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When to consider professional help for your child

As a parent or carer, the last thing you ever want is to feel worried about your child's health, this includes their mental wellbeing. This last year has shown us all how little is within our control and how quickly our lives can change. It is entirely normal for your child to have found the knock-on effects of Covid challenging but if you feel their **reaction is outside of what you'd typically expect, trust your instincts**. This is your child and you know them. In this document, we will help you decide if this may be the right time to take the next steps for your child. How to discuss it with them and what services may be available to you.

Parents Assessment

Noticing your child is struggling shows you are an observant parent and having tried to help at school and at home, you may need to look elsewhere. We all have different skills and will be able to help a child in different ways in their lives but there may be times a child needs to talk to someone outside of their normal environment. To decide whether this may be the right time to access help consider your child's behaviour in the last few weeks.

School

- Has their performance in school declined suddenly or over a period of time?
- Are they avoiding school?
- Is your child acting in an uncharacteristically rebellious or defiant manner?
- Have they lost interest in previously enjoyed subjects or extracurricular activities?
- Has their ability to concentrate dramatically decreased?





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Social Life

- Are they socially isolating or expressing a new fear of social situations?
- Have they suddenly changed social groups?
- Are they angry with all their friends?
- Do they repeatedly fall out with friends?

Home

- Are they moody, sad or unhappy for extended periods of time? It is normal for all of us to have good and bad days, but a prolonged period (two weeks or more) could indicate that intervention is needed.
- Are they quick to temper or having seemingly irrational responses to minor issues?
- Are they locking themselves away in their bedroom when previously they would engage with the family?
- Are they displaying poor physical hygiene i.e. not showering, changing clothes or suddenly lacking care in appearance.
- Are they practicing obsessive cleaning or ritualistic behaviour?
- For younger children, regressions such as bed-wetting when they're potty trained.



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Talking to your child

The first step is to talk to your child. Are you able to have a real conversation about the situation and are they receptive?

Young children often understand the concept of a feelings doctor. The same way we see a Dr when our bodies hurt, we see a feelings doctor when we feel lots of emotions. With older children/adolescents, you can ask them if they feel like it would be helpful to speak to someone that wasn't family or school-associated. If they're resistant, encourage them to give it a go for just one session. **By bringing it up, you can help them see that there is no shame in needing support.**

Make sure to choose your moment wisely, if you mention it mid argument, therapy might seem like a form of punishment, which it certainly is not (or shouldn't be!) **Try to talk about it at a time when everyone is calm.** Take a non-judgemental stance. Saying something like "I could see it was very difficult for you today when I was wondering if you think you might need more help to manage this."

Eating and Sleeping

- Has there been dramatic changes in sleep habits? i.e. staying awake all night, sleeping all day, sleeping too much or unable to sleep at all?
- Are they having nightmares?
- Are they hiding food, eating in secret, restricting food or going on diets that eliminate entire food groups?
- Are they displaying signs of anxiety when presented with family meals or restaurants?

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Risk-taking behaviour

- Is your child taking risks or acting impulsively?
- Do they show interest in sinister or self-destructive media?
- Have they spoken about self-harm?
- Are they experimenting with drugs or alcohol?

Psychosomatic symptoms

- Is your child complaining of frequent headaches or stomach aches?
- Are they displaying symptoms of panic attacks such as tight chest or difficulty breathing?

