



Exploring Mental
Health and Well-being
Seven sessions for church youth groups

**The
Children's
Society**

Contents

Introduction to this resource	3
Introduction to The Good Childhood Report 2020: Key findings	5
Leaders' Guide: Talking with young people about mental health and well-being <i>Amy Sixsmith</i>	7
Session 1: Identity: Who am I? <i>Pete Maidment</i>	14
Session 2: Being well: Physical and mental health <i>Amy Sixsmith</i>	22
Session 3: The importance of good relationships <i>Susie Mapledoram</i>	29
Session 4: Being there for my friends: how to help <i>Pete Maidment</i>	34
Session 5: Depression and anxiety <i>Amy Sixsmith</i>	42
Session 6: Fears and the future <i>Susie Mapledoram</i>	48
Session 7: Feeding back to the church <i>Amy Sixsmith</i>	52
Further resources	55
Appendix: Mental health conditions	57

Introduction **to this resource**

Who is this resource for?

This resource has been designed for church-based youth groups aged 11 to 16.

The themes

The session themes are drawn from what children and young people have told us matters to them. Each year, The Children's Society talks to thousands of children and young people about their well-being and issues that concern them. This research is analysed and published each year in our Good Childhood Report. The sessions in this resource are based on issues highlighted in the Good Childhood Reports for 2019 and 2020. (You can find these on The Children's Society's website, childrenssociety.org.uk). There is a summary of findings from the 2020 report on p.5.

Talking about mental health and well-being with young people

We appreciate that talking about some of these issues with your young people may be challenging and open up difficult conversations. We have given lots of advice on handling these conversations and signposting on to other sources of help and advice in the Leaders' guide.

You are the expert on what your young people can handle, and we encourage you to pick and choose sessions and activities to suit the needs of your group.

We would only endorse this resource being used when there are at least two DBS certified adults present, and in line with your own organisation's safeguarding policies. More advice on safeguarding is given in the Leaders' guide.

The length of each session

Each session is designed to be between an hour and an hour and a half long, depending on which activities you choose, the size of your group and how talkative they are.

The shape of each session

Each session follows the same format:

Introduction: Introducing the theme of the session.

Have a giggle: An 'icebreaker' activity to get your group warmed up to the theme.

Think about it: A reflection on the session theme, which you may want to summarise and present to your group – the 'teaching bit'.

Talk about it: A discussion starter, including some Bible input and questions to get the group talking about the theme.

Going deeper: Some sessions include this optional activity, talking the discussion further.

Do something: An activity to explore the theme.

What's next?: Thinking about our 'takeaways' from the session – something to do after the session or think about at home.

Reflection activity: This is an option if you'd like to end your session with some quiet and reflection. (There is also a more active version for your more kinaesthetic learners and those who might find sitting still challenging).

Parents/carers' postcard: This is included at the end of each session to print out and send home to parents and carers of your young people to let them know what has been talked about in the session and further sources of help and advice. You can of course email this or distribute it electronically.

The authors

Pete Maidment is lay chaplain at Lord Wandsworth College, Hampshire. He was previously youth officer for the Diocese of Winchester holds an MA in Youth Ministry and Theological Education. He is the author of *Living your Confirmation* (SPCK) and a number of other titles.

Susie Mapledoram is Youth Officer for the Diocese of Manchester and an Honorary Lay Canon of Manchester Cathedral. She is the co-author of *Re-Connecting with Confirmation* (CHP) and a contributor to a number of other titles.

Amy Sixsmith is Mental Well-being Youth Worker for the Diocese of Manchester, working with secondary schools and other groups across the diocese to support and promote good mental health and well-being. She holds an MA in Children and Young People's Mental Health and Psychological Practice.

Thanks

We would like to thank the youth leaders and groups who trialled this material: Mike Rutt and the youth group of Emmanuel Church, Croydon; Nigel Spencer MBE DL and Ramsey/Dovercourt Crusaders.

Introduction to
The Good Childhood
Report 2020:
Key findings

What is the Good Childhood Report?

The Good Childhood Report is our state of the nation report on the well-being of children in the UK. It is based on information that thousands of children and young people gave us about their well-being and issues that concern them. The Good Childhood Report 2020 is our ninth annual version of this report.

In this year's report, we explore:

- The latest trends in children's well-being in the UK.
- International comparisons of well-being.
- The patterns in children's happiness with friends.

The Good Childhood Report 2020 marks the 15th anniversary of our well-being research programme. Read the full and summary reports here: childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/good-childhood-report-2020

Key findings

Trends in well-being

When comparing children's (aged 10 to 15) responses to the most recent Understanding Society survey (2017/18) with when the survey began (2009/10), this year we have found there has been:



A significant decrease in mean happiness scores for life as a whole and with friends.



A sustained dip in mean happiness with school (first reported last year).

Happiness with appearance has also declined.

There has been no significant change in children's mean happiness scores for family or school work.

International comparisons

In the last year, a number of large international studies have published data on children's well-being. In this year's Good Childhood Report, we explored data from the Programme for International Assessment (PISA), comparing the well-being of 15 year olds in the UK with children of the same age in 23 European countries.¹

We found that the UK had both the lowest proportion of children with high life satisfaction and the lowest proportion of children with a sense of purpose, as well as the second highest level of sadness among children. However the UK ranked higher for the proportion of children with high happiness, coming 9th out of 24.

Low life satisfaction was found to be linked to high levels of fear of failure and to changes in child poverty rates.

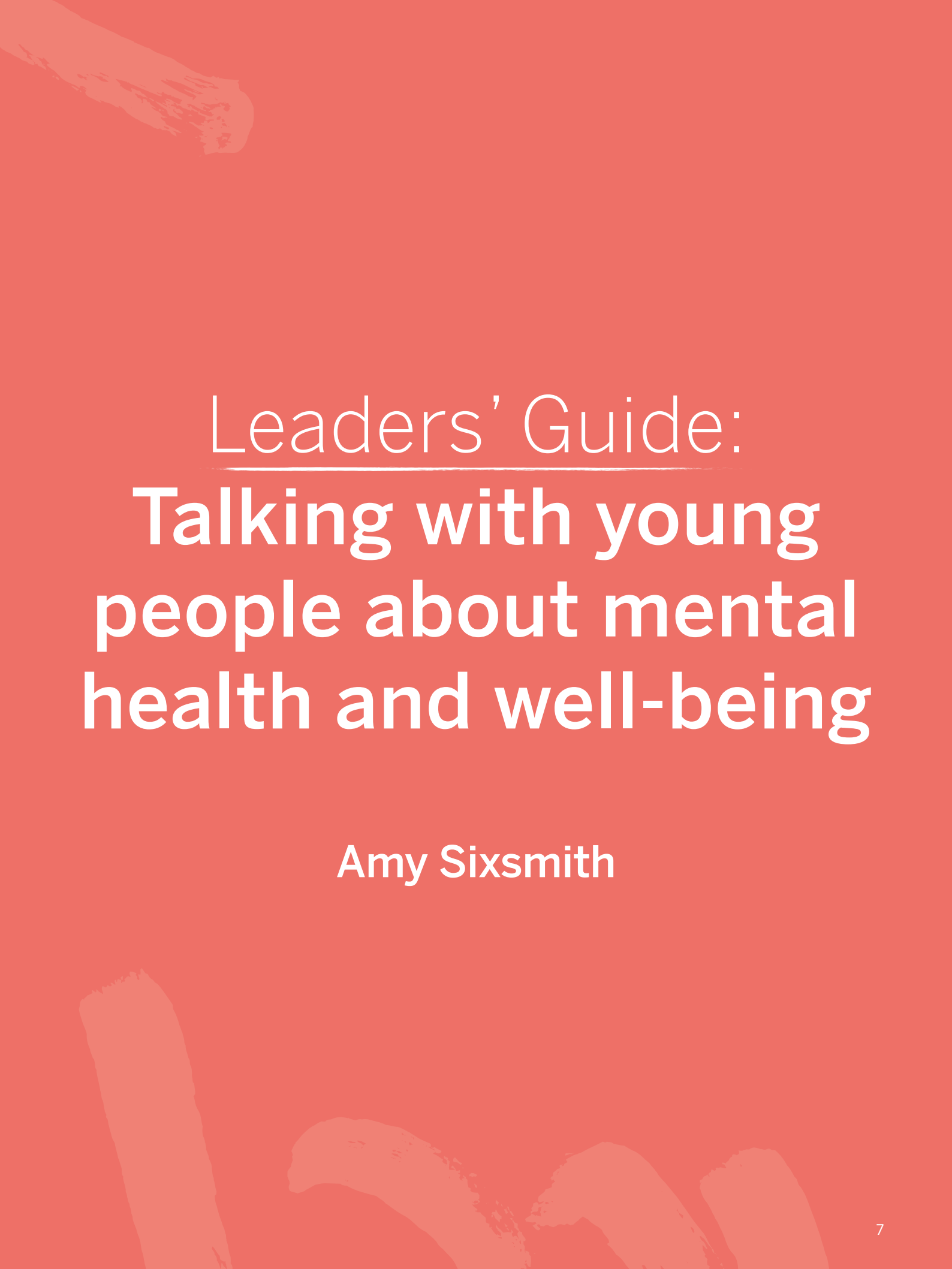
Happiness with friends

One of the themes emerging from previous Good Childhood Reports has been the decline in children's happiness with their friends, as detailed in the Understanding Society survey. Although mean happiness with friends is higher than for other areas of life, there has been a downward trend in recent years.

This year we explored this aspect of children's lives in more detail, finding that girls and older children are significantly less happy with their friends compared to 2009/10.

In a recent consultation of 150 young people we also discussed the qualities that young people felt were important for lasting friendships, including the importance of trust, honesty and support.

¹ The Programme for International Assessment (PISA) is mainly focused on children's academic achievement. But it increasingly also asks them about their subjective experiences of life as a whole.

The background is a solid red color with several white, brushstroke-like accents. One large stroke is in the top left corner, and several smaller ones are at the bottom.

Leaders' Guide:
Talking with young
people about mental
health and well-being

Amy Sixsmith

Looking after ourselves

Before we begin to talk about how we work towards supporting young people and their emotional well-being, it is important that we first check in with ourselves. **One of the most important parts of the work we do in talking with young people about their mental health and well-being is to ensure that we are also looking after ourselves at the same time. Here are some top tips for how we might do this:**

- Develop our own support network – who are the people we go to when we are feeling stressed and overwhelmed?
- Take some time for our own self-care, recognise what that means for ourselves and at points during the busy-ness of day to day life, factor time in to do this.
- Acknowledge and identify when our work supporting others has an impact on us, both emotionally and physically.
- Recognising when supporting a young person becomes bigger than just ourselves and we need to ask for advice or further support from other professionals.
- Knowing how and when to respond to a safeguarding concern.

How to safeguard young people when facilitating these sessions

Prior to each session, think about any issues the topics covered might cause for individual young people within the group, based on their own experiences. Where possible, meet with them prior to the session to discuss some of the content that will be discussed in that session, supporting them to feel well-informed and prepared. Provide the option to opt-out at points when they think this might be helpful for them. Also, outline the option to opt-out to all young people at the start of each session, give them permission to sit out or simply observe particular parts of the session if that makes them more comfortable. Consider providing a space for young people to take five minutes out of the session at any time.

Throughout and following the session, ensure that you are observant of the behaviours of individuals in the group. Make sure all young people are made aware that they can follow up

any of the topics with any of the leaders outside of the session if they would like to, or if they have any concerns. Have points throughout the session to check everyone is ok to carry on or build this into the break points. Furthermore, have a clear understanding of how to respond to and raise a safeguarding concern should one arise and needs to be passed on.

What is mental health?

Mental health refers to a combination of our thoughts, our feelings and our behaviours, and it is just one part of our overall health and well-being.

'A state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.'

(World Health Organisation: definition of mental health)

Sometimes we think that health is just about our bodies, but both our body and our mind are part of who we are and our overall sense of well-being. We are all aware of and talk openly about our physical health, but it is also important that we understand and acknowledge what keeps us mentally healthy and what aspects of our lives impact upon our mental health and emotional well-being.

Each and every one of us is vulnerable to mental ill-health if we experience enough emotional stress. Being mentally healthy can be about having the ability to overcome the difficulties and challenges we can face at times. It is useful to think about what makes up a healthy mind as how we think, how we feel and how we behave in response to these situations.

What is well-being?

Put simply, well-being is about how we are doing and how we feel about our lives. Our own personal well-being concerns how satisfied we are with our lives, our sense that what we do in life is worthwhile, and includes our day-to-day emotional experiences (like how happy we feel). As such, well-being is a big concept and is influenced by the broad dimensions of life

that are the essential ingredients for a good life. The Children's Society's own research suggests that for children and young people things like family, home, friends, school, choice, money and possessions, and health are just some of those important ingredients.

What influences mental health and well-being?

Life is made up of all sorts of good and bad times, and it is perfectly normal to experience a mixture of these, even within one day. **Some of these things might impact upon a person's well-being, mental health or a combination of the two. For young people, these might include situations such as:**

- Difficulties with friends
- School pressures
- Family issues
- Relationships
- Bullying
- Physical Illness
- Social media
- World issues

- Peer pressure
- Self-esteem
- Issues around sexuality and gender
- Issues around ethnic identity and racial prejudice
- Body image
- Traumatic events

Mental health conditions and low well-being

One in eight young people have been identified as having a mental health condition (NHS Digital, 2018). This might include conditions such as anxiety, depression, an eating disorder, bipolar disorder, and conduct disorders. It is also important to note that 75% of mental health conditions develop before the age of 18.

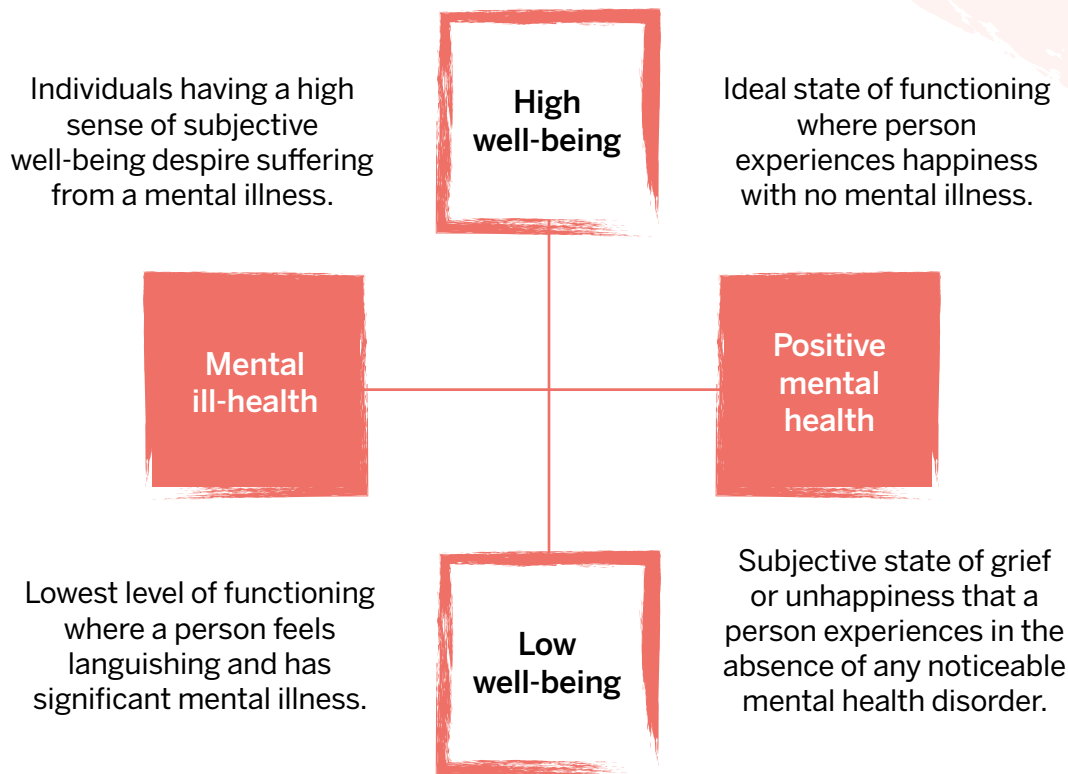
The Children's Society's research suggests that whilst the vast majority of children are happy with their lives, somewhere between 10 and 20% of children report being unhappy with their lives.

Youth leaders can be a vital part of the support network that's needed to enable all young people to look after their mental health and well-being.

75% of
mental health
conditions
develop before
the age of 18



The Mental Health and Well-being Continuum



Adapted from Tudor: *Mental Health Promotion: Paradigms and Practice* (2013)

The continuum above can be a really helpful way to gain a wider perspective of what we understand when we talk about mental health and well-being. Each and every one of us, and of course the young people we work with, sits somewhere on this continuum at any one point in time. This continuum brings both concepts of mental ill-health and well-being together and helps us recognise the importance of talking about well-being with all young people.

This continuum shows that although it might not be our role to intervene in a young person's existing mental health condition, we can support all young people to cope well and work towards positive well-being despite challenges. We can also see from this continuum that regardless of mental health diagnosis or not, all individuals are capable of working towards positive well-being.

Understanding emotional well-being

Mental health and well-being are things we all have and should aim to look after. Part of doing this is about our resilience to the difficulties and challenges that we face in life, and the ability to find the words to understand and communicate our emotions and feelings. This comes down to

our emotional intelligence, our ability to recognise our emotions and feelings, how to communicate these and how they impact on our behaviours – in sum, our emotional well-being. Understanding this can be a lifelong process but by having the skills to do so, we can start to know what to do to help ourselves manage our emotional well-being and look after ourselves when we recognise we are becoming overwhelmed.

However, it is important to recognise that alongside this, lots of children and young people will need extra support with their emotional well-being – whether that be through parents, carers, youth workers or professional services. Encouraging and helping young people to recognise this is a vitally important step in supporting a young person.

More often than not young people will go to their friends when they need support, so it is also important that we equip young people with the skills to know how best to support their friends' emotional well-being. Encouraging young people to know how to be a non-judgmental ear, whilst also knowing how and when to support their friend in getting further support, can have a really positive impact.

Talking with young people about their mental health and well-being

The way in which we talk about emotional health and well-being is really important. By talking more openly about these topics we help to break down the stigma and discrimination that we often come across. By creating safe, open spaces to talk honestly about all aspects of our emotional well-being we enable conversations in which we can talk freely about how events impact upon us. By talking to young people in a non-judgemental way, we can break down the shame attached to some of these thoughts and feelings. Always approach these conversations with an open mind and non-judgmental listening ear.

Responding to mental health disclosures

- **Confidentiality:** From the start we need to be honest that we might need to pass information on in order to ensure the young person is safe. We should make this very clear at the beginning of the conversation in order to ensure we don't break a young person's trust and that they are fully informed. Please refer to your organisation's safeguarding policy and record any appropriate steps you take.
- **Reflect on the significance of this disclosure to that young person.** It might have taken that young person days, weeks or months to feel comfortable sharing what is going on for them, and this might be the first time they have shared some of these thoughts and feelings with anybody.
- **Feel privileged that they are opening up to you** – this young person will have picked you to talk to for a certain reason. Sometimes we might not feel well equipped to have that conversation but it is important to keep this in mind before handing it over to somebody else.
- **Acknowledge that this is a really brave thing for the young person to have done and make sure you tell them that.** Let them know that you understand this is difficult for them to share.
- **Be aware of their physical safety and any first aid needs initially** – particularly if that young person has spoken about topics such as self-harm and suicidal thoughts.
- **If the young person discusses suicidal thoughts or feelings be sure to ask further questions.** Ask direct questions about whether they have had thoughts of ending their life, and specific questions regarding if they have thought about when and how? Research has found that asking these direct questions in these instances is best practice and does not encourage these thoughts further, rather it allows the young person to know that it is ok to talk about these things and gives them the space to do so.
- **We can now make sure that the young person is your number one priority for that conversation.** Focus on what they are saying and use active listening skills in order to ensure they feel as if they have been heard. It can be helpful to reflect back and clarify in order to make sure that you are understanding them correctly and you are both on the same page.
- **Listen, don't judge and ask open questions, leaving space for them to talk openly.** It can be difficult, but it is really important that we don't convey our own emotions in this conversation. It is important to acknowledge how they are feeling and the impact it is having on them – we can use phrases such as 'I am really sorry that you feel like this' and 'that sounds really difficult for you' to acknowledge this.
- **Don't assume, guess or compare** – the young person may not know the full story yet so try not to make assumptions. This can be difficult, especially if we know them and their background well, but try not to fill the gaps. Don't compare them to another specific young person, though it can be helpful to normalise their experience by saying things like 'we have worked with other young people who have felt like this, so although we don't know what you are going through we can work through this together.' This might help the young person to feel less isolated and alone in what they are experiencing.
- **Sit with silence, even if it feels uncomfortable.** The young person may have a lot in their mind that they are processing and so it is okay to allow space for them to reflect and process, even when it feels uncomfortable for us.

- **Be patient.** It may take lots of time and conversations to get to what is really going on but let it take its course and keep checking in.
- **Stay calm** – the young person might be at a point where they feel like they can't manage what is going on for them anymore and so they could be in particular distress. However, we tend to find it difficult to think things through and look at the big picture when we feel like this. Try to support them to manage how they are feeling in that moment, and to calm themselves or de-stress. You can then arrange to come back to the conversation in a calm way to discuss it further and look at their options.
- **Help them to explore their options, rather than give advice.** Sometimes it can be really natural to want to jump in with our advice or own experiences and try to fix the problem, but it is important that we don't do this. Give space for the young person to fully talk through what is going on from them, then explore this using open questions that prompt them to consider their options moving forward.
- **Make a plan and write it down.** Try to leave each conversation with at least one next step – it will let the young person know that they are supported.
- **Be honest about recovery and the journey,** acknowledge that it might take time but you will support them in putting things in place to move forward.

How to involve parents and carers

Including parents and carers within this process is often an important part of a young person's journey. As much as we are able to support the young people we work with within our settings, it is vital that this support is also being echoed in the home environment where possible. Involving parents within the conversation is key, as is helping to support them where possible.



Passing on information

What do we do when we recognise that a young person is experiencing difficulties with their mental health and we want to pass this information on to parents and carers? There are times – particularly if a young person is engaging in behaviours or experiencing thoughts that are putting them at risk – when we have a duty to refer this on in line with our safeguarding policy and procedures, to ensure that they are safe. It is often best practice to include parents or carers in the conversation regarding a young person's well-being.

It is really important to (where possible) have the young person involved in the process of how we pass this information on. For a young person who might be feeling completely overwhelmed and out of control with their thoughts, feelings and emotions, having some control over how their parents are informed can be very significant. An open and honest conversation about why it is important to pass information on is a great place to start. Let the young person know the importance of having a consistent support network – made up of trusted adults, friends, family members, pets, whoever is important to them! We can't only rely on one individual, but need a team of people to be there when we are finding things difficult. Then ask the young person how they might best want to pass this information on to their parents or carers – examples of how you may do this include:

- **Arranging a meeting together** between yourself, the young person and parent or carer.
- Encouraging the young person to **write a letter** explaining how they are feeling to their parent or carer.
- **Planning an activity** where the parent and child have time alone, maybe outside of a busy household, to discuss what's going on.

If the young person would like you speak with their parent or doesn't feel confident being involved in this conversation, make sure that you go through the key points with them in advance – what would they like you to say? Be clear about what specific information you are going to pass on.

At this point, it can be really helpful to provide as much support as possible to the parents. It might be difficult for them to hear that their child is feeling this way and so it is important to support them and help them understand the situation. Directing parents to helpful sources of information and resources can be really helpful, so that they can go away and understand a little bit more of what their child is experiencing.

If it seems necessary, encourage the parent and young person to seek professional support together. Follow up and check in with both the child and family at different points.

It may also be necessary and important to involve your church leader within this process, especially for your own personal reflection and supervision after supporting a young person.

Signposting

It is important to remember our role when working with young people. Often it is within our capacity to listen, mentor and journey with young people, but we should also aware of the power of signposting and encouraging young people to receive professional support.

How do we know when to signpost?

Any safeguarding concerns need to be followed up on as soon as possible through the correct process, in line with your safeguarding policy and procedures.

We know that the moods, feelings and thoughts of the young people we work with can change over time. However, for some young people these feelings and emotions can have an impact on their daily lives. **Here are a few keys signs to looking out for that may indicate it is necessary to encourage a young person and their parents or carers to seek further professional support:**

- Sudden or prolonged changes in behaviour
- Changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- Unable to engage in activities they once could/enjoyed
- Isolation and withdrawal
- Unhealthy coping strategies
- Neglect of self

Next steps

Encourage the young person to seek professional support as soon as possible. Often this involves suggesting they go to see their GP to discuss their mental health. This can sometimes be a daunting task for a young person – so it might be helpful to work with them to prepare for this appointment. It is important for the young person to communicate all the information regarding how they are feeling in that appointment, and so it might be helpful to talk through with them what they want to share so that they feel able to do this. Perhaps even consider writing it all down in advance and practising.

There are different ways a young person might prepare for a visit to the GP, and the website doready.org may be a useful resource for them. YoungMinds also have some guidance on things to consider if a young person's GP does advise a referral to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services: youngminds.org.uk/find-help/your-guide-to-support/questions-you-should-ask/

Session 1: **Identity: Who am I?**

Pete Maidment

Introduction

When talking about identity, the very obvious starting place is the reminder of the fact that we are made in the image of God – our identity is inextricably linked with God's identity. This is at the core of my teaching in a Christian youth club, in school confirmation preparation and even the GCSE RS syllabus. Knowing who I am – and knowing that the answer to that question starts with knowing who God is – is the key to unlocking this session.

'We are made in the image of God – our identity is inextricably linked with God's identity.'

If identity feels like a big issue for us as adults, it's far bigger for our young people. Usually, as adults, we have reached a stage in our lives where we are less concerned with how people perceive us – it's one of the key indicators of a transition from adolescence to adulthood. Our young people are still very much in the midst of that process of working out who they are, and the pressures from their friends and their culture should never be overlooked by those of us who have 'been there and done that'! If peer pressure is an influence on our identity, then social media magnifies that pressure. We feel that pressure as adults, but young people will feel it even more. That's why this session, on identity, focuses so heavily on the part that social media plays in a young person's life.

In Matthew 6 Jesus tells his disciples, *'Do not worry... about your body, what you will wear...'* (v.25)

It seems to be really easy for Jesus to casually tell his followers not to worry about their appearance or how they should dress. It's lovely advice – but young people will cry 'Jesus didn't have social media!' I love this advice from Jesus, 'Look at the grass', he says, dotted with flowers, 'not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these' (Matt 6.28-29); but I also understand that young people will hold their heads in their hands and quite rightly say, 'But you don't understand!'

As soon as you start to talk about social media young people are tempted to switch off. They hear so much negative talk from adults about their mobile phones and so it becomes just more background noise. This session isn't anti social



media, but it is a health warning about the risks associated with comparing ourselves to other people. Young people's self-esteem is a pretty fragile thing at the best of times, and so looking at pictures of beautiful, talented people all day long can have a real impact on how the majority view themselves. We might wish they would just turn their phones off altogether, but we might as well hope that the world would stop spinning on its axis! What we can do is to give young people the tools to view that content through wiser eyes, and also to give them the knowledge that God's view of them is entirely different to their own.

This session seeks to help young people recognise the pitfalls associated with constantly comparing yourself with other people, particularly online. This session will also seek to help young people to find ways to avoid putting themselves down, and to look for a healthier way to view themselves. If you want to do a little back ground reading, check out the two articles from Psychology Today that are referenced in the 'Think about it' section.

Have a giggle (5 minutes)

Photostream shuffle: Ask everyone to get their phones out (leaders too) and spin through the photo gallery or the selfie folder. The challenge is simple: in a short amount of time try to find the most embarrassing picture of yourself – aim for double chins, no make-up, bad hair day pictures at their worst. Who can get the biggest laugh from their disastrous pictures?

Now have a look and compare your worst picture to your Instagram or Snapchat profile picture. Lots of us choose super flattering photos, maybe with filters, that show off our very best side. Have a think for a bit – which one is the real you?

If your group are nervous about sharing their photos then you could have an ugly mug competition, take some awful selfies, or use an app to create weird and wonderful faces!

Think about it (10 minutes)

There's a theory that has gained popularity recently that tries to explain the trend for comparing ourselves with other people, and the effect it might have on our self-esteem.²

Have another look at your phones, choose either Snapchat, TikTok or Instagram and find out who in the room is following the most people on any one of those platforms. Consider for a moment how many pictures that means we probably scroll through each day. How long does it take to hit the 'you're up to date' screen on Instagram?

Back in the day ('the day' being the 1990s) in the time before social media, most people had an extended friendship circle of about 100 to 120 people. That's roughly how many people any one of us can maintain in our 'acquaintances' group. Experts reckon that when we looked at those people we (quite naturally) compared ourselves with them. Some of those people were great at sport, some really brainy, others good at music or drama, and some really good-looking. Conversely, we also spotted that lots of people were less good at sport or drama or academic stuff than us, and that plenty of people were less good-looking than we were. Importantly we saw the unedited versions of people. We saw them every day, on good days and bad days, in good light and bad, and the vast majority of us would place ourselves neatly in the middle in the comparison game.

Now remind yourself how many people you follow on your favourite social media platform... in all likelihood it's hundreds, if not thousands, of people. And they all regularly post pictures, of themselves, of their achievements, of their successes. The trouble is, that for the most part, people only post their best pictures. We don't get to see the bad hair, or the spots, or the double chin. The pictures of puffy eyes and dodgy skin

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/basics/social-comparison-theory>

³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/beauty-sick/201907/the-nofilter-lie>

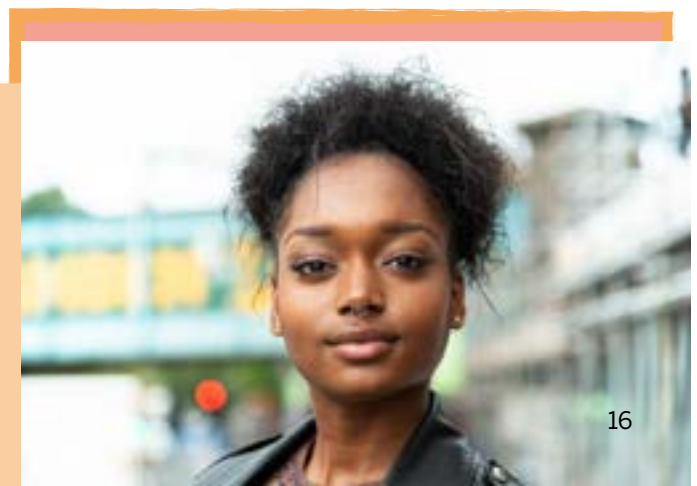
are all consigned to the trash. Recent research even suggests that 1 in 10 pictures on Instagram posted with the hashtag #nofilter are actually filtered!³

You will need to summarise the thoughts above for your young people and then work through the questions below. If you want to include a deeper bible study as well as the references in the first section, make sure that you leave time for the 'Going a bit deeper' thoughts below.

Talk about it (20 minutes)

If possible watch this video together. It's from the Diocese of Gloucester and was created as a part of the #liedentity campaign: youtu.be/QwaKEaG4m34

- How many pictures do you normally take of yourself before you post one online?
- What are the pitfalls associated with comparing yourself to the image that people create of themselves on Instagram or TikTok?
- The Bible says that I am 'made in the image of God' (Genesis 1.27), that I am 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (Psalm 139.14).
 - What do those phrases mean?
 - How do they change the way we might view ourselves?
- What do you think God sees when he looks at us? Try and come up with a list of as many words as you can.
- Create a list of survival tips for other young people using social media. How might they view content, but still have a great view of themselves?
 - How would your list be different for a Christian and a non-Christian friend?



Going a bit deeper (15 minutes)

Read or retell the story of Jacob and Esau – you can find it in Genesis 25.19-34. In brief, it tells the story of twin brothers who are jealous of each other. One (Jacob) is the mum's favourite, and is described in the Bible as 'a plain man' – don't be misled, this means that he was perfect, upright, undefiled! The other brother, Esau, is dad's favourite, and is described as tough and rugged and spends each day out in the wilderness looking after the sheep and hunting wild game. The point is that each brother in comparing himself to the other finds himself wanting. In Jacob and Esau's case, the outcome is pretty huge; Esau ends up giving away to Jacob his entire inheritance, his birthright (in exchange for a bowl of stew of all things!) Once you have read or retold the story, use these questions with your group:

- The Bible describes Esau as Isaac's favourite son and Jacob as Rebekah's favourite. How might this have affected the way they viewed each other as children?
- The twin boys are very different: Esau is an outdoors type, who loves hunting and bringing back food for the family, while Jacob prefers to stay at home and be with his parents (they're almost the typical sporty/academic stereotypes!) What might they have been envious about in each other?
- Each of them does something 'bad' as a result of their self-comparison. What mistakes do they each make?
- What parallels can you draw between this ancient story and the subject of today's session?

Do something (10 minutes)

I recently visited an open art studio for one of my favourite street artists who goes by the name My Dog Sighs. In his bathroom he has this picture hanging over the sink. The artist isn't making any comment on how you actually look, but instead saying something a little deeper, that maybe we shouldn't worry about the surface, but that perhaps beauty is something just a little bit deeper.

In the Bible it says this: 'Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewellery or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self,



Having a quiet and gentle spirit is where true beauty lies

the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.' (1 Peter 3.3-4). In other words it's not how we look on the outside that really matters – it's what is going on inside that's important. In particular, Peter seems to say that having a quiet and gentle spirit is where true beauty lies. Our desire to compare ourselves to others doesn't create a quiet spirit, and growing that gentleness and quietness takes real effort and commitment.

What piece of advice would you like to give yourself whenever you look in the mirror? Would it be to view yourself as God sees you? To take a breath? To have five seconds of peace? Using the frame (see p.21), write yourself a message that will help you to discover the beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.

On a recent trip away with some young people things were starting to get a bit negative, everyone was complaining about how they looked and felt... we were all pretty tired. Out of the blue one of the teenagers announced that everyone should say one positive thing about themselves, it actually became a bit of a theme for the rest of the weekend. Give it a try now – can everyone say at least one nice thing about themselves? As a leader you might want to pay attention to this activity, particularly to the young person (people) who can't think of anything positive at all... this may be a sign that someone is struggling and could do with a quiet word at some other point.

If your young people are desperate for something a bit more active by this point, you could also provide a selection of crafty bits and bobs for them to decorate the frames with, or really up the ante and buy some really cheap frames and create something a bit more permanent!

Checking Out (5 mins): Reflection activity

This is an optional activity if you would like to give your group some time for quiet and reflection at the end of the session (there is a more active version below for those who might find this activity difficult).

Explain that one helpful way some people look after their emotional well-being is by making time for relaxation and reflection to help calm our busy minds. Explain that you are going to give this a try. Note: for some young people it might be helpful to hold a physical object eg beanbag, stressball etc. and this activity can be adapted to focus on the object rather than their body or breathing.

- We begin by sitting comfortably and gently closing our eyes, if you feel comfortable doing that.
- Begin by taking some long, slow, deep breaths. Breathe in fully and exhale slowly. Breathe in through your nose and out through your nose or mouth. Feel your stomach expand as you inhale and relax as you exhale.
- Now bring your attention to check-in with your body, and recognise any sensations you are feeling throughout your body. If you feel like you are tightening or scrunching up anywhere, try to let the tightness fall away and soften.
- Bring your attention back to your breathing.
- We might notice that our minds start to wander and become distracted. If we do, that's okay, acknowledge these thoughts and label them, 'that's just a thought' or 'that's a feeling'.

- When you notice this, allow yourself to recognise how those thoughts make you feel. These thoughts and feelings might be positive or negative.
- Now try to set those thoughts to one side, or you can think about handing those thoughts over to God.
- Bring your focus back to your breathing or body.
- Now try to bring to mind something that you are grateful for today. This can be anything, no matter how small or big.
- Spend a minute or two reflecting on this, picture it in your mind, notice how it makes you feel.
- Now bring something to mind that gives you hope. This might be a particular verse from the bible or a reflection. Reflect on this for a minute, and picture it in your mind. Allow yourself to think through the words or image and notice how this makes you feel.

After a short time, encourage the group to open their eyes. Allow time for anybody to comment on their experience of the activity.

Explain that practices like this take time. Sometimes our minds can feel too busy and sitting in stillness can be scary. Explain that it can be helpful to practice this, as it is a skill that can be learned so that it can be done on a day-to-day basis.

Alternative activity – Five senses

For an alternative activity that might be more suitable for your group, you could try the following as a shorter activity. Ask each young person to think of:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you are grateful for today or that brings you hope

This helps to calm the mind and bring us back into the moment around us.



Parents/Carers' Postcard

Today we looked at issues that might arise from constantly comparing ourselves with other people, and explored different situations in life where that might happen, including on social media.

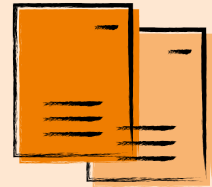
We read the story of Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25.19-34) and saw the potentially damaging effects of comparing ourselves to others.

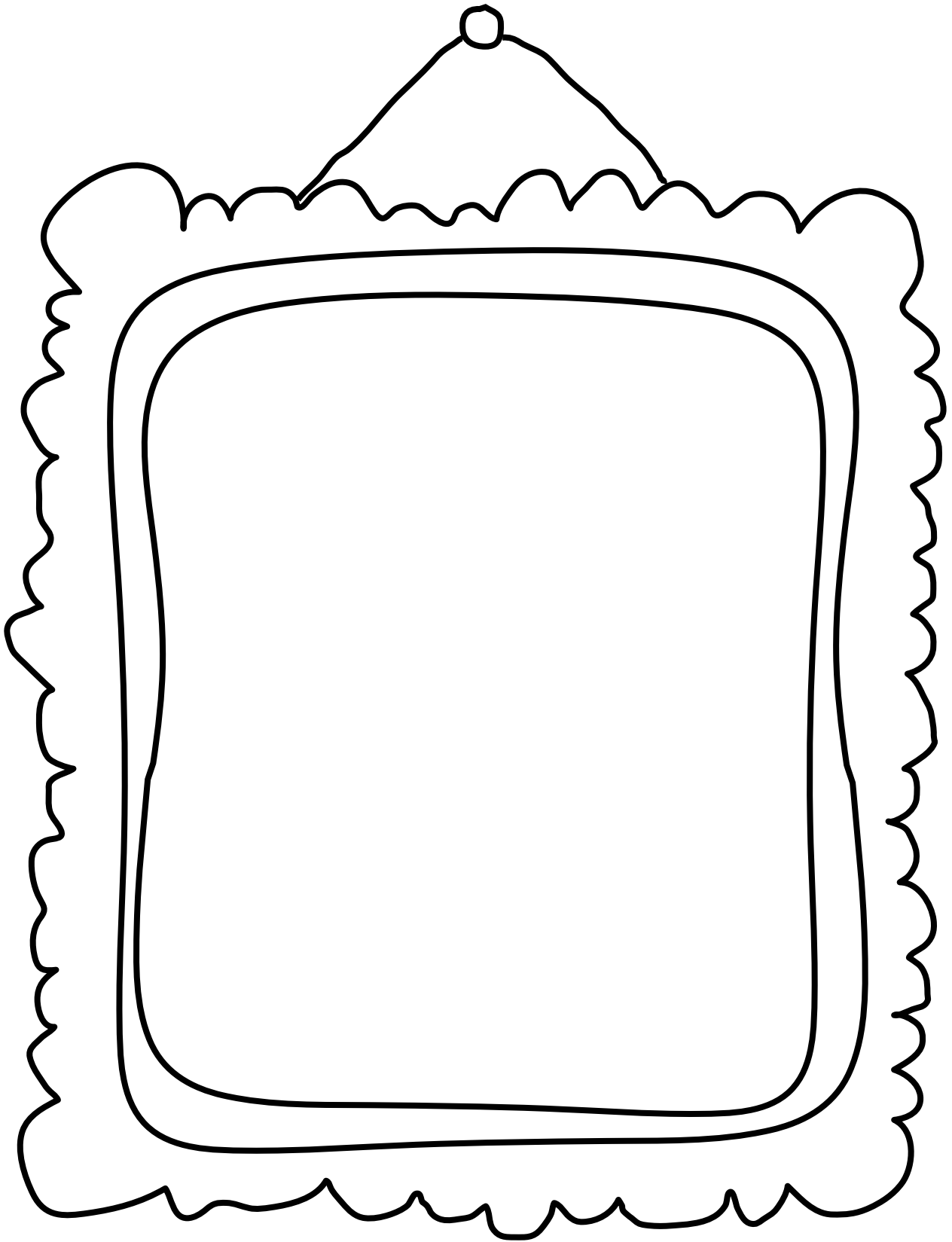
Top Tips:

- Keep conversation with young people as positive as possible, and avoid comparing them to others at all costs eg 'Why can't you be more like...'
- Avoid complaining about the amount of time they spend on their phones. Instead engage with them about it. Who do they follow? What kinds of things do they look at? Stick to open, non-judgmental questions.
- If you want them to take some time away from screen time, try to calmly and non-judgmentally offer a positive alternative.

Further Reading:

- psychologytoday.com/gb/basics/social-comparison-theory
- youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-social-media-and-the-internet/





Session 2:
**Being well: Physical
and mental health**

Amy Sixsmith

Introduction

In this session we are going to introduce the topic of mental health and well-being. We will look at understanding more of what we mean when we talk about our mental health. We'll also learn that looking after our emotional health is just as important as looking after our physical health for our overall well-being.

Have a giggle (10 mins)

Well-being: Heads, shoulders, knees and toes

- Divide the group into four even groups. Provide each group with a piece of flip chart paper and fold it up into four sections.
- Each group will start by drawing a head on the top section of the piece of paper. Around it, ask them to write some ideas of what people might do to keep themselves healthy in that area. Once they have done this, they can fold it over so that the next group can't see it.
- Once they have done this, each group passes their paper to the next group, and everyone draws the next section of the body and writes how to keep it healthy.
- Continue this until each body (head, arms and upper body, legs and lower body, feet) is completed. Ask each group to unfold their body and show to the group how their people have turned out and feedback the comments around each one.

Think about it (15 mins)

Using the game above, identify how many of the comments were based around our physical health. Highlight that this is often what comes to mind first when we think about looking after our 'health'. We all do things on a regular basis to look after our physical health – well, we try to! We make efforts to eat well, get some exercise and take medications when we are feeling unwell. But for lots of us, we don't prioritise looking after our mental health in the same way. We are quick to tell someone if we have a bad cold, or have broken a bone, or have a bad headache – but often we won't do the same for our mental health. For a long time, we may have thought that certain people 'have mental health', but actually (just like physical health), mental health is something that each and everyone one of us has.



It might be helpful to share a definition of mental health here from the Leaders' Guide, or you could explain that it is everything to do with how we think, feel, our emotions and how we cope with changes in life.

Every single one of us experiences a range of feelings, emotions and thoughts on a daily basis. Sometimes these are our day-to-day thoughts and feelings (eg worried about a test this afternoon), sometimes these are thoughts for the future (eg thinking about what we want to do when we are older) and sometimes, these are a little bit more complex (eg thinking about what might happen to a relative that is unwell). It can sometimes be difficult to identify and understand the emotions that we experience or why we feel the way that we do. These aspects of our day-to-day life are all a part of our mental health. That includes all of it, not just the bad stuff but also all of our good emotions, feelings and thoughts too: the good, the bad and the messy.

We all have times when we feel down or stressed or frightened. Most of the time those feelings pass, but sometimes they develop into a more serious problem. That could happen to any one of us, so we all need to put things in place to help us to manage and look after our mental well-being on a daily basis. And just like physical health, some of us might experience times when we find it difficult

to cope with our emotions and feelings over a longer period of time. This is what we might refer to as a mental illness and includes conditions like anxiety or depression.

Let's take an example of when we see someone experiencing overwhelming feelings in the Bible: 1 Kings 19.3-15.

When we meet Elijah in this passage he is just coming out of a pretty intense period in his life. Prior to this, he has stood up against the prophets of Baal, had a death-threat from the queen and fled for his life into the wilderness. And where do we meet him in this passage... alone in the wilderness.

“He [Elijah] came to a lone broom bush and collapsed in its shade, wanting in the worst way to be done with it all—to just die: “Enough of this, God! Take my life—I’m ready to join my ancestors in the grave!” Exhausted, he fell asleep under the lone broom bush.” (1 Kings 19.4)

- Ask the group how they think Elijah was feeling in this passage? What might he have been thinking and feeling?

We can see that Elijah has come to a point of despair and desperation. He doesn't feel like he can cope with what is going on in his life and the challenges he is facing.

- But what can we see in this passage about how God responds to this man, who is weary and feeling like giving up?

First, God supports Elijah very practically, by providing him with food and time to rest (vs 5-6). After that, once Elijah is starting to recover, God takes him to the special place of Mount Horeb (v.8). Here, Elijah would be reminded of God's promises and faithfulness. However, unlike when God appeared to Moses through wind, fire and earthquakes, God came to Elijah in a gentle wind, providing a comforting presence at a time when Elijah needs it most. Finally, once Elijah is fully refreshed, God gives him a new task to move forward to.

This passage reminds us of the importance of looking after both our physical health and emotional health at times when we are feeling overwhelmed and struggling to cope. When we are feeling like things are really difficult for us, it can be important to take care of the practical things like getting some rest and eating enough food. But what we also see in this passage is the importance

of looking after our emotional health as well – finding what gives us hope and what brings us peace and comfort in these times, so that we can start to move forward.

Talk about it (15 mins)

What does it look like to be physically healthy? What do we think it looks like when we are mentally healthy?

You might want to point out some of the following... When we are feeling mentally healthy we are able to:

- Recognise our different emotions and feelings.
- Identify when we might need some support.
- Build healthy relationships with ourselves and those around us.
- Develop emotionally, creatively, intellectually and spiritually.
- Face problems, resolve them and learn from them.
- Be aware of others and empathise with them.
- Use and enjoy time alone.
- Play and have fun.

Ask the group:

- Do you think God created our emotions and feelings? If so, why?
- Where can we see different examples of emotions in the Bible, both positive and negative?
- What impact do our emotions have on us in our day-to-day lives?
- What are some ways in which people might look after their emotional health?

Do something (15 mins)

There are lots of ways that we can look after our mental health, but one great example is the Six Ways to Well-Being which is what we might call our 'six-a-day' for our mental health.

Connect: It often starts with a conversation and relationship. If somebody is struggling to cope with how they are feeling, talking to someone about it is one of the most important things to do. That someone could be a teacher, school counsellor, youth leader, doctor, or parents or carers.

Be Active: We know that being active is one of the best things we can do to look after our mental health. This doesn't just have to be in the typical way; there are lots of different ways that we can make sure we are getting our bodies moving and boosting the 'happy chemicals' in our brain.

Take Notice: Spending time taking notice of the things happening around us can be a really helpful strategy, especially when we find ourselves worrying about the past or the future. Spending time focusing on the present moment and practicing gratitude for the things around us can be a great way to take notice of the positive things in our lives.

Keep Learning: Learning new skills and hobbies can give you a sense of achievement and a new confidence. Find the things that bring you joy and keep learning more!

Give: Research has shown that actions to help other people have a huge positive impact on our own well-being. It could be small acts of kindness towards other people, or larger ones like volunteering in your local community.⁴

Be creative: Being creative and engaging in play have also been identified as important aspects of our well-being. Engaging in artistic, music-related and play activities are a great way of adding enjoyment into our daily lives and help us to feel positive.

After you have talked through the six areas, place a sign with each topic in different parts of the room. Ask the group to come up with as many ideas for activities people could do for each topic as they can, and put these around the relevant sign using different coloured post-it notes for each one (see template at end of this session).

If you have extra time you could have one engaging activity at each area for the young people to try:



For example:

Connect: Find Your Pair game (guess the celebrity on your sticky note, once you know who you are you need to then find your matching partner).

Be Active: Have a go at an unusual sport (for example cheese rolling or egg throwing!)

Take Notice: Guess the mystery object in the box.

Give: Wrapping up an obscure object in newspaper blindfolded within a time limit.

Keep Learning: Share your facts – write down the most bizarre or amazing fact you know.

Be Creative: Draw a portrait of someone in the room and guess who it is.

What next?

Bring all the ideas together for people to look through. Using the template provided, give time for each young person to create their own Six Ways to Well-being plan. It can also be helpful to encourage each young person to share theirs, or give a copy to their friend. This way they can check in with each other and encourage each other to make time for their six ways.

As a group, you could also decide on a number of activities that you will do together as a group in the weeks to come, or plan some of your future sessions around the six ways.

⁴ The Children's Society, in partnership with New Economics Foundation, did some research in 2014 to understand whether the 'Five ways to Well-being', which were developed with adults, are also effective for children and young people. Whilst we found strong evidence for four of the ways to well-being, we found mixed evidence that 'giving' improves children's well-being. We found that 'being creative' was more effective, especially for children. For this resource, aimed at older teenagers in youth groups, we have included 'give' as a 'way to well-being' but youth leaders should take note that being creative is an important way of strengthening well-being and would be advised to think about ways that creativity can infuse all the activities suggested.



Parents/Carers' Postcard

In this session we've started to think about our mental health and how important it is for all of us to take time to look after our well-being, both physically and mentally.

We looked at the story of Elijah from 1 Kings 19 and how when God meets with Elijah in moments of despair, he meets both his physical and emotional needs. We then looked at some ways we might look after our emotional well-being, through the Ways to Well-being: connect, be active, take notice, give, keep learning and be creative.



Top Tips:

- Ask us about ways we can look after our mental health in day-to-day life, just like we would we do our physical health.
- Ask us about the Ways to Well-being and share some of the ways you try to look after your well-being.

Places to go for help:

- Childline (0800 1111)
- Papyrus (0800 068 41 41)
- Young Minds: youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/



Checking Out (5 mins): Reflection activity

This is an optional activity if you would like to give your group some time for quiet and reflection at the end of the session (there is also a more active version below for those who might find this activity difficult). Explain that one helpful way some people look after their emotional well-being is by making time for relaxation and reflection to help calm our busy minds. Explain that you are going to give this a try. Note: for some young people it might be helpful to hold a physical object – eg beanbag, stressball etc – and this activity can be adapted to focus on the object rather than their body or breathing.

We begin by sitting comfortably and gently closing our eyes, if you feel comfortable doing that.

Begin by taking some long, slow, deep breaths. Breathe in fully and exhale slowly. Breathe in through your nose and out through your nose or mouth. Feel your stomach expand as you inhale and relax as you exhale.

- Now bring your attention to check-in with your body. Recognise any sensations you are feeling throughout your body. If you feel like you are tightening or scrunching up

anywhere, try to let the tightness fall away and soften.

- Bring your attention back to your breathing.
- We might notice that our minds start to wander and become distracted. If we do, that's okay, acknowledge these thoughts and label them, 'that's just a thought' or 'that's a feeling'.
- When we notice this, allow yourself to recognise how those thoughts make you feel. These thoughts and feelings might be positive or negative.
- Now try to set those thoughts to one side, or you can think about handing those thoughts over to God.
- Bring your focus back to your breathing or body.
- Now try to bring to mind something that you are grateful for today. This can be anything, no matter how small or big.
- Spend a minute or two reflecting on this, picture it in your mind, notice how it makes you feel.

- Now bring something to mind that gives you hope. This might be a particular verse from the bible or a reflection. Reflect on this for a minute, and picture it in your mind. Allow yourself to think through the words or image and notice how this makes you feel.

After a short time, encourage the group to open their eyes. Allow time for anybody who wants to comment on their experience of the activity.

Explain that practices like this take time. Sometimes our minds can feel too busy and sitting in stillness can be scary. Explain that it can be helpful to practice this, as it is a skill that can be learned so that it can be done on a day-to-day basis.

Alternative activity – Five senses

For an alternative activity that might be more suitable for your group, you could try the following as a shorter activity. Ask each young person to think of:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you are grateful for today or that brings you hope

This helps to calm the mind and bring us back into the moment around us.



Be creative

Be creative

Be active

Be active

Take notice

Take notice

Keep learning

Keep learning

Give

Give

Connect

Connect

Session 3:
**The importance of
good relationships**

Susie Mapledoram

Introduction

Being in healthy, life-giving friendships and relationships can be hugely helpful when our mental health is low. Having good people around us and cultivating healthy relationships can make all the difference, so this is an opportunity to bring some thoughts together around how young people view and navigate the friendships and relationships they are in and keep them healthy.

Have a giggle (10 mins)

Despite the Big Bang Theory having come to a glorious conclusion, there are some pure nuggets of gold in this comedy and this session gives you the opportunity to show a classic. Sheldon is very keen to get his hands on a piece of equipment but his nemesis Kripke is making this tricky. The solution is for Sheldon to 'make friends' with him so he creates a 'Friendship Algorithm'. The clip demonstrates the awkwardness of Sheldon's attempts and highlights that friendships aren't always easy to create and cultivate, even if it is for ulterior motives such as Sheldon's.

The link to the video on YouTube is [youtube.com/watch?v=kOxgjUhEG3U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOxgjUhEG3U)

As a follow up give your group a HUGE piece of paper (we are talking about at least four pieces of flipchart joined together!) and ask them to map out in a spider diagram of the relationships and friendships within the group and also connected to the group through parents, other friends, school, community etc. See how vast the map becomes and the volume of relationships and friendships that exist from your group. You may want to do two or three of these depending on the size of your group.

Think about it (15 mins)

Friendship is woven through the Bible, both our friendship and relationship with God, and our friendship with each other. Look at the relationship between Ruth and Naomi in the Book of Ruth. Ruth showed deep love, commitment and security in their friendship. The friendship between the brothers Moses and Aaron demonstrates how a tight friendship can overcome anything, including confronting Pharaoh. Read through Exodus 4 where Moses begs God for help and it comes in the form of a good friendship with Aaron. There is great wisdom and advice on friendship and the importance of relationships, as well as glimpses and stories of

friendships. The verses below draw out some of these themes and demonstrate that being connected to each other and to God in a healthy way is important and supportive.

The 'proverbial' friend

The Book of Proverbs, part of the 'wisdom' literature of the Old Testament, has a fair bit to bring to the table around friendship and good relationships, and has the additional benefit of being quite straightforward in some places!

As you read through these verses together and talk about what they might mean to us in our situations and the advice they give, have a few pads of post-its around and ask the group to write down words and advice that these verses give.

Proverbs 18.24 *Friends come and friends go, but a true friend sticks by you like family.*

Proverbs 22.24-25 *Don't hang out with angry people; don't keep company with hotheads. Bad temper is contagious — don't get infected*

Proverbs 13.20 *Become wise by walking with the wise; hang out with fools and watch your life fall to pieces.*

Proverbs 17.17 *Friends love through all kinds of weather, and families stick together in all kinds of trouble.*

Proverbs 27.17 *You use steel to sharpen steel, and one friend sharpens another.*

Proverbs 12.26 *Just as lotions and fragrance give sensual delight, a sweet friendship refreshes the soul.*

Proverbs 16.28 *Troublemakers start fights; gossips break up friendships.*



Either print out these verses or give your young people Bibles to look them up. Then ask your group to read through these verses, talk about them, look at the advice, wisdom and insight they give about good friendships and relationships and ask them to build a picture of what authentic friendships and relationships might look like. What would this 'proverbial' friend look like? The world is our oyster – it could be demonstrated through a drama sketch, a picture, a reflection, a sculpture out of Playdough – whichever way the groups want to take it. Make some time to introduce and explore each group's ideas and thoughts. You may want to rank the quotes in order of which ones you think are best, most important or most relevant to the young people's lives.

Talk about it (10 to 15mins)

Let's dig a bit deeper and think about what happens when things get tough. When we feel low and fed up we may not have the capacity to reach out to friends because of our low mental health. It's good to both have and be the friend who will comfort and support in those times, and remind us that God is always close. Without reading the whole of the book of Job, give a snapshot of the kind of struggles that Job faced and some snippets of his frustrations and worries:

- Job was someone who suffered and would always ask 'why?' to God.
- He was persistent with God and pushed for answers, without going to anyone else.
- He dealt with the kind of suffering that we might relate to; family, health and material things.
- Within the first chapter of this book he endures the stealing and killing of both his livestock and workers, his children are killed by a tornado and he suffers with sores and scabs on his body.
- At this point, his friends arrive.

Then read them these beautiful verses of what his friends did:

‘Three of Job's friends heard of all the trouble that had fallen on him. Each travelled from his own country—Eliphaz from Teman, Bildad from Shuhah, Zophar from Naamath—and went together to Job to keep him company and comfort him.’ (Job 2.11)

Making the effort to be there can make all the difference, and in some cases it is life-changing. And these friends of Job certainly made an effort. If you go on to read verses 12 and 13 you will see to what extent they felt for their friend and the symbolic things they did to demonstrate both their shock at how they found him and their love for him.

‘When they first caught sight of him, they couldn't believe what they saw – they hardly recognised him! They cried out in lament, ripped their robes, and dumped dirt on their heads as a sign of their grief. Then they sat with him on the ground. Seven days and nights they sat there without saying a word. They could see how rotten he felt, how deeply he was suffering.’ (Job 2.12-13)

We are not suggesting you start to tear your clothes and get a bucket of soil from the garden, but this is worth dwelling on for a few minutes. This would seem somewhat extreme to many, but it is symbolic of how much Job's friends were willing to do and not do (keeping silent for seven days and nights) to show him how much he meant to them. 'Sitting alongside' is also reflected in some mourning rituals which ensure that there is always someone there to support the bereaved person with companionship. And we come back to where we started – recognising that these are human responses to humans, but inspired by a God who gives everything to have a relationship with us.

Discuss the following with the group:

- Can we think of times when our friends and loved ones have gone the extra mile for us, or times when we have done that for others? What motivated us to do it?
- Are there ways in which we can be more proactive and supportive with our friends, especially those who are struggling?
- What about the times when we are feeling low and struggling – how do we seek out the support and comfort that we need?
- How much has God done for us to demonstrate how much we mean to him?
- Does being a Christian mean that I do friendships differently?

Do something (15 mins)

This activity gets the group thinking about the qualities of a good friendship, and involves a bit of creativity too! Ask the group to come up with things that they both look for in a friend (such as supportive, trustworthy, honest, fun) and things that would put them off in a friendship (judgemental, controlling, liar, etc). Cut up long strips of paper and write each of these traits (good or bad) on them so that there is one on each piece of paper with enough room at the end of each piece of paper to punch a hole. Then put the group into teams and supply each team with a bag of marshmallows and some spaghetti and ask them to build a person with their arms spread out. Then challenge the teams to find as many positive traits to hang on the person by threading the paper onto the spaghetti human as they can in three minutes, but doing it with their mouths, one person at a time. Once the teams have completed this, look at the traits on each of the spaghetti humans and create a picture of what the best kind of friend might be like.

What's next?

This is simple. It's an opportunity to bring a bit of encouragement. The Bible says 'encourage one another daily' (Hebrews 3.13) and this is a brilliant challenge for each one of us. Our words can be very powerful and positive, so this is an opportunity to use them in a supportive and encouraging way. Get a load of blank cards and envelopes, and get creative in making some cards which you can send to the people that matter to you. Put the kettle on and make some good space and time for you all to write some cards of encouragement to the people in your life who matter. It's a small thing, but it can have a massive impact on the people who'll receive these pieces of mail.

Parents/Carers' Postcard

In this session we have talked about how important relationships are when we are struggling with low mental health. We've been thinking about the friends that can help us and the friends we can help, and recognising the qualities of a good friend.

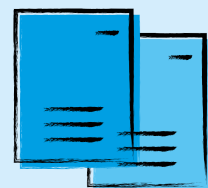
We have had a whistle-stop tour through Proverbs and drawn together wisdom on friendship, and we've also explored the story of Job and how his friends were there for him in a very literal sense. We thought about how we can be there for our friends and explored creative ways to do that.

Top Tips:

- Ask us what is important to us when it comes to friends, and what are some of the ways in which we are being supported or are supporting friends.
- Ask us about our friendships, and who the people we support and sit alongside are. Tell us stories where that's made a difference to you and your friends.

Places to go for help:

- Childline (0800 1111)
- Papyrus (0800 068 41 41)
- Young Minds: youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/



Checking Out (5 mins): Reflection activity

This is an optional activity if you would like to give your group some time for quiet and reflection at the end of the session (there is also a more active version below for those who might find this activity difficult). Explain that one helpful way some people look after their emotional well-being is by making time for relaxation and reflection to help calm our busy minds. Explain that you are going to give this a try. Note: for some young people it might be helpful to hold a physical object – eg beanbag, stressball etc – and this activity can be adapted to focus on the object rather than their body or breathing.

- We begin by sitting comfortably and gently closing our eyes, if you feel comfortable doing that.
- Begin by taking some long, slow, deep breaths. Breathe in fully and exhale slowly. Breathe in through your nose and out through your nose or mouth. Feel your stomach expand as you inhale and relax as you exhale.
- Now bring your attention to check-in with your body. Recognise any sensations you are feeling throughout your body. If you feel like you are tightening or scrunching up anywhere, try to let the tightness fall away and soften.
- Bring your attention back to your breathing.
- We might notice that our minds start to wander and become distracted. If we do, that's okay, acknowledge these thoughts and label them, 'that's just a thought' or 'that's a feeling'.
- When we notice this, allow yourself to recognise how those thoughts make you feel. These thoughts and feelings might be positive or negative.
- Now try to set those thoughts to one side, or you can think about handing those thoughts over to God.
- Bring your focus back to your breathing or body.
- Now try to bring to mind something that you are grateful for today. This can be anything, no matter how small or big.

- Spend a minute or two reflecting on this, picture it in your mind, notice how it makes you feel.
- Now bring something to mind that gives you hope. This might be a particular verse from the bible or a reflection. Reflect on this for a minute, and picture it in your mind. Allow yourself to think through the words or image and notice how this makes you feel.

After a short time, encourage the group to open their eyes. Allow time for anybody who wants to comment on their experience of the activity.

Explain that practices like this take time. Sometimes our minds can feel too busy and sitting in stillness can be scary. Explain that it can be helpful to practice this, as it is a skill that can be learned so that it can be done on a day-to-day basis.

Alternative activity – Five senses

For an alternative activity that might be more suitable for your group, you could try the following as a shorter activity. Ask each young person to think of:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you are grateful for today or that brings you hope

This helps to calm the mind and bring us back into the moment around us.

Session 4:
**Being there for my
friends: how to help**

Pete Maidment

Introduction

More often than not, when young people are struggling with their mental health, the first person they will tell is one of their friends. Your young people almost certainly know about other teenagers who are struggling with low mood, self-harm or issues around eating. Having good friends to talk to is incredibly important for young people – it's natural that they will confide in their friends, and it's also natural for them to want to conceal how they feel from even the most important adults in their lives.

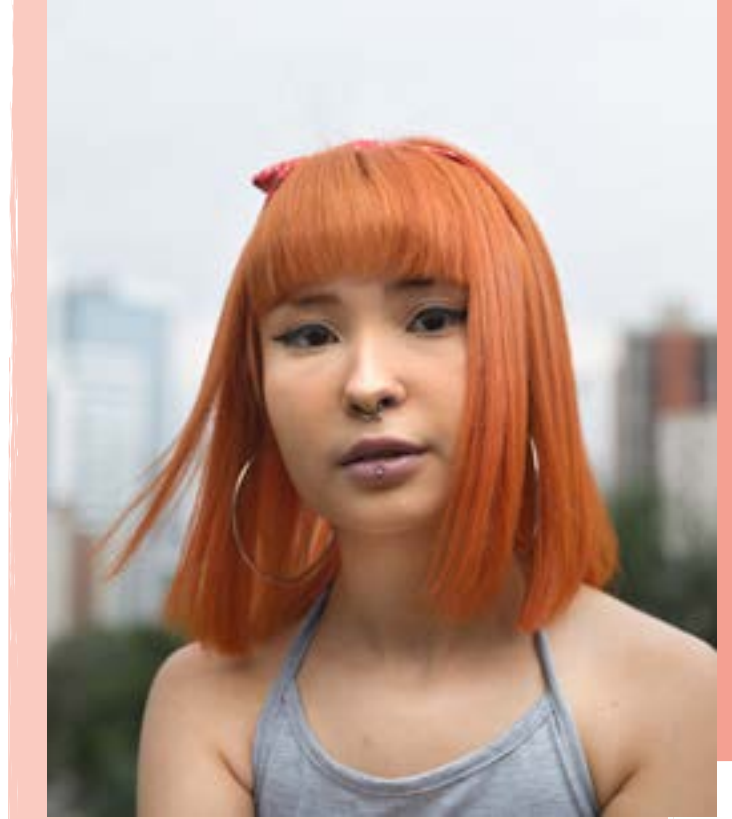
This session is about thinking through the best ways we can support our friends when they are in need, and when to involve others, including the adults in their lives.

Have a giggle (5 minutes)

Google 'friendship test', find the most ridiculous one, and then set your young people the challenge of finding out how good a friend they are.

Think about it (10 mins)

There's a story in the Bible (2 Kings 5) about an important man called Naaman. He was the commander of the king's armies, and he had a pretty high opinion of himself. As well as being a top military leader, he also suffered with leprosy, which at that time was an incurable skin disease that would have left him untouchable by friends and family. Untouchable is a phrase that (fortunately) we don't use in our culture anymore, but at the time it would have meant that Naaman essentially become an outcast, his friends and even his family would have pushed him away, literally not wanting to be anywhere near him. Some of Naaman's friends hear about a prophet in Samaria called Elisha and persuade Naaman to pay the man a visit. Naaman agrees, and gathers up gold, silver and other gifts with which to pay for the prophet's cure. Elisha, unimpressed with Naaman's importance, doesn't come and meet the commander himself, instead sending a messenger to greet him and to tell him to go and wash himself seven times in the river Jordan. Incensed by the prophet's rudeness, Naaman leaves in a foul mood, 'I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy.' (2 Kings 5.11, NIV) he says, and so he leaves, refusing to follow Elisha's instructions. Then Naaman's friends do something brave: they know about Naaman's



temper and that he thinks very highly of himself, and yet they also know that they want him to be well. So they stand before him and persuade him to follow the prophet's instructions, to go and wash in the river Jordan. Persuaded by his friends, Naaman goes, washes, and is cured of his disease.

I have worked in the past with a young person who went through a period of unbelievably low mood and who got to the stage of posting on social media that he no longer felt able to go on; he wished his friends goodbye. A number of other young people saw the post, and because of their commitment to him decided that they shouldn't tell anyone – he didn't want anyone to know how he was feeling and they wanted to stand by him. However, another friend recognised that he needed help, even if he didn't want it, and so rang round the adults in his life until she was able to get someone to help him.

Naaman's companions do a pretty amazing job of caring for their friend: he confides in them, they know that he is a proud man who doesn't like seeking help, and yet they persuade him and support him in getting the help that he needs.

You will need to summarise the above reflection for your young people and then lead them through the questions below.

Talk about it (20 minutes)

- Why is it so hard for Naaman to seek help with his illness? (Help your young people explore the stigma associated with leprosy, and the fear that it would have instilled in those around Naaman. You might want to help them make the link between the stigma associated with leprosy in Naaman's time and the stigma that people experience today related to poor mental health and mental illness.)
- Why might the friends have been forgiven for being there for Naaman, but not insisting he gets help?
- Naaman's friends have to do two very hard things in this story. First, they have to talk to Naaman about his illness and suggest that he speak to Elisha, and then when Naaman rejects Elisha's advice they have to persuade him to give it a go. Which is harder do you think? Why?
- How much of this story can you relate to in your life?
- Where do you draw the line between supporting your friends wishes and sharing what's going on for them with others?

'In his epistle to the early church, James compels his readers to be 'quick to listen, slow to speak'

Do something (15 minutes)

Did you know that listening is a skill that can be practised and improved? Really listening takes some effort, and there are ways to make sure that we can listen better when someone is talking to us. There's loads of great advice out there for being a better listener: Celeste Headlee's 10 minute TED talk 'Ten ways to have a better conversation' is a great place to start (search for 'Celeste Headlee TED Talk'), but the best way to become a better listener is to practise listening. I have a great friend who is convinced that we are created with two ears and one mouth because listening is twice as important as speaking, and in his epistle to the early church James compels his readers to be 'quick to listen, slow to speak' (James 1.19, NIV). When I train young people to be peer mentors, they often tell me that they can't wait to give people advice, and I always have to stop them and remind them that the main role of a peer mentor – in our context at least – is to listen.

We've included two activities for your group to increase their capacity for listening – the first demonstrates what happens when we listen badly and the second allows them to stretch their listening legs a little.

In groups of three give your students roles of speaker, listener and distracter. The speaker should talk about their most recent holiday, the listener should listen as closely as possible, and the distracter should read the following script into the ear of the listener (through some rolled-up paper if it makes things easier). Give everyone the chance to have a go if they want to, and allow people to sit out if they don't fancy the activity.

Script:

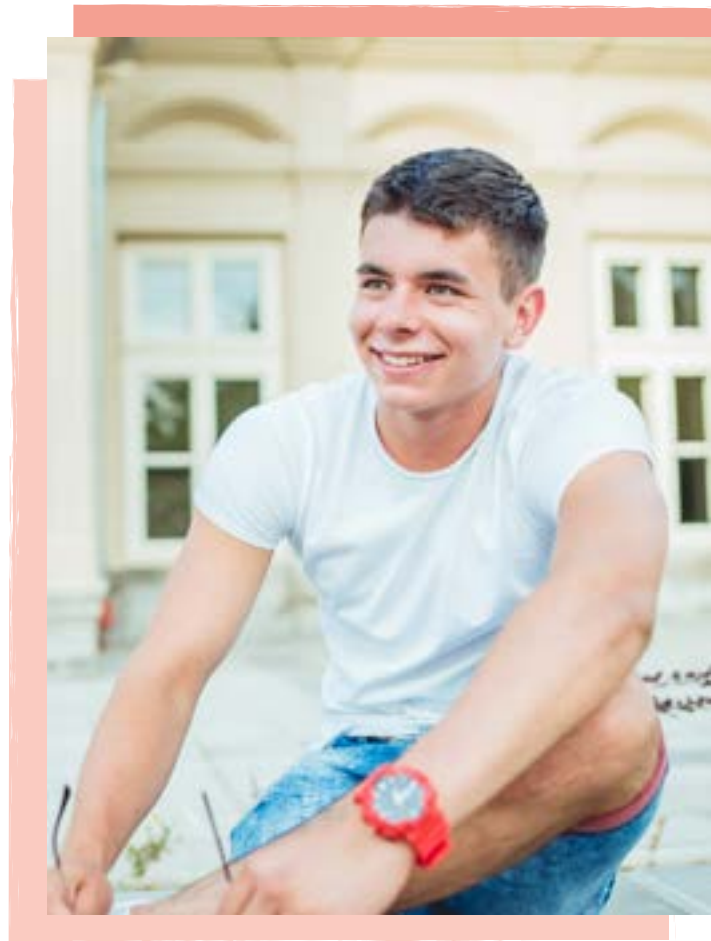
- Have you done your homework?
- It's probably ok.
- Although haven't you got a test coming up?
- I wish she/he would hurry up.
- Why is it hurry up?
- Shouldn't it be hurry down?
- It's always quicker going downhill.
- I hope it snows this year, then I could sledge downhill.
- I love snow.
- But I don't like wet feet.
- I need new socks.
- Where do the missing socks go?
- Is there a huge pile of missing socks somewhere in the world?
- Perhaps if all socks were the same then we wouldn't need to be sorry about missing socks.
- Or perhaps we should all just wear odd socks.
- I get why socks come in pairs, but why do trousers come in pairs?
- Or pants for that matter?
- Surely it's not a pair of pants, it's just a pant?
- Pears or apples.
- I think I prefer apples.
- Unless it's soft, no one likes soft apples.
- Why do biscuits go soft when they're stale but cake goes hard?
- I'd love a bit of cake right now.
- Does carrot cake count as one of your five a day?
- Why can't cake be healthy?
- Perhaps I'll invent healthy cake. I'd be the richest person in the world.

In this second activity, the young people should practise some good listening skills. This time, split your groups of three into speakers, listeners and observers. What do the observers notice about the quality of listening being demonstrated?

Give out a series of pictures for your young people to describe – just use the internet to search for some scenes, or grab some postcards. Aim for a real selection: beach, mountain, countryside, city, groups of people etc.

The speaker needs to describe the scene to the listener and the listener needs to, well, listen... They need to follow these three simple rules of listening:

1. Be totally present, give the speaker your undivided attention.
2. Use open-ended questions – these are questions that need explained answers and can't just be answered with 'yes' or 'no'.
3. Go with the flow – in other words allow the speaker to lead. Don't ask for details about what you are interested in, instead let the speaker lead the conversation.



Going deeper... (10 minutes)

Young people are often confused or worried about what to do when a friend confides in them. Often young people will beg their friends to keep what's going on secret – and because solidarity and 'tribe' are so important to young people, they will often keep secret things that as adults we know need to be aired. (There's some really interesting stuff in Kenda Creasy Dean's book *Practising Passion*⁵, particularly in section two, Dimensions of Passion.)

Whatever the theory, we need to help young people to think through who they will talk to if they are aware of friends who are struggling, and to help them overcome the feeling that they might be 'snitching'.

This next activity is 'high risk' in as much as you will be talking about some pretty big issues with your youth group. I would recommend that you have two adults in the room, in order that one of you can focus on observing the group to see if anyone seems particularly affected by the conversation. Also make sure you have ample time after the session for young people to talk to you about anything that concerns them.

You will need to create two piles of cards or post-it notes, in two different colours.

The first pile should be 'sources of help', for instance:

- Parents
- Carers
- Brother or Sister
- Family Friend
- Emergency Services (999)
- Childline (0800 1111)
- Childline Online (childline.org.uk)
- The Samaritans (116 123)
- Tutor
- Teacher
- Youth Worker
- Church Leader

On a second pile of cards or post-it notes, in a different colour you need to create a selection of issues that your young people might be experiencing or witnessing in their friends. Only you will know your group well enough to decide which issues you want to offer them, and you may want to amend what you write on the cards depending on the age and experience of your group. Choose from the ideas below, or pick some of your own that you know might be pertinent:

Behaviour:

- Angry outbursts
- Unusually risk-taking
- Worrying about being in a big group of people
- Avoiding talking to friends
- Regularly missing meals

Social:

- Vaping
- Pressure to engage in sexual activity
- Experimenting with drugs
- Getting drunk at a party
- Low self-esteem
- Sexting

Mental Health:

- Self-harm
- Talk about suicide
- Very low mood
- Panic attacks

School:

- Very worried about exams
- Spending excessive hours on homework
- Missing days of school

As a group, your goal is to decide who the young people might talk to about each of the situations, so you might want to lay the 'sources of help' cards out at the top of a table, and then fill each column up with the issues that you talk about.

⁵ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practising Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*, Eerdmans, 2006.

The purpose of the activity is simply to help your group recognise that the best thing to do in these situations is to talk to someone. The hope is that if the young people have already given some thought as to who they would talk to, then they will be more open to talking if the issue does arise. The activity might also help your young people open up about issues that their friends (or they themselves) may be working through.

What's next? (5 minutes)

A great way to finish this session is to give your young people a chance to pray for each other and for their friends. As Christians, as well as other people to talk to, we have the added bonus of being able to bring difficult decision before God, to seek God's advice and to seek God's solace. You might find this activity useful:

In lots of traditions, Christians will light candles for people who they want to pray for. Search for an outline image of a candle and print out enough for everyone to have at least one. Spend some time in silence encouraging the young people to think of any friends they have that might be facing a tough time and to hold them before God. Once enough time has passed, encourage them to write the name of the person on their mind on their candle and then to 'light' their candle by colouring in the flame with felt tips or highlighters. This may give you the opportunity to talk about anyone who might be struggling, so make sure you leave enough time.

An extra!

There are plenty of really great organisations out there where young people can get advice for themselves and their friends. At the time of writing a new website had been launched called **camhs-resources.co.uk** which seeks to draw together all of the different agencies out there to help young people. You might want to show your group the website and highlight any sections which relate to your previous conversation.

Alternatively you might want to go super low-tech and hand out cards with the contact details of just one or two places that they can go for help: ChildLine (0800 1111), Papyrus (0800 068 41 41) and your own phone number might be the best place to start! You might also have dedicated helplines for young people locally that you can signpost them to.



Checking Out (5 mins): Reflection activity

This is an optional activity if you would like to give your group some time for quiet and reflection at the end of the session (there is also a more active version below for those who might find this activity difficult). Explain that one helpful way some people look after their emotional well-being is by making time for relaxation and reflection to help calm our busy minds. Explain that you are going to give this a try. Note: for some young people it might be helpful to hold a physical object – eg beanbag, stressball etc – and this activity can be adapted to focus on the object rather than their body or breathing.

- We begin by sitting comfortably and gently closing our eyes, if you feel comfortable doing that.
- Begin by taking some long, slow, deep breaths. Breathe in fully and exhale slowly. Breathe in through your nose and out through your nose or mouth. Feel your stomach expand as you inhale and relax as you exhale.
- Now bring your attention to check-in with your body. Recognise any sensations you are feeling throughout your body. If you feel like you are tightening or scrunching up anywhere, try to let the tightness fall away and soften.
- Bring your attention back to your breathing.
- We might notice that our minds start to wander and become distracted. If we do, that's okay, acknowledge these thoughts and label them, 'that's just a thought' or 'that's a feeling'.
- When we notice this, allow yourself to recognise how those thoughts make you feel. These thoughts and feelings might be positive or negative.
- Now try to set those thoughts to one side, or you can think about handing those thoughts over to God.
- Bring your focus back to your breathing or body.
- Now try to bring to mind something that you are grateful for today. This can be anything, no matter how small or big.

- Spend a minute or two reflecting on this, picture it in your mind, notice how it makes you feel.
- Now bring something to mind that gives you hope. This might be a particular verse from the bible or a reflection. Reflect on this for a minute, and picture it in your mind. Allow yourself to think through the words or image and notice how this makes you feel.

After a short time, encourage the group to open their eyes. Allow time for anybody who wants to comment on their experience of the activity.

Explain that practices like this take time. Sometimes our minds can feel too busy and sitting in stillness can be scary. Explain that it can be helpful to practice this, as it is a skill that can be learned so that it can be done on a day-to-day basis.

Alternative activity – Five senses

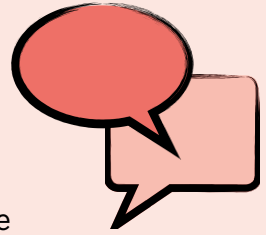
For an alternative activity that might be more suitable for your group, you could try the following as a shorter activity. Ask each young person to think of:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you are grateful for today or that brings you hope

This helps to calm the mind and bring us back into the moment around us.

Parents/Carers' Postcard

In this session we've talked about the importance of being a good friend, but also the limitations of what we can do to support our friends. We looked at all of the different people that we might talk to if we are worried about our friends' mental health or any of their behaviour.



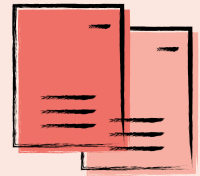
We studied the story of Naaman from 2 Kings 5 and thought about how he struggled to seek help when he was unwell, because of the stigma attached to his condition. We looked at how his friends cared for him and then pointed him the direction of someone who was better qualified to help him than they were.

Top Tips:

- Ask us if there is anyone that we are worried about. Listen non-judgementally, and then help us to find appropriate people for them to talk to.
- Ask us who we would talk to if we were having a tough time, and don't be offended if there's someone other than you on the list! The important thing is that we talk.

Places to go for help:

- Childline (0800 1111)
- Papyrus (0800 068 41 41)
- Young Minds:
[youngminds.org.uk/
find-help/for-parents/](https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/)



The background is a solid orange color with several light orange brushstroke-like accents. One is in the top left corner, and three are in the bottom right corner.

Session 5: **Depression and anxiety**

Amy Sixsmith

Introduction

This session focuses on low mood, anxiety and well-being. It's about opening up the conversation to help young people understand the difference between everyday emotions and mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

Have a giggle (15 mins)

Emoji game

- Divide the group into even teams.
- Ask each group to sit in rows facing the back of the person in front, provide the person at the front of the row with a piece of paper and pencil.
- Show the young person at the back of the row an emoji that they have to draw on the back of the young person in front of them with their finger.
- Whatever the person in front feels on their back has to be then passed onto the person in front of them and so on until it reaches the person in the front of the row.
- This person then needs to draw whatever they have felt on their back onto the piece of paper. The first group to get the correct emoji wins.
- You can then send the person from the front of the group to the back and start again.

How would you feel?

Display numbers from 1 to 5 across the room. Each number refers to how worried or anxious that person feels depending on the situation read out. Read out the following scenarios and ask everybody to move towards the number they would feel in that situation.

- You receive a note telling you to go and see the headteacher as you come into school in the morning.
- You realise you have left your phone on the bus.
- You notice that a friend has unfollowed you on Instagram.
- You walk into a room and hear someone whispering your name.

- You break something expensive at a relative's house.
- You accidentally let slip about a surprise birthday party.
- You arrive at school in the morning and realise you have a maths test you had forgotten about.

Feel free to come up with your own scenarios based on your group, but try to keep them light-hearted.

Encourage the young people to share why they are where they are on the scale. How would they be feeling at that time? What would they be thinking? What emotions might they be experiencing?

Think about it (10 mins)

As we saw in that activity, different situations make all of us feel and respond differently. We are all unique in the way in which we feel and think about day-to-day life. It is important to acknowledge here that no emotion or feeling is in itself bad or wrong. Rather, we should look at our emotions with curiosity and recognise how they make us feel and respond.

Depression and anxiety are big topics to discuss! Talking about our emotional health can be difficult, especially when it comes to trying to explain how we feel. However, each and every one of us will experience times in our lives when we will feel worried, uneasy or anxious about something, as well as experiencing times when we feel sad or low. It is important to recognise that these are normal, everyday emotions and can sometimes be really healthy (even if they don't feel great at the time).

We can see different examples throughout the Bible of feelings of low mood and anxiety.

Ask different young people to read out the following verses (and any others that you would like to add):

'My guilt has overwhelmed me, like a burden too heavy to bear.' Psalm 38.4

'Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?' Psalm 42.11

'I have no peace, no quietness, I have no rest, but only turmoil.' Job 3.26

'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.' Matthew 26.39



As we look through the Bible at Jesus' life, we can see that he also experienced different emotions, and times of fear and darkness. We see in Matthew how Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane responds in a moment of despair, and what he did as a way of confronting and overcoming those overwhelming circumstances. We can say that he chose to be with close friends at this difficult time, he told them how he felt, he asked them to be with him and he prayed to God.

Distinction between difficult feelings and mental health issues

For some of us, there are times when our emotions might start to feel overwhelming or difficult to manage, and impact on our well-being. When these emotions and feelings start to impact on our ability to manage daily life, over a longer period of time, this is when we might be experiencing a mental health condition, such as anxiety or depression.

What is mental illness? A mental illness is something that affects your thoughts, moods, and behaviours and might make them more or less extreme. For example, anxiety may make your body and mind speed up, or you may experience persistent fear and unease, while depression may make you extremely tired and lacking motivation or hope.

It is important to note that our emotional well-being might become a concern when it is having an impact on day-to-day life, and causing difficulties engaging in activities you once engaged in.

We ALL need to put things in place to look after our feelings and emotions at any stage so that we are able to cope and manage. It is important that we take note and check in with our emotions regularly rather than ignoring them. We can learn from our emotions and feelings without being ruled by them.

Our faith can be a big support when we are struggling with low mood or anxiety. It can help us to have a different perspective, find hope and reminds us that we are not alone. Times of prayer and reflection can also help when we are feeling overwhelmed, and help us to calm our anxieties and fears. However, it is important to remember that overcoming difficulties with anxiety and low mood is not as simple as trying to 'not fear'.

Talk about it (15 mins)

Split the group into small pairs/groups and ask them to think of one real-life situation where someone could experience anxious feelings or low mood. After some time to think, go around and share the different situations.

- What do worry and fear look and feel like for different people?
- Can anybody in the group think of any times within the Bible when we can see feelings of fear or darkness?
- How do we see people overcome these feelings in the Bible?
- How do we know when our low mood or anxious feelings might become difficult to manage and feel overwhelming?
- What do we understand by depression and anxiety?
- What signs might we see in a friend if they were struggling with their emotional well-being?

Do something (15 mins)

Body map

Draw around two young people in the group and ask the group to write around each body the different ways in which somebody who is feeling anxious or low might feel. Use the situations discussed previously as prompts if helpful. Have one body map for anxious feelings and one for low mood.

Encourage young people to consider all the different range of feelings/experiences including both the emotions, thoughts and physical sensations.

Coping strategies activity

It can be helpful to share different coping skills and ideas. Using the body maps as examples, ask the young people to think about what advice they would give to those young people to encourage them to look after themselves. Give out post-it notes and ask everybody to write down positive coping strategies that they might try with these young people, then stick these around the bodies.

(At this point, people might bring up unhelpful coping strategies ie self-harming, isolating yourself, not sleeping or eating enough, drinking alcohol or drug use. It is important to have a conversation around this. Identify the difference between unhealthy and healthy coping strategies and point out that sometimes we might engage in behaviours that make us feel better in the short term, but aren't good for our well-being in the long term).

Important note: At this point it is crucial to talk about the importance of professional support and talking to someone when you are finding it difficult to cope. Explain that when we (or a friend) start to feel that our anxious or low feelings are becoming difficult to manage and effecting our lives, it is really important that we speak to someone. Give examples: speaking to a parent, youth leader, trusted adult at school.

Sometimes young people experiencing these feelings do need to access some professional support, such as a counsellor or mental health professional. If we are feeling this way, we might be encouraged to go to see our GP so that they can help us to access further support.

Alternatively, this might be a point to highlight other services such as Childline, Kooth, or YoungMinds Crisis Messenger.

As a leader it is important to recognise that this activity might lead to disclosures from young people regarding their own well-being. Poor mental health is a safeguarding concern and it is important to respond to these disclosures from young people. Ensure that there is time after the sessions to follow up privately with those young people who do so and make sure that you record any actions you need to take. Check the Leaders' Guide and your safeguarding policy for further guidance.

What's next? (10 mins)

My Well-being Toolkit

There are different ways that we can do this depending on the resources you have available. The idea is to create a visual 'toolkit', unique to each young person, of their own tools to look after their well-being. You could provide jars, shoeboxes etc and any resources that you manage to collect.

Here are some examples of things that young people could fill their box with:

- Positive playlist
- Self-care cards
- Bible verses
- Helpline numbers
- Positive affirmations
- Playdough
- Paper to tear
- Calming teabags
- Bubble wrap
- Journal
- Stress ball
- Tissues
- Positive notes from others
- Fidget toy
- Favourite candle
- Slime
- Comfort cross
- Favourite sweets or chocolate

- Photograph of family or friends
- Colouring
- Fluffy socks

Even if in this session each young person only adds one item to their toolkit, it is important to note that this is a starting point and they can add things over time that they find help them. It is also important to highlight that each toolkit is unique, what might be helpful for one person could be very different to another person.

Checking Out (5 mins): Reflection activity

This is an optional activity if you would like to give your group some time for quiet and reflection at the end of the session (there is also a more active version below for those who might find this activity difficult). Explain that one helpful way some people look after their emotional well-being is by making time for relaxation and reflection to help calm our busy minds. Explain that you are going to give this a try. Note: for some young people it might be helpful to hold a physical object – eg beanbag, stressball etc – and this activity can be adapted to focus on the object rather than their body or breathing.

- We begin by sitting comfortably and gently closing our eyes, if you feel comfortable doing that.
- Begin by taking some long, slow, deep breaths. Breathe in fully and exhale slowly. Breathe in through your nose and out through your nose or mouth. Feel your stomach expand as you inhale and relax as you exhale.
- Now bring your attention to check-in with your body. Recognise any sensations you are feeling throughout your body. If you feel like you are tightening or scrunching up anywhere, try to let the tightness fall away and soften.
- Bring your attention back to your breathing.
- We might notice that our minds start to wander and become distracted. If we do, that's okay, acknowledge these thoughts and label them, 'that's just a thought' or 'that's a feeling'.

- When we notice this, allow yourself to recognise how those thoughts make you feel. These thoughts and feelings might be positive or negative.
- Now try to set those thoughts to one side, or you can think about handing those thoughts over to God.
- Bring your focus back to your breathing or body.
- Now try to bring to mind something that you are grateful for today. This can be anything, no matter how small or big.
- Spend a minute or two reflecting on this, picture it in your mind, notice how it makes you feel.

Now bring something to mind that gives you hope. This might be a particular verse from the bible or a reflection. Reflect on this for a minute, and picture it in your mind. Allow yourself to think through the words or image and notice how this makes you feel.

After a short time, encourage the group to open their eyes. Allow time for anybody who wants to comment on their experience of the activity.

Explain that practices like this take time. Sometimes our minds can feel too busy and sitting in stillness can be scary. Explain that it can be helpful to practice this, as it is a skill that can be learned so that it can be done on a day-to-day basis.

Alternative activity – Five senses

For an alternative activity that might be more suitable for your group, you could try the following as a shorter activity. Ask each young person to think of:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you are grateful for today or that brings you hope

This helps to calm the mind and bring us back into the moment around us.

Parents/Carers' Postcard

In this session we have talked about low mood, anxiety and well-being. We opened up the conversation to better understand the difference between our everyday emotions and mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

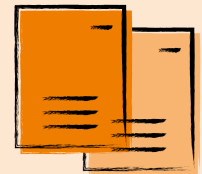
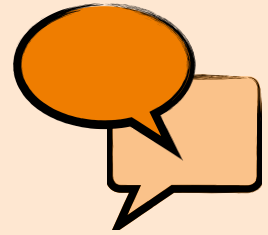
We have looked at different passages from the Bible in which we saw a range of emotions and feelings, and we discussed how these feelings might present themselves in our mind and bodies. From this, we discussed a range of tools and strategies we can use to help us cope with our emotions and feelings.

Top Tips:

- Share a time when you have felt overwhelmed or anxious and how you overcame it. What helped and who did you turn to?
- Ask us who we would talk to if we were having a tough time, and don't be offended if there's someone other than you on the list! The important thing is that we talk.

Places to go for help:

- Childline (0800 1111)
- Papyrus (0800 068 41 41)
- Young Minds:
[youngminds.org.uk/
find-help/for-parents/](http://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/)



Session 6: **Fears and the future**

Susie Mapledoram

Introduction

This session involves thinking about our fears and our hopes for the future. At the time of writing this resource it would be fair to say that there are big fears about the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, the state of the economy, the political stability of our country and wider world, and the urgency of the need to do something about climate change. Be ready to encounter these big issues and their relevance to our young people. Talk about how these worries can affect our mental well-being, and reflect on God's unwavering presence and faithfulness through all that has been and all that is present, however we might be feeling.

Have a giggle (10 mins)

Over the last few years a few 'aging' apps have been created, causing some big laughs. Consult your young people for the best one to use (maybe FaceApp, Future Mirror). You basically take a photo and by some kind of weird technical magic it changes the picture to reveal how you might look when you are old.

To start this session off let's get in the mood of what we might look like in the future – waaaayy into the future. Download the app and have a go at home before the session and then use the app as a light-hearted way into a discussion about the subject of the future and our fears.

You might want to have some photos of your group ready to use and also connect your phone up to a big screen for maximum effect! And of course, be ready to put your pic up first!

Think about it (15 mins)

Fears about the future are very real for young people and we want them to look forward to all that is to come, whether it's known or unknown. In the 2019 Good Childhood Report, we saw that young people were worried about many aspects of their future, from the current climate emergency, to education, social media, and family. God knows and understands us and our fears – in the Bible God says 'fear not' over 80 times. He knows how we think and what worries us. It's really important to talk about and name those fears, and not dismiss them. Young people's fears are valid, and making space to talk about them is key to the support that we as leaders can offer – and to the support they can offer each other.

Write up or print off these verses and put them around the room. **Ask the young people to go round and read them, and then write alongside what the verse means to them and what hope it brings them:**

'Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.' Psalm 23.6

'Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him.' Psalm 62.5

'Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life.' Psalm 143.8

'Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge him and he shall direct your paths.' Proverbs 3.5-6

'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.' Jeremiah 29.11*

*This is a great and much used verse, however it's also worth explaining the context in which it was written. This promise is not to an individual but to a large group of exiled Israelite priests and elders, and a group who are facing the fulfilment of this promise in 70 years. God still has a plan and a purpose for these people, but it's not the future that these Israelites might have expected or planned. But God still has a plan and still brings them hope. ✂

'God knows and understands us and our fears ... He knows how we think and what worries us. It's really important to talk about and name those fears, and not dismiss them.'

Talk about it (20 mins)

This activity is called Future Consequences. You can find an outline of the game through this link schoolswork.co.uk/media/files/consequences.pdf?phpMyAdmin=TfZDLs4Qw81cdrNlnZQS%2C1ecdze As with all resources, feel free to adapt the 10 questions at the beginning to your own young people or use these generic ones.

The questions to think about at the end are really key and you might want to develop them further by exploring:

- How it feels to hear your future from someone else, already planned out and arranged?
- What difference does it make to know that your life is in God's hands?
- Are they safe hands? Are they hands you trust? Why, or why not?
- When others around you talk about their fears, especially fears for the future, what hope can you give them?

Do something (10 mins)

Put up two pieces of flipchart paper, one headed 'Fears' and the other 'Hopes'. Invite the young people to think about what their own hopes and fears for their future are, and get them to write these down on the flipchart paper. This requires space and time. It would be good to involve your leaders in this too. **Then take some time to talk through the thoughts on the papers and think about these questions:**

- Which were easier to come up with, hopes or fears?
- Are some fears easier to talk about than others?
- Looking over these hopes and fears – which of each would you say are the biggest?
- Having looked at what God says about the future and being hopeful, what promises of His can you hold onto?

What next?

Having journeyed through thinking about our fears and what hope we have, how do we become people who are hopebringers? How do we make space to listen to each others' fears and bring hope to the lives of others who are struggling and

looking for reassurance? We are all gloriously different and there will be many ways that we can think of that could bring hope to others – through words, actions, service, etc.

Get some glass jars (lids aren't essential) and some small bits of paper and some pens, and then get writing ideas. Ideas of ways that you can bring hope to others, light into darkness. Take the jar home and challenge yourself to become a hopebringer each day in the lives of others. Some ideas might include: spending time with a friend who is worried, taking photos of hopeful quotes and sending them to others, creating a space for regular good news stories online or in other creative ways, talking to people in church or your community and asking them what hope means to them etc.

Checking Out (5 mins): Reflection activity

This is an optional activity if you would like to give your group some time for quiet and reflection at the end of the session (there is also a more active version below for those who might find this activity difficult). Explain that one helpful way some people look after their emotional well-being is by making time for relaxation and reflection to help calm our busy minds. Explain that you are going to give this a try. Note: for some young people it might be helpful to hold a physical object – eg beanbag, stressball etc – and this activity can be adapted to focus on the object rather than their body or breathing.

- We begin by sitting comfortably and gently closing our eyes, if you feel comfortable doing that.
- Begin by taking some long, slow, deep breaths. Breathe in fully and exhale slowly. Breathe in through your nose and out through your nose or mouth. Feel your stomach expand as you inhale and relax as you exhale.
- Now bring your attention to check-in with your body. Recognise any sensations you are feeling throughout your body. If you feel like you are tightening or scrunching up anywhere, try to let the tightness fall away and soften.
- Bring your attention back to your breathing.
- We might notice that our minds start to wander and become distracted. If we do,

that's okay, acknowledge these thoughts and label them, 'that's just a thought' or 'that's a feeling'.

- When we notice this, allow yourself to recognise how those thoughts make you feel. These thoughts and feelings might be positive or negative.
- Now try to set those thoughts to one side, or you can think about handing those thoughts over to God.
- Bring your focus back to your breathing or body.
- Now try to bring to mind something that you are grateful for today. This can be anything, no matter how small or big.
- Spend a minute or two reflecting on this, picture it in your mind, notice how it makes you feel.
- Now bring something to mind that gives you hope. This might be a particular verse from the bible or a reflection. Reflect on this for a minute, and picture it in your mind. Allow yourself to think through the words or image and notice how this makes you feel.

After a short time, encourage the group to open their eyes. Allow time for anybody who wants to comment on their experience of the activity.

Explain that practices like this take time. Sometimes our minds can feel too busy and sitting in stillness can be scary. Explain that it can be helpful to practice this, as it is a skill that can be learned so that it can be done on a day-to-day basis.

Alternative activity – Five senses

For an alternative activity that might be more suitable for your group, you could try the following as a shorter activity. Ask each young person to think of:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you are grateful for today or that brings you hope

This helps to calm the mind and bring us back into the moment around us.

Parents/Carers' Postcard

In this session we talked about what our fears might be, especially for the future. We were conscious of the big world issues that are around and the big issues that can create fear and uncertainty. We talked about how God remains constant and faithful during these times. We talked about hope a lot too – both in terms of finding ways to feel hopeful ourselves, and in how we can bring hope to others.

We looked some verses from the Bible which talk about hope, and discussed how we felt about these verses and how they applied to our lives.

Top Tips:

- Ask us about how we see our futures and what we are hopeful for.
- Ask us who we would talk to if we were having a tough time, and don't be offended if there's someone other than you on the list! The important thing is that we talk.
- Ask us about the aging app we used and give it a whirl yourself!

Places to go for help:

- Childline (0800 1111)
- Papyrus (0800 068 41 41)
- Young Minds: youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/



Session 7:
**Feeding back
to the church**

Amy Sixsmith

Introduction

This session provides an opportunity for the group to feed back to the wider church community on what they would like them to know about mental health and well-being. It's a chance for your young people to share with the church their reflections on what they have covered over the past sessions.

Have a giggle (10 mins)

In small groups, give young people words for them to describe for the rest of their group to guess. However, they also have a list of words that they cannot use when describing the key word. See which group can get the most words in a certain time, they can nominate a person for each word and rotate if they wish.

Pyjamas – sleep, bed, clothes, dressing gown, slippers

Train – railway, tracks, carriage, station, journey

Doughnut – sugar, hole, jam, custard, sweet

Pizza – toppings, cheese, Italian, round, dough

Christmas – Jesus, tree, presents, Father Christmas, December

Fire – flame, hot, warm, flicker, water

London – capital, Queen, Big Ben, Underground, city

Magic – wizard, spell, wand, trick, abracadabra

Sandwich – bread, filling, lunch, butter, packed

Bath – water, bubbles, taps, rubber duck, room



Think about it/Talk about it (10 mins)

Ask the group to name some of the barriers to people understanding the importance of mental health and well-being in our churches/ communities?

For example:

- Not knowing how to respond.
- Fear of what people will think.
- Fear of saying the wrong thing.
- Fear of certain behaviours.
- Doesn't fit into the 'norm'.

Did you know that three out of four young people experiencing a mental health issue fear the reaction of their friends (Time to Change). Encourage the group to raise awareness and talk more openly about mental health across our communities, so that people feel able to seek help and support when they feel they need to.

Explain that now we have spent some time thinking about mental health and what that means for each of us, we want to pass this on to our wider church communities.

Do something (30 mins)

Ask the group to come up ways to get across the key points around mental health and well-being to their churches eg church service, video, presentation, event etc.

What are the key points they would like to get across? **Ask the group what they think would be important to get across to the wider church community, for example:**

- We all have mental health.
- We all need to put things in place to look after our well-being.
- We need to talk to people when we are struggling or finding things difficult.
- The importance of creating a community that is open about their mental health and well-being.
- A theological reflection – what are some of the things that they would like to pass on? What from scripture has impacted them? What does God think about mental health?

Spend some time planning and prepping what you want to present to your church community. It might be that this is possible within one session, or it may possibly spill over into another session – for example if you're creating a video or an event.

Here are some ideas:

- Leading a church service.
- Creating a video that can be played to the church/in the community.
- Holding an awareness raising event (see the Time to Change website for details – Get Involved).

Here are some examples of videos for ideas:

- youtube.com/watch?v=o9I5fSd4N-Y
- youtube.com/watch?v=YBfK5yajRnQ
- youtube.com/watch?v=nOkH2jGK4p0
- youtube.com/watch?v=jrdWyftmQMk

What's next? (10 mins)

Spend some time planning the practical details and next steps. **Here are some things to consider:**

- Set a date and time
- Decide and organise a location
- Create advertising eg flyers and posters
- Assign roles within the group
- Let people know
- Make sure you share your event with **@ChildSocChurch** and **@Childrensociety**



Further resources

Organisations offering support for young people and families:

- **Childline**
childline.org.uk
0800 1111
- **YoungMinds**
youngminds.org.uk
Crisis Messenger for young people:
Text 'YM' to 85258
Parents helpline: 0808 802 5544
- **Kooth**
kooth.com
Online support for young people's well-being.
- **Papyrus**
papyrus-uk.org
Support for the prevention of young suicide.
Hopeline UK: 0800 068 41 41
- **SelfHarm UK**
selfharm.co.uk
Alumina: a free online course for young people struggling with self-harm.
- **Beat Eating Disorders**
beateatingdisorders.org.uk
Youthline: 0808 801 0711

Further resources for youth leaders

- **Youthscape**
Training and resources for young people's mental health
youthscape.co.uk/store/themes/mental-emotional-well-being



The background is a solid orange color with several light orange brushstroke-like accents. One is in the top left corner, and several others are in the bottom right corner.

Appendix: **Mental health conditions**

This section highlights a few of the mental health conditions that a young person might experience. It is important to remember that within our role it won't be our responsibility to diagnose (or even suggest a diagnosis to) a young person, but this information can be helpful for gaining an understanding of what that young person might be experiencing.

There is much more information available online, from some of the websites listed in the 'Further resources' section.

Anxiety

Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time, and even though it is unpleasant, it is a completely normal part of life. We all get frightened or worried, and sometimes fear can be a good thing as it keeps us from getting too close to danger. Sometimes though, we can feel frightened or worry about things too much and this can get in the way of us enjoying life. This sort of fear or worry is called anxiety.

Anxiety can become a cause for concern when it is impacting on an individual's daily life over a prolonged period of time. This could include experiencing persistent fear, worry and unease within and about day-to-day life – for example, regularly experiencing anxious emotional and physical symptoms about things that might happen in the future or have happened in the past. Sometimes an individual might experience lots of the physical signs of anxiety without any particular situation in mind. Young people may also feel anxious in particular situations, such as speaking in class and socialising with peers, and may try to avoid these scenarios. They may find themselves worrying a lot and not being able to stop, or they might experience physical and visible symptoms such as panic attacks.

Often, experiencing anxiety can leave an individual feeling tired, upset and frustrated. It can make them feel as if they are unable to cope with the situation. Anxiety can affect us all in very different ways and can vary greatly from person to person. Often young people might experience the 'fear of the fear', feeling on edge waiting for bad things to happen and therefore stopping doing activities that link to the negative feelings or thoughts – this is referred to as avoidance. However, we tend to find that the more we avoid the thing we link to the feelings, the more we start to perceive it as threatening.

We know that for individuals experiencing an anxiety disorder that their biological, 'fight, flight or freeze' response is not functioning in a healthy manner. When we feel we are in danger, our brains tell our bodies to get ready to act quickly. Therefore, it can be much more complex for that individual than simply choosing not to be afraid. Those suffering will often require professional help.

Anxiety is an umbrella term for a number of mental health conditions such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), phobias, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), panic disorder and Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD). Research suggests that 1 in 6 young people may experience an anxiety condition in their lives.

Low mood and depression

Most people will experience times of low mood in their life. However, depression refers to when an individual experiences these feelings of low mood on a persistent basis over a prolonged period of time. Experiencing depression can lead to an absence of feeling, irritability, a lack of pleasure and/or a lack of motivation. An individual might experience regular feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Persistent low mood may lead an individual to become withdrawn and might be related to a number of different factors.

Depression can impact on a young person's behaviours and has physical, emotional and cognitive effects. The young person might experience repetitive negative thoughts and lack motivation to engage in day-to-day life because of this. Some of the physical symptoms that an individual might experience could include feeling constantly tired, sleeping badly, having no appetite, or experiencing physical aches and pains. Depression can lead to an increased risk of suicidal thoughts and self-harm.

Self-harm

Self-harm refers to any behaviour that a young person might engage in where there is a physical release of emotional pain. This can include behaviours such as cutting, burning, pulling out hair, biting, picking or scratching at your skin, hitting yourself or walls, excessive exercise, getting into fights and risk-taking behaviours.

It is important to note that self-harm in itself is a behaviour and not an illness, and is often recognised as a coping strategy for emotional pain. There are lots of reasons why a young person

might engage in self-harming behaviours: it may be an emotional release, a source of control, a form of self-punishment or self-hatred, a form of distraction or dissociation, a way of expressing anger, or as a way of communicating distress.

This behaviour can develop into an addictive cycle and become relied upon as a coping mechanism that can become difficult to stop. It is therefore important that when we become aware a young person is self-harming we do not just tell them to stop. Due to the addictive nature of self-harming and the reliance on it as a coping mechanism, often a young person might find it incredibly difficult to stop and instead might turn to more risky behaviours or experience suicidal thoughts. Rather, it is important to acknowledge that self-harm isn't a healthy way of coping with emotions, but we want to journey with them as they find alternative healthier ways of coping in order to reduce this behaviour.

It is also important to note that self-harm is not an attention-seeking behaviour, and it can be very damaging to label it as such. Rather it can be seen as a visible form of communication of the emotional distress that an individual is experiencing. There is often a lot of shame and secrecy around self-harming behaviours from the individual, leading to it often being a hidden act.



Praise for this resource:

‘These sessions provide young people with the opportunity to think about mental health and well-being through a biblical lens and equip leaders to facilitate engaging and thoughtful conversations. My youth group really benefited from doing these sessions.’

Mike Rutt, Youth Ministry Co-ordinator,
Emmanuel Church, Croydon

‘This timely resource explores mental health and well-being from a Christian perspective through activities, games, discussion and reflection. It focuses on themes young people highlighted in the Good Childhood Report in practical and well-researched ways. It is an excellent and comprehensive tool for supporting young people in developing their well-being and mental health.’

Rt Revd Libby Lane, Bishop of Derby and
Vice-Chair of Trustees, The Children’s Society

‘For too many of our children, the critical years of adolescence are marred by periods of poor mental health. This resource, from a gifted and experienced team, will help group leaders, other adults and young people themselves be a better support for friends and church members going through troubled times.’

Rt Revd David Walker, Bishop of Manchester

‘These Good Childhood resources for church youth groups are excellent! Successfully trialled and tested, they are adaptable and relevant, and can be used by any group of young people. These resources will engage all who explore them. I happily endorse them - they work!’

Nigel Spencer MBE DL, Group Leader,
Ramsey/Dovercourt Crusaders, Essex

‘I strongly commend these resources... I long for every child and young person to discover that they are unique and precious, created in the image of God who knows them, loves them and desires for them to fulfil their potential as they go on becoming fully who they are... Hearing powerful testimonies from their peers can often help young people open up about how they think and feel and for them to know they are not alone. I am therefore delighted that one of the Diocese of Gloucester’s #IamIdentity videos has been used as part of the Identity session.’

Rt Revd Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester

‘Too often adults assume we know what younger generations need. This excellent resource is based on what young people are saying and addresses their concerns around identity, mental health and well-being. I particularly welcome the session connecting back with the church, which reminds us how important an intergenerational community is in supporting young people.’

Mary Hawes, National Children and
Youth Adviser, The Church of England

Every young person should have the support they need in order to enjoy a safe, happy childhood.

That's why we run services and campaigns that make children's lives better and change the systems that are placing them in danger.

The Children's Society is bringing hope back to children's lives.