Health and wellbeing
Mental health: reaching out to young minds

Poverty, unemployment and abuse put young people at risk of mental illness. Tackling these social causes early can increase their chances of improving their quality of life, and make them more resilient. Support services that meet the specific needs of teenagers and the young are also essential in making them well again.

Anxiety, depression and self-harm cost society an estimated £100 billion according to the Centre for Mental Health. Yet mental health continues to fight for equality with physical health. This inequality affects not only how long patients live for but also increases the burden on the NHS and the economy.

Attempts have been made at improving mental health support and treatment. A national agreement between local care agencies and services now exists to help people get the support they need when they need it. Waiting times have also been introduced for the first time. People needing therapy for depression, for example, will get guaranteed treatment within six weeks.

The Conservative government has pledged a £1 billion a year programme to reduce waiting times, expand support and put spending on an equal footing with physical health. In 2017, Theresa May also promised to transform attitudes to mental health by focusing on children and young people.

Yet the reality is that spending on services is being cut, and beds are in short supply especially for young patients. Often they end up treated far from home or not receiving appropriate care.

This resource focuses on two research projects which looked at young people’s risk factors for developing mental health problems, and the support available.

King’s College London is heading up The Environmental Risk (E-Risk) Longitudinal Twin Study. These types of studies track people over several years or decades even to see how they develop and change. The focus of the programme is on children’s disruptive behaviour and what factors influence this.

Around 1,000 families of twins have been recruited and followed up to analyse their development. Looking at their job situation was a key focus. At 18, more than one in ten (11.6%) participants were not in education, employment or training (NEET).

The King’s research highlights how mental illness has a significant impact on the life chances of young people. More than three in five (60%) of NEETs...
had already experienced more than one mental health problem in childhood or adolescence. Yet the figure was much lower (35%) for non-NEET youths. For those already vulnerable, unemployment takes an additional toll say the King’s researchers.

They also believe that NEETs are already at a disadvantage in the job market. Despite a commitment to working, they are hindered by their psychological problems and a lack of ‘soft’ skills such as time management.

The researchers believe therefore that it is crucial mental health services support young people better. This is as they make the transition from school to employment.

Domestic violence is an example of why health professionals need to be more clued up. Women who are abused by their partners are at greater risk of problems such as depression, and psychosis where a person loses touch with reality and experiences symptoms such as hallucinations. Those who suffer mental illness are also more likely to be the target of domestic violence.

Early childhood abuse also increases their risk of being exposed to violent relationships in adulthood. The King’s researchers say doctors need to be made aware of these factors and be involved in taking early action.

The second research project this resource focuses on is the Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing programme at the University of Nottingham. Here, researchers are exploring issues such as the need for friendly mental health services that young people can relate to and which do not leave them feeling ashamed of having issues. Young people often cannot access appropriate help to cope with the demands they face.

Under the current system, Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) support children until they reach 18. But the Nottingham researchers believe these services should be extended from birth to age 25. Young people would then benefit from unbroken and continuous care. They would not end up struggling to make the move from child to adult services.

Digital technology too could provide an alternative way of communicating what support is available and seeking help. The Nottingham researchers are backing a national system for mental health using new forms of telecommunications. This was an idea recommended by the NHS Confederation’s Mental Health Network in a report published in 2013.

This should complement face-to-face therapy (not replace it) and would integrate digital tools into the existing system of healthcare. These tools would include apps to track changes in mood, and online treatments that involve talking to a therapist about your thoughts and feelings.

Stigma surrounding mental health is still a major obstacle to patients seeking out help. Public figures such as actor Stephen Fry and Alastair Campbell, the former political aide and author, are among those who have spoken out about their own struggles with mental ill health.

This sharing of personal stories has changed attitudes on one level. On another, though, mental illness is not met with the same understanding and sympathy as a broken leg or cancer.
The Nottingham researchers say stigma is still rooted in a perception that people are unpredictable or violent even. As a result, those with a mental illness will try and hide their symptoms from friends, family and medical professionals for fear of affecting their life chances such as getting a job.

They commend the work of Time to Change, a nationwide campaign aimed at ending discrimination faced by people with mental health problems. However, the Nottingham researchers echo the concerns of charities such as Young Minds that there is still a long way to go in eradicating stigma.

They believe what is key is intervening early and not waiting until adulthood when negative beliefs are already established. This could be done through schools, they say, to raise mental health awareness, and shape children’s attitudes from a very early age.

Further information
Maria Michail
Email: maria.michail@nottingham.ac.uk

Louise Arseneault
Email: louise.arseneault@kcl.ac.uk

- [http://www.nhsconfed.org/~/media/Confederation/Files/Publications/Documents/E-mental-health.pdf](http://www.nhsconfed.org/~/media/Confederation/Files/Publications/Documents/E-mental-health.pdf)
- [www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/mental-health/youth-mental-health/index.aspx](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/mental-health/youth-mental-health/index.aspx)