of secondary school.

QUESTION

Beth used to think there was something wrong with her and felt different to other people. Do you think Beth's experience is unusual or do you think many people feel like that?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Promote self-acceptance and empathy

Normalise developmental and existential issues that arise during adolescence

Identify the reality of prejudice, stigma, bullying and discrimination for some young people

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Many young people go through periods where they feel different to their peers

Youth is a key time for identity exploration and most young people have times when they struggle to make sense of themselves and their identity

Society places pressure on young people to conform and young people with a minority identity (gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc.) can both feel and be isolated and excluded. This can also extend to young people who have specific challenges, such as autism spectrum disorders, specific language or learning difficulties, etc.

Key message in this discussion is highlighting that, while it is normal to feel different during this phase of the lifespan (whatever that perceived or actual difference is), some people can be targeted, excluded, bullied or isolated because of perceived differences and prejudices, which can affect their mental health and wellbeing.

QUESTION

When you watched the first part of the video, what did you notice about Beth's emotions and what was happening around her?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Increase mental health literacy

Promote self-acceptance and empathy for others

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Dominant emotion expressed by Beth was sadness – evident in her facial expression and her body language

Video conveys the reality for Beth of her own feeling of isolation from her peers. **Feelings of isolation and disconnection can happen for young people even when they are not being actively excluded or bullied.**

Key messages to highlight include:

- What we perceive someone's experience to be may not be accurate and they might experience it very differently within themselves
- **Never assume you know what's going on for someone** or how 'good' or 'bad' their life is. Many young people who are struggling work hard to hide their suffering behind an illusion of happiness and a fulfilling life
- We can only know how someone actually feels if they share that with us.

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QUESTION

Why do you think joining the music group had such a positive effect on Beth?

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Enhance understanding of ways to promote better mental health

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Engaging in hobbies and interests that we enjoy...

- Promote a sense of **wellbeing**
- Can offer **respite and distraction** from challenges in our lives
- Keep our **minds active** and keep us learning
- Offer us **opportunities to meet with like-minded others**
- Provide **opportunities for mastery or growth**

The key issue to highlight here is the importance of finding activities, places and people that you connect with and where you feel a sense of belonging (**a sense of belonging** being recognised as central to good mental health)

A secondary point to highlight is the value of being active in some way (as per the five-a-day for mental health and wellbeing). Being active can sometimes be misinterpreted as 'doing exercise' but that is not what is intended here. Rather, it is about getting out, getting involved and not being idle.

NOTE: An important point to be aware of and to note is that, when someone is experiencing more significant mental health difficulties, it can be very hard for them to engage in activities that they may once have really enjoyed. This is one of the paradoxes in relation to mental health – things that we once enjoyed that protect and support our mental health can become the very things that we find harder to do the more we struggle with our mental health. **Thus, it is not helpful to suggest to someone with significant difficulties that they just need to get back to their hobbies and interests. If it was that easy for them to do that, they would be.**

QUESTION

What kinds of things are around your area that young people can get involved in where they can meet people who share their interests? List as many things as you can (hobbies, sport, art, etc.)?

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Improve knowledge of activities in local area across all areas of interest

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Encourage group to consider as many kinds of activities as possible:

- Sports clubs
- Art
- Drama
- Music – lessons, clubs, choirs, bands, orchestras
- Youth clubs
- Film clubs
- Book clubs
- Dance groups or classes
- Gaming (e.g. local groups that play fantasy board games, etc.)
- Volunteer work
- Civil society activities – e.g. Red Cross, Order of Malta, climate action, etc.

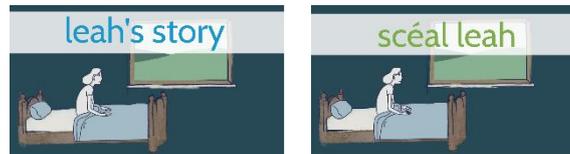
Consider group task of researching other activities in the local area and then compile a complete list of activities, costs and details as a resource for the group

This kind of discussion and exploration highlights the breadth of activities that people are interested in (which can be very helpful and validating for young people who have minority interests) and provides an important local activity resource for young people in the group.

END OF SESSION

SIGNPOST YOUNG PEOPLE TO FURTHER INFORMATION & SUPPORT. ENCOURAGE SELF-CARE.

Leah's Story (Depression)



EDUCATOR/FACILITATOR NOTES

RELEVANT IRISH RESEARCH FINDINGS

- The My World 2 survey found that 40% of adolescents reported depression. Females reported higher rates than males. Rates of depression increased throughout the adolescent years.
- The Mental Health of Young People in Ireland report found that over 1 in 4 people reported had experienced clinically significant depression by the age of 24.

QUESTION

Leah talked about her experience of feeling depressed. How did that affect her emotions, her thoughts and her life?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Increase mental health literacy

Recognise signs of mental health difficulties

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Mental health difficulties manifest themselves in many ways.

Signs and impact of depression include:

- **Emotions** – sadness, anger and numbing of emotions
- Thinking – negative, pessimistic, skewed thinking patterns. These include skewed and distorted thoughts about yourself, your relationships, aspects of your life and about life itself
- **Behaviour** – changes in what is typical for someone. This can include becoming withdrawn, having angry outbursts, being very tearful, withdrawing from friends and hobbies, refusing to go to school, sleeping too much or too little (early morning waking is often a feature of depression), changes in appetite (eating too much or struggling to eat)
- **Cognition and concentration** – struggling to focus or concentrate
- **Functioning** – declining grades in school, decreasing interest in self-care, lack of motivation to engage with others

Identifying that changes and signs can occur in all of these areas is important for young people as indicators for themselves or for friends who may be struggling with low mood and/or depression

Not all of the indicators are what you might expect or were part of Leah's experience (for example, many people are not aware that anger is an emotion that is quite commonly associated with depression)

QUESTION

What would you do if you were worried about a friend who you thought was depressed?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Promote help- and support-seeking

Promote self-acceptance and empathy for others

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Highlight the message that supporting someone with depression can be difficult and it isn't easy to know what to do.

Things young people can try:

- **Talk to their friend** – ask them how they are
- Express their concerns and **let them know you're there for them** if and when they want to talk
- **Listen without judgment** and avoid giving advice immediately
- **Ask them** how they can best support them
- Let them know of **any supports they're aware of**
- **Encourage them to get support** if they are worried about them

If very concerned, speak to an adult they trust about their concerns.

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QUESTION

Why do you think Leah didn't want to tell anyone how she was feeling?

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Promote help- and support-seeking

Promote self-acceptance and empathy for others

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Research evidence suggests low levels of help-seeking among young people. Issues affecting help-seeking include:

Lack of mental health literacy – not recognising what was happening or significance of difficulties

Minimising – of difficulties by young people

Stigma – self-stigma, shame and perceived labelling and judgment by others

Fear – many young people worry that they won't be taken seriously and will be told they are overreacting if they share their concerns

Lack of access – young people may not have access to a trusted adult or support services

Lack of knowledge – young people often don't know who or where to turn to for help and support

Low mood, associated lack of energy and disconnection may also affect whether or not someone feels able to reach out for help

QUESTION

Leah was seen by her local mental health service. What other services do you know of that someone could use if they needed mental health support?

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Improve knowledge of mental health supports and how to access them

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Encourage group to consider as many kinds of supports as possible. You might suggest they consider them under the headings of:

- **Information** – this may encourage young people to think of websites such as SpunOut.ie and jigsaw.ie where they can access reliable, youth-friendly and youth-focused information about mental health issues and supports
- **Helplines** – a number of services provide helplines. For example, Pieta House (for people who are feeling suicidal or who have been affected by suicide). If young people have access to a computer, they can look up mental health services and see if they have a helpline.
- **Text lines** – some services are now offering young people the option to text for support. In 2020, a new national text support line was launched by the HSE, known as TEXT50808.
- **Counselling services** – are young people aware of any local counselling services? Do they know if they offer counselling to young people? Some communities have free counselling services available.
- **Dedicated youth mental supports** – services like Jigsaw do provide free youth mental health support services to young people aged 12-25 in selected locations around Ireland. Do young people know if there is a Jigsaw service in their area?
- **GP services** – as highlighted in Leah's story, the GP is a key support person for young people who are struggling with their mental health
- **Specialist mental health services** – this is to ensure that young people know that every locality has a specialist mental health team available as described by Leah

Check out the 'Mental Health Supports' page of the Mental Health Educate website for some more information on accessing support

You may want to consider using our resources on '**Exploring Local Mental Health Services**' to engage young people in a project to find out more information about what's available in their local area.

END OF SESSION

SIGNPOST YOUNG PEOPLE TO FURTHER INFORMATION & SUPPORT. ENCOURAGE SELF-CARE.

Dean's Story (Being Bullied)



EDUCATOR/FACILITATOR NOTES

RELEVANT IRISH & INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH FINDINGS

- The My World 2 survey found that 39% of adolescents reported that they had been bullied. Of those who reported being bullied, the most common place where they had experienced bullying was at school (73%).
- Multiple and repeated studies have demonstrated a significant association between being bullied and mental health difficulties, including anxiety, depression, suicidality and substance misuse.

QUESTION

What effect did being bullied have on Dean?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Increase mental health literacy

Promote self-acceptance and empathy for others

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Encourage group to think about this under the following headings:

- **Emotional impact** – anxiety, sadness, anger and resentment. Note how Dean talks about the change in his emotional state that occurred after he was bullied and excluded (emergence of anxiety)
- **Effects on self-worth** and self-esteem – no self-worth
- Effects on Dean's **relationships with his peers** – being excluded, isolated, rejected, judged
- Effects on **Dean's experience being in school** – anxious going into school, school no longer a safe place
- Dean's **sense of belonging** – no sense of belonging

Note the interrelationship between these issues for Dean. How they all effected each other. The catalyst was his experience of being bullied.

Highlight fact that the impact Dean describes is consistent with research that being bullied and excluded are associated with a range of mental health difficulties and the erosion of people's sense of self-worth

QUESTION

Can you think of any other ways being bullied might affect someone? (think about things like their emotions, their thoughts, their beliefs about themselves, their schoolwork, their relationships and their hobbies and interests)?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Increase mental health literacy

Promote self-acceptance and empathy for others

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Encourage group to consider any other possible impacts or effects Deans' experiences may have had.

- **Emotional** – low mood, depression, guilt, hopelessness, fear
- **Thoughts** – negative interpretations of things that happen, not trusting people, anticipating bad things all of the time, assuming they are responsible or to blame for things (even when they're not)
- **Beliefs** about themselves and the world around them – experiences of bullying, exclusion, rejection and discrimination and the negative emotions and thoughts that accompany the experience can become internalised and negatively affect someone's core sense of self, their internally held beliefs about their value and worth.
- **Schoolwork** – problems concentrating, not achieving well
- **Relationships** – difficulties trusting others and/or low self-worth can make it very hard for people to feel safe trying to connect with others
- **Hobbies** and interests – can be negatively affected if negative thoughts and beliefs generalise to all settings (nowhere feels safe to be yourself)

Highlight potential lasting impact of bullying into individuals' adult years, particularly if it has negatively impacted their core beliefs about themselves

QUESTION

Why do you think Dean said that having someone to talk to about what was happening to him made such a difference to him?

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Promote help- and support-seeking

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Here, the key message is about the protective role of having a trusted adult you can turn to for support.

The emphasis on a trusted adult relates to research findings on the **protective role of trusted adults in the lives of young people** and on some evidence demonstrating that. Although it is really important for young people to have friends they trust who they can talk to about what's going on for them, friends may not always be able to provide the kind of support that a young person needs when dealing with more significant challenges in their life

Positive aspects of talking to someone

- **Not feeling so alone**
- **Talking to someone** and sharing what's going on is **one of the most important coping mechanisms** for people
 - The process of sharing your story aloud with someone who is listening has been shown to be helpful and therapeutic
 - The experience of **feeling heard and understood without being judged has been shown to be helpful and therapeutic**
- Talking with someone once may lead to **possibility of ongoing connection and support**
- Person may be able to **signpost to other supports**
- In situations that involve bullying and other forms of victimisation, a **trusted adult may be able to take action to address the issue**

Important to highlight that not talking to someone you trust can increase risk of emotional and mental health difficulties

QUESTION

Dean talked about how volunteering really helped him. He talked about meeting people he could connect with, who accepted him for who he was. Are there other things you can think of that Dean could have done to help with what he was going through? Write down as many ideas as you can think of.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Promote help- and support-seeking

Improve understanding of how to protect and care for one's own mental health

Improve knowledge of mental health supports and how to access them

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Here, encourage young people to think as creatively as possible about the kinds of things that might be helpful for someone who is being bullied or victimised in some way.

The key messages here in whatever young people suggest is to consider:

- **Talking to a trusted adult** – if not a teacher as was the case for Dean, what other adult figures might a young person talk to?
- In relation to bullying within an educational setting, it is important to **highlight any bullying policy within your own organisation and/or identify a person or people available to young people to speak to within your school/organisation**. It is also important to highlight the process that would happen if a young person confided to someone in the school/organisation that they were experiencing bullying.
- **Seeking professional support** – if the bullying/victimisation is affecting a young person's physical or mental health, their capacity to function or they are feeling hopeless or despairing, professional support may be needed. Encourage young people in the group to think about the supports that may be available locally or nationally (text/phone/online supports)
- **Connecting with like-minded others** – Dean chose to volunteer but it is important to encourage young people to think about the value of nurturing their own hobbies and interested in order to increase the likelihood of meeting like-minded others.

END OF SESSION

SIGNPOST YOUNG PEOPLE TO FURTHER INFORMATION & SUPPORT. ENCOURAGE SELF-CARE.

Megan's Story (Loneliness)



EDUCATOR/FACILITATOR NOTES

RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH FINDINGS

- Loneliness has not been comprehensively studied among Irish youth. International research suggests that youth is a key period of risk for loneliness and social disconnection, with females being more vulnerable than males. A longitudinal study published in 2015 found that 22% young people in their sample reported persistent loneliness between the ages of 7 and 17.
- Loneliness is associated with a range of emotional and mental health difficulties, including anxiety and depression.

QUESTION

Megan talked about her feelings of loneliness and feeling disconnected from other people. In what ways do you think loneliness and mental health difficulties are connected?

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Increase mental health literacy

Promote self-acceptance and

DISCUSSION POINTS

There are three key points to highlight in this discussion

- **Loneliness is a common experience among young people.** In fact, feelings of loneliness often surface during the adolescent years along with existential concerns about the meaning of life. Thus, loneliness is part of the human condition and, though uncomfortable, is not unusual in young people
- Loneliness is, however, **associated with higher levels of emotional and mental health difficulties.** So, loneliness is something to be mindful of, particularly if someone experiences it over an extended period of time
- Loneliness **can occur in the context of being isolated and alone** (for example in young people who are excluded, marginalised and bullied). It **can also occur even when people have meaningful relationships in their lives.** Therefore, it is important not to assume someone doesn't feel lonely because they have family and friends around them.

There is a **bi-directional relationship between loneliness and mental health difficulties**, so that:

- People who feel lonely are at higher risk of mental health difficulties
- People with mental health difficulties are at higher risk of social isolation and loneliness

Reinforce the message the developing meaningful connections with others who share your interests is important in reducing a sense of loneliness. Being able to fully be yourself with another person and feeling able to share your thoughts and feelings with them can reduce a sense of loneliness and disconnection

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QUESTION

Megan also talked about keeping everything bottled up and then bursting into tears one day. What do you think stops young people reaching out for support when they need it?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Promote help-seeking behaviours

Promote self-acceptance and empathy for others

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

This question is about encouraging young people to talk about whatever issues they think stop them and others reaching out for support. Issues raised can be explored, particularly in relation to ways to overcome or address any obstacles for which solutions can be identified.

Of note, research has shown that issues that impede help-seeking include:

- **Poor mental health literacy** (not knowing or recognising signs of mental health difficulties)
- **Lack of knowledge about mental health services and supports** (where they are, how to access them and what happens in them)
- **Practical barriers to support** – absence of informal supports, lack of support services in the area, services only open during school hours when young people can't get to them, complicated referral processes, waiting lists and financial barriers
- **Stigma** – self-stigma and fear of stigma and judgement from others
- **Confidentiality fears** – fears of being seen in a service by their peers, wanting to attend without parents knowing but many services require parental/guardian permission to attend if under 18 years, fears information will be shared with parents/guardians/schools/teachers
- **Negative help-seeking experiences** – young people who have reached out for support in the past who have had negative experiences of that support (ranging from talking to an adult they trust to attending formal services) are less likely to reach out for support again

You may consider a follow-up fact-finding exercise if any issues arise concerning lack of knowledge about support services, how to access them and what happens in them, using our 'Exploring Local Mental Health Services' session plan.

END OF SESSION

SIGNPOST YOUNG PEOPLE TO FURTHER INFORMATION & SUPPORT. ENCOURAGE SELF-CARE.

Ava's Story (Body Image)



EDUCATOR/FACILITATOR NOTES

RELEVANT IRISH RESEARCH FINDINGS

- The My World 2 survey found that 26% of adolescents reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their body. Females were more likely to be dissatisfied than males.
- The survey also found that those with high levels of body dissatisfaction had higher levels of both depression and anxiety than their peers.
- Adolescents who spent more time online reported lower levels of body esteem

QUESTION

Ava talks about comparing her body and herself to other people. She says that she always thought that other people were prettier than her and had better bodies than her. What kinds of things do you think put pressure on young people to look a particular way?

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Promote self-acceptance and empathy for others

Enhance awareness of impact of external factors on internalised sense of self

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

As noted above, over 1 in 4 Irish adolescents experience negative body image. Levels of negative body image increase as adolescents get older

While there are many issues that affect a person's body image, the **focus of this discussion is specifically on externally-derived messages that result in young people developing problematic perceptions about idealised body image types**. For this discussion, we recommend that you maintain this focus and do not deviate into other, more complex and personally resonant issues that may affect an individual's body esteem.

As was found in the My World 2 survey, a relationship between engagement with social media and online platforms and body image/esteem has been established. Relevant research in this area has found:

- Social media has been found to encourage **comparison between users**, which heighten people's feelings about their bodies,
- Young people have been found to **modify their appearance online to portray a perceived ideal image**
- Even when aware of the negative impact of social media on body image, young people continue **to seek external validation of their body** (and lives) through social media

When discussing issues about the potential negative impact of social media/online content, it is important to remember and highlight that not all online time is equal. There are positive ways to do so, such as using the internet and social media to engage positively with friends. The My World 2 survey also found that gaming was a positive means of managing stress for young people. However, spending time focusing on the idealised, inaccurate and unrealistic images of the lives and bodies of others (which have often been modified) and comparing yourself and your body to these is not constructive.

QUESTION

What effect could having a negative body image have on someone?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Increase mental health literacy

Promote self-acceptance and empathy for others

Promote self-care

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

Here, the discussion can focus on the fact that having a negative body image can affect someone's mental health (and vice-versa).

The possible effects can include:

- **Low self-esteem**
- **Depression**
- **Anxiety**
- **Avoidance** – people may stop doing the things they enjoy, like going out with friends, playing sport, etc.
- **Obsessing and worrying about what you wear**, often trying to 'hide' your body or make it look a particular way.
- **Not focusing on other things**, particularly those that are important to you
- Taking over your thoughts and makes it **hard to concentrate on other things**
- **Negative thoughts get internalised and generalised**, so that you think negatively about all aspects of who you are
- What and **how you eat** (restricting food, developing eating disorders)
- How often and at what intensity you exercise (**over-exercising** or focusing on muscle mass, etc)

Key message is that negative body image/esteem, comparing yourself and your body to others and believing how you look is more important than who you are and how you are in the world is associated with a range of negative outcomes, that affect your mental health, your relationships, your sense of self and your ability to be free to enjoy your life

QUESTION

Ava said that not focusing on other people and comparing herself to them had helped her to accept herself and her body. What other things can people do to help them feel more positive about their body?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Increase mental health literacy

Promote self-acceptance and empathy for others

Promote self-care

SUPPORTING INFORMATION & DISCUSSION POINTS

It is useful to end the session focusing on positive actions young people can take in relation to the issue. In relation to body image/esteem, there are many things young people can do:

- Anything you can do to **enhance your own self-esteem and mental health** can have a knock-on positive effect on your body image
- **Reflect on and modify your social media engagement** – use it to explore your hobbies and interests and to connect with like-minded others and not to compare yourself to idealised, edited and unrealistic images on popular media or those of other young people
- **Try not to dismiss compliments** that people give you – the more you practice accepting positive feedback about yourself, the more that feedback will seep into your sense of self
- **Focus on being healthy** rather than on numbers (weight on scales, clothing sizes or muscle mass percentages)
- **Catch yourself when you have an automatic negative thought about your body and practice responding to it with a positive thought about yourself or your body.** This is about balancing the automatic thoughts we all have about ourselves in a more positive direction
- Remind yourself that much of **what you see in the media and on social media is not real**

END OF SESSION

SIGNPOST YOUNG PEOPLE TO FURTHER INFORMATION & SUPPORT. ENCOURAGE SELF-CARE.