MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING FACTSHEET

Understanding Mental Health and Wellbeing

Recognising changes, understanding influences and finding appropriate support

The short version

Mental health is part of everyone’s health. It can change throughout life and is influenced by our bodies, experiences, relationships, resources and surroundings. Difficult feelings are not always a mental illness, but persistent distress, loss of functioning or concerns about safety should never be dismissed.

What do mental health and wellbeing mean?

Mental health	Our emotional, psychological and social wellbeing. It affects how we think, feel, relate to others, make decisions and respond to life's demands. Mental health is more than the absence of a diagnosed condition.
Wellbeing	A broad experience that can include feeling safe, connected and able to function, having needs met, and experiencing meaning, satisfaction or positive feelings. A person can have good days and difficult days within the same period.
Mental health condition	A pattern of thoughts, feelings, physical experiences or behaviours associated with significant distress, impaired functioning or risk. Diagnosis should be made by an appropriately qualified professional.

Mental health exists on a changing continuum

People do not sit permanently in either a 'mentally healthy' or 'mentally unwell' category. Someone living with a diagnosed condition may experience purpose, relationships and good functioning, while someone without a diagnosis may be overwhelmed or unsafe. Support should respond to the person's current needs rather than labels alone.

What shapes mental health?

The World Health Organization describes mental health as shaped by interacting individual, family, community and structural factors. No single factor reliably predicts an outcome, and poor mental health should not be reduced to lack of resilience or effort.

Body and health	Genetics, hormones, pain, disability, long-term illness, sleep, neurological health, medicines and substance use can all influence mood, thinking and energy.
Experiences	Trauma, abuse, neglect, discrimination, bereavement, relationship changes, caring responsibilities and major transitions may affect wellbeing immediately or over time.
Relationships and belonging	Safe relationships, social connection and community can be protective. Loneliness, conflict, bullying, isolation or feeling excluded can increase distress.
Material circumstances	Income, debt, housing, food security, employment, education, transport and access to services affect both stress exposure and the options available for coping or recovery.
Environment and society	Safety, neighbourhood conditions, inequality, culture, stigma, public policy and wider events can strengthen or undermine mental health.

Protective factors

- safe and supportive relationships
- stable housing and enough financial security
- sleep, nourishment and movement suited to the person
- skills for expressing feelings and solving problems
- access to appropriate health and social care
- meaningful activity, learning or employment
- identity, culture, faith or community connection
- hope, autonomy and opportunities to make choices

Protective factors reduce risk and support recovery, but they do not make anyone immune from mental-health difficulties.

Recognising when something has changed

Feelings	Persistent sadness, fear, worry, emptiness, hopelessness, guilt, irritability, emotional numbness or feeling unable to cope.
Thinking	Poor concentration, indecision, racing or intrusive thoughts, harsh self-criticism, confusion or thoughts about death and self-harm.
Body	Sleep, appetite, energy, pain, headaches, muscle tension, stomach symptoms, breathlessness or a racing heart may change. Physical symptoms still deserve appropriate medical consideration.
Behaviour	Withdrawal, reduced self-care, avoidance, agitation, loss of interest, increased alcohol or drug use, gambling, risk-taking or compulsive behaviour.
Daily functioning	Difficulty managing work, study, relationships, caring, household tasks, appointments or personal safety.

Distress is not always visible

A person may continue working, caring or appearing cheerful while struggling internally. Others may communicate distress through anger, physical complaints, overworking, humour, perfectionism or withdrawal. Avoid assuming that someone is fine because they are functioning in one area of life.

When everyday feelings may need more support

- the change is persistent, intense or getting worse
- usual ways of coping are no longer helping
- sleep, relationships, self-care or daily responsibilities are significantly affected
- alcohol, drugs, gambling or unsafe behaviour are increasing
- there are hallucinations, delusions, severe confusion or marked changes in behaviour
- there are thoughts of self-harm, suicide or being unable to keep someone safe

Finding the right level of support

Everyday wellbeing support	Trusted relationships, practical help, peer support, community connection, rest, meaningful activity and manageable routines may support wellbeing. They should fit the person's health, culture and circumstances.
GP or primary care	A GP can consider physical and mental-health causes, medicines and risks; discuss treatment; and refer to other services where appropriate.
NHS Talking Therapies	Adults in England can usually self-refer for non-urgent help with anxiety and depression. Services provide evidence-based psychological treatments delivered by trained practitioners.
Specialist services	Some difficulties require a community mental-health team, psychiatrist, specialist psychological therapy, addiction service, eating-disorder service or another clinical pathway.
Social and practical support	Debt, housing, benefits, employment, safeguarding and caring pressures may require specialist practical help alongside emotional or clinical care.

Small actions that may support wellbeing

- name what feels difficult without judging yourself
- tell a trusted person what you need
- protect sleep and rest where circumstances allow
- reduce isolation through safe connection
- choose one manageable next step
- maintain regular food, fluids and prescribed medicines
- use movement adapted to health and ability
- seek practical help with pressures you cannot solve alone

Self-care can support wellbeing, but it should never be used to blame someone whose distress is driven by illness, trauma, poverty, discrimination, unsafe relationships or overwhelming responsibilities.

Supporting another person

Notice changes, choose a private moment and ask an open question such as, 'You haven't seemed yourself lately - how are things?' Listen without rushing to fix or compare. Ask what would help, follow up, and seek urgent assistance if safety is at risk. A later factsheet in this section provides fuller guidance.

Urgent help and emergencies

Call 999 or go to A&E now

Do this if someone's life is at risk, they have seriously harmed themselves or taken an overdose, or you do not feel able to keep yourself or someone else safe. A mental-health emergency should be treated as seriously as a physical emergency.

Urgent but not an emergency	Use NHS 111 online or call 111 and select the mental health option. You can also ask a GP practice for an urgent appointment.
Samaritans	Call 116 123 free, day or night, 365 days a year, if you need a safe place to talk about whatever you are facing.
New psychosis symptoms	Seek prompt medical help for hallucinations, delusions, severe confusion or behaviour suggesting that someone has lost contact with reality, particularly when symptoms are new or safety is uncertain.

How Health Matters UK can support you

Health Matters UK provides general wellbeing education, compassionate listening and practical support to help you notice patterns, identify barriers and consider realistic next steps. We can help you prepare questions and signpost appropriate services. We do not diagnose mental-health conditions, provide psychotherapy or crisis intervention, or replace a GP or regulated mental-health professional.

Mental health and wellbeing matter to us

People do not struggle simply because they have failed to think positively or try hard enough. Everyone deserves to be listened to, taken seriously and supported in a way that considers both personal needs and the circumstances surrounding them.

Important information

This factsheet is for general education and does not replace personalised medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Contact an appropriate healthcare professional if you are worried about your mental health. Use NHS 111 for urgent mental-health help and call 999 or go to A&E when life is at risk or someone cannot be kept safe.

Evidence and review

Prepared in line with Health Matters UK's Evidence & Editorial Standards. Information was checked against current NHS, WHO and NICE resources. External guidance remains the responsibility of the issuing organisation.

• World Health Organization. Mental health: strengthening our response, updated September 2026. who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response

• NHS. Every Mind Matters. nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/

• NHS. Mental wellbeing tips. nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-wellbeing-tips/

• NHS. Feelings, symptoms and behaviours. nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/

• NHS. Where to get urgent help for mental health. nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/where-to-get-urgent-help-for-mental-health/

• NHS. Find NHS Talking Therapies for anxiety and depression. nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/find-nhs-talking-therapies-for-anxiety-and-depression/

• NICE. Depression in adults: treatment and management (NG222), reviewed January 2026. nice.org.uk/guidance/ng222

• Samaritans. Contact a Samaritan. samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/

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