

Toolbox Talk for students

Understanding Your Mental
Health



Time: 15 minutes

Objective: To help learners understand that everyone has mental health, recognise when something may be changing and feel more confident speaking to someone before difficulties become overwhelming.

Have you ever had one of those days when everything feels harder than it normally would? Maybe you slept badly, had an argument at home or started worrying about something that hasn't even happened. Suddenly, concentrating becomes difficult, small problems feel much bigger and you don't have much patience with others. You might still attend lessons, complete practical work and laugh with your mates while knowing that something doesn't feel quite right. Mental health isn't only something we talk about when somebody is seriously struggling. We all have mental health and it can change depending on what is happening in our lives.

Why It Matters

Students, apprentices and adult learners can carry a lot of pressure. There may be coursework, exams, practical assessments, placements or worries about finding an apprenticeship or job. Outside education, there can be money worries, relationships, family responsibilities, social media and uncertainty about the future. When several pressures build up, they can affect concentration, motivation, patience and confidence. You might find it harder to remember instructions, complete assignments or arrive on time. You could begin thinking you aren't capable, even when you are. Recognising these changes early gives you an opportunity to do something before they begin affecting more areas of your life.

What It Can Look Like

There is no single way somebody looks when they are having a difficult time. One person might become quieter and stop joining in, while another might seem more irritable, defensive or angry. Somebody could lose interest in work they normally enjoy, miss deadlines, arrive late more often or seem distracted during practical tasks.



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You may notice changes in yourself too. Perhaps you are finding it difficult to switch off, your sleep has changed or small jobs are beginning to feel overwhelming. You might avoid messages, put off work because you don't know where to begin or constantly compare yourself with other people. Some people withdraw, while others keep themselves busy because they don't want time alone with their thoughts. None of these things automatically means somebody has a mental health condition. Everyone has difficult days, becomes stressed or loses motivation sometimes. What matters is noticing a change from what is normal for that person, particularly when it continues, becomes harder to manage or starts affecting everyday life.

What Can Help

A useful first step is to pause and be honest about what you have noticed. You don't need to understand exactly why you feel different before doing something about it. Ask yourself what has changed, how long it has been happening and whether it is affecting your sleep, relationships, attendance, concentration or enjoyment of life.

Simple actions can sometimes reduce the immediate pressure. Breaking a large piece of work into smaller tasks can make it feel more manageable. Getting outside, moving your body, eating regularly, improving your sleep routine or spending some time away from your phone can also give your mind some breathing space. These actions won't solve every problem but they can make it easier to deal with what is in front of you.



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Speaking to somebody can also help. You don't need to wait until you are in crisis or explain everything at once. You could say, "I haven't felt like myself lately," or, "I'm finding things difficult and could do with talking to someone." That person might be a friend, family member, tutor, lecturer, safeguarding lead or apprenticeship adviser. You could also speak to your GP, a counsellor or another support service.

If you notice a change in somebody else, check in privately rather than putting them on the spot. You could say, "You seem a bit quieter than usual. How are things?" Listen without interrupting or immediately trying to solve everything. You are not expected to become their counsellor. Take them seriously and encourage them to speak to someone who can provide appropriate support. If you believe somebody is in immediate danger, involve a trusted member of staff or seek urgent help.

Preparing for Life in Construction

Construction can provide a brilliant career, practical skills, good friendships and opportunities to progress. Starting out can still feel unfamiliar. You may be learning from experienced tradespeople, receiving instructions from different people and worrying about making mistakes or asking an obvious question. Being able to notice when pressure is affecting you is a useful working-life skill. Feeling distracted, exhausted or overwhelmed can affect your concentration and safety as well as your wellbeing. Speaking early, asking questions and telling somebody when you need support are responsible habits to take into any workshop, placement, apprenticeship or construction site.



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Discussion Questions

- What pressures might students and apprentices be carrying that other people cannot immediately see?
- What changes could suggest that somebody may be having a difficult time?
- What might make it easier for a student or apprentice to tell somebody they are having a difficult time?

Takeaway Message

Everyone has mental health and it can change as life changes. Having a difficult period doesn't mean somebody is weak or incapable and noticing a change doesn't mean we need to diagnose it. It gives us an opportunity to respond early. Pay attention when you or somebody around you seems different, take continuing changes seriously and remember that you are allowed to ask for support before things reach breaking point.

Action

After this talk, find out where you could go for support within your college, university, apprenticeship provider or training organisation. Save one name, number or contact in your phone so that if you or somebody else ever needs support, you already know where to begin.



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