

# Having discussions with parents and carers about mental health



For young people's mental health

# INTRODUCTION

This is a guide and presentation designed to enable you to have discussions with other adults about young people's mental health and resilience. In doing so you will be supporting Mental Health UK to improve understanding of the importance of resilience in young people. Well done, and thank you for spreading the word.

For someone with caring responsibilities for a young person the idea of having a discussion about emotional wellbeing can feel very challenging. It can feel particularly difficult to start a conversation about mental health as we often don't feel equipped with the right information. But don't be alarmed, this guide will help.

In giving this presentation, you won't become an expert in mental health but you will be able to discuss your own knowledge. What is really important is that share your experiences and what works for you. Far too often parents and carers of young people suffer in silence about the challenges they face in talking about mental health. By engaging people through the tools and activities in the presentation, you can help put people at ease and give them the confidence to have these conversations themselves with young people.

## About this Guide

The aim of this guide is to make sharing the resilience tools with parents and carers as straightforward as possible. The opportunity to share this knowledge might come from ad-hoc chats at the football, over lunch at work, a get-together with friends etc. You may want to formalise these chats by organising structured get togethers where you could volunteer your time to share the materials with other people. It's up to you!

We encourage you to keep meet-ups small. It might range from being one to one, to half a dozen people joining you in activities and discussions. Find a quiet space where you can share some slides, try out some activities and build each other's confidence.

These resources are based around the content of Bloom, a resilience programme for 14-18 year olds delivered by Mental Health UK and shaped by young people themselves. Bloom focusses on young people's strengths and encourages them to employ tools and strategies to build their resilience and support them through transitions. This includes

copng with stress at exam time, making decisions about whether to stay at school, get a job, apply to university or making subject choices.

## Top tips on bringing parents and carers together

Whether it be on the cheering lines of a football game, at your local café or in the kitchen at work – there are many places where you might talk with other people about resilience. Here are a few things to keep in mind when bringing people together for this:

- **Start small** – it may be one person, it may be more, but try to keep the maximum number to 4-6 people. If the setting you've met in has a space you can use, take advantage of that. E.g. the football club (or other sporting venue) a meeting room at work, or a local community space that can hire for free. Wherever you decide to do it, make sure the space enables you to speak confidentially. Being able to speak open and freely is really important.
- **Be flexible with time** – some groups may be able to commit an afternoon, others will only be able to commit to 60-90 minutes (or if at work, perhaps a lunchtime slot). Any of these options can work as an introduction to the materials and you may agree on additional meetings to avoid risk of information overload.
- **Share what you've experienced yourself** (or noticed about the materials if you're yet to use them) and be as supportive and optimistic as possible.

You can use this guide to talk about resilience in young people of any age, although please note that the research and theory behind Bloom is focused on the life scenarios and challenges of 14-18 year olds.

## How to use this guide

In this guide we go through a suite of topics and suggest some relatable activities that will support your discussion with parents and carers.

The time needed for discussions and activities will vary depending upon the size of your group and how much each individual wishes to speak. Please use as many or as few activities as you feel comfortable with. We don't recommend doing all, so pick and choose the ones which you relate to the most and which you feel will work best.

Follow the first few slides closely to build your confidence, and the notes can be used word for word or as a script if needed. If you find certain conversations are really useful, don't feel pressure to move on quickly just to get to the end. The idea is that you're growing in confidence about using these tools and feel motivated by the experience you're facilitating.

It would be useful to make the [Having discussions with young people guide](#) available at the start of the session. This is the resource that parents and carers may wish to take away with them and continue what they have learned.



# WELCOME

## Welcome parents and carers to the presentation

Initiating conversations about wellbeing or mental health can feel challenging for many of us; it may stretch us or put us completely out of our comfort zone. That's often all the more reason to explore possibilities for starting these conversations with the young people in our lives. There may be times when you try something and it doesn't quite go to plan, and so at the heart of this guide is the message that mistakes can lead to learning and growth, and gentle perseverance is key.

We don't expect you to replace counselling services or other therapies, if a young person needs them; it's worth knowing that the tools we use in the parent and carer guide that we discuss today have a strong base in mental health therapies. If some people in the group feel they need further support, that is ok too. We have a signposting list available with further help.

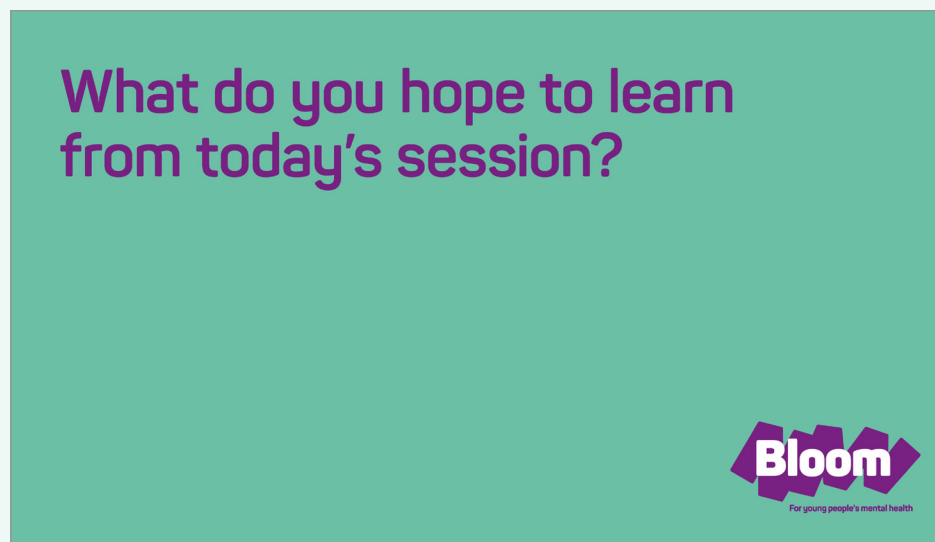
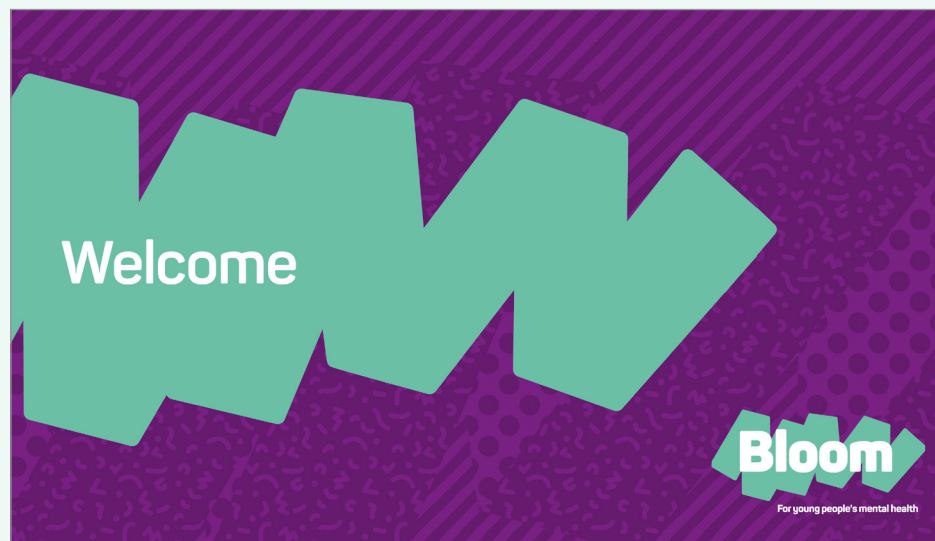
In the session today you aren't expected to become an expert on resilience or mental health but you have an opportunity to try out tools and ideas in a way that helps you to feel that your role as a parent or carer is enhanced.

### Activity: Group contract/agreement – if available perhaps use a flipchart or sticky notes

Before we start, perhaps we want to agree how we want to speak and act with each other in this session, as we will be discussing mental health and challenges we have encountered ourselves in our own lives or the lives of the young people we care for. What are your suggestions?

### Encourage parents and carers to discuss and agree the following. You could write this in advance on a flipchart or verbally suggest:

- No interruptions- phones on silent, taking calls or messages out of the room



- Keeping personal information about participants and their families within the group and not sharing this externally
- Creating a supportive environment and being empathetic
- Create an environment where people aren't criticised, invalidated or judged
- Look after their own boundaries- they don't have to share anything

This presentation is designed to support you as parents and carers to share experiences and ideas. Although you are encouraged to participate you are not expected to share anything personal about yourself or young people that you do not feel comfortable doing so.

### **Approx. duration 10 minutes**

You are not alone if you find it challenging. Speak about what you find challenging and you might be surprised that others feel exactly the same.

In the parents and carers guide, we emphasise that it can feel challenging to initiate conversations about mental health with young people. We would encourage you to do the same as you welcome parents and carers.

It's important to note:

- Young people's mental health and resilience is strengthened when they are listened to, and when their concerns are taken seriously. You are all here, so you are taking it seriously.
- Calmly and confidently opening up conversations, in a safe environment, can encourage young people to understand that we all have mental health.
- Once the conversation is open, you may learn that there are areas of further support required. This guide contains a range of tools that are used in schools and colleges in the UK as part of Bloom and there is a signposting document available at the end of this guide.

### **Approx. duration 2 minutes**

Put thought into when and where you are going to have this conversation. Don't worry that things might come up that you don't have the answers to, be open about that. Tell them why you are having this conversation and that this resource is based on materials that were designed by young people and is being used in schools and colleges throughout the UK.

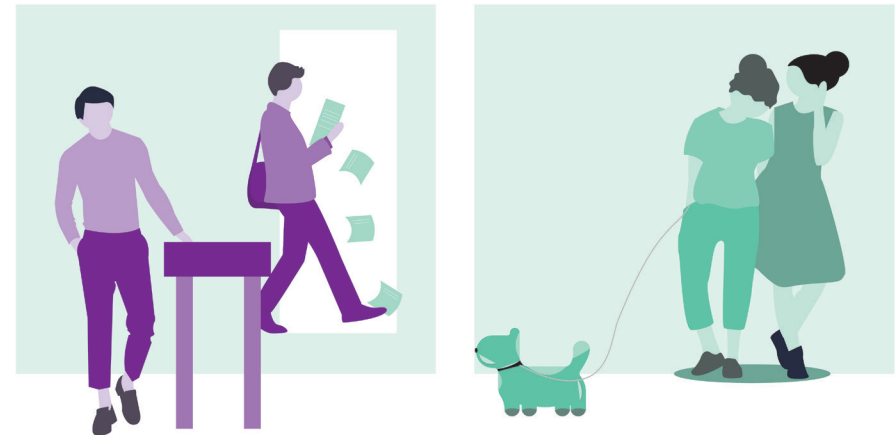
**Activity: Invite the group to read the open letter and ask them to feedback what they learned and what they were encouraged by.**

**In the previous slide, we looked at the challenges to opening the conversation. Now let's look at some top tips for opening up the conversation:**

- Think about setting, what else is the young person doing or going to be doing around that time?
- Be respectful of their priorities - is now the best time? You aren't expected to have all the answers, you're there to listen and guide them.
- Try not to panic if they share something you weren't prepared for.
- Think of ways that you can discuss things without necessarily using labels like 'mental health' or conditions such as anxiety or depression, as this might shut down the conversation.
- Be transparent about what you are doing and why you are doing it. You might want to explain to them that this guide has been helpful for other people, and that it has ideas that you could explore together.
- Listen out for anything worrying that you might need to act on and refer to our signposting advice in this pack for organisations that can provide specialist support.

No matter how conversations have gone in the past we can seek to build on that experience in the future. Generally, despite what young people might say, they do still rely on you to help them through difficult periods.

**Approx. duration 5 minutes**



## Top tips

### Opening up the conversation:

#### Read the 'open letter from a parent'

- Think about setting, what else is the young person doing or going to be doing around that time?
- Be respectful of their priorities, is now the best time?
- You aren't expected to have all the answers, you're there to listen and guide them. Try not to panic if they share something you weren't prepared for.
- Think of ways that you can discuss things without necessarily using labels 'mental health' or conditions such as anxiety or depression. This might shut down conversation or require additional professional support.
- Be transparent about what you are doing and why you are doing it. You might want to explain to them that this guide has been helpful for other people, and that it has ideas that you could explore together.
- Listen out for anything worrying that you might need to act on and refer to our signposting advice in this pack for organisations that can provide specialist support.

# WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH AND RESILIENCE?

## We all have mental health like we all have physical health.

Talk through the slide and invite them to discuss their thoughts on why mental health is as important as physical health.

### Activity: Take five minutes to discuss what they understand by the phrase mental health.

Depending on the knowledge and experience of the group, you may get answers that are quite diverse and cover both mental illness and mental health. However, often people lean towards words associated with mental illness.

Poor physical health can lead to an increased risk of developing mental health problems. Similarly, poor mental health can negatively impact on physical health, leading to an increased risk of some conditions.

Example: A good analogy for understanding this is working out at the gym. If you lift weights consistently and you are given a slightly higher weight than you are used to, you know the form and hopefully will be able to lift the weight. However, if you don't lift weights, you may be worried about it or scared of it. In a similar way, if you look after your mental health over time, it makes it easier to deal with difficult challenges, such as exam pressure.

**Approx. duration 8 minutes**

## What is mental health?

Mental health is defined as a state of **wellbeing** that enables every individual to:

- Realise his or her **own potential**
- Cope with the **normal stresses** of life
- **Work productively**

**It affects how we think, feel and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others and make choices.**

**Why is mental health as important as physical health?**





It's important to know the role resilience plays in supporting positive mental health. It is an essential and learnable skill that everyone has, rather than a trait you are born with, so opening the conversation around it is the best place to start.

The best way to get this across is to be open about what you do to make yourself resilient. Young people will learn and model from this. Equally, please share times when you may not have been resilient.

Read out the definitions on the slide: Resilience is something we use every day; it is a process (something we do rather than something we have) and resilience helps us get through the not-so-fun times.

Resilience is not just to get us through the 'not-fun times' but it can help us with enjoyable times too, it is the mechanisms or strategies we use to navigate life and challenges.

We all know that we all have mental health and that this exists on a continuum, sometimes our mental health can be good and sometimes not so good. Mental health is a vital part of who we are.

We also need to acknowledge that people can still be thriving even with a diagnosis of mental illness, such as depression or anxiety. By using tools that help strengthen resilience, young people can be encouraged to cope with situations that may be stressful.

The key message is that resilience is a protective factor of mental health.

**Approx. duration 5 minutes**

## Resilience

- Is something we use every day
- Is a process (something we do rather than something we just have)
- Helps us get through the 'not so fun' times





# STRESS

Stress and anxiety are major challenges for young people. Don't worry that we are discussing the brain, we all have one. It's important that we touch on this with young people to help them understand that the way we think and where we focus our thoughts can have a massive impact on how our brain is wired and connected up.

As well as how we think, what we do in situations also affects the way our brain is wired and how it helps or hinders us to achieve our goals. We can influence whether our brains help us to be calm, resilient and cope with exam stress, or whether we feel out of control or anxious.

Our brain is complex when we experience extreme stress and prepares us for fight, flight or freeze. That's its job. It helps us when we are in danger.

The problem is, when we are in fight, flight or freeze mode, this is not helpful for learning, thinking, curiosity and remembering things they have learned. Young people may seem very anxious or tell you that the information 'isn't going in' for example. This is because the primal parts of their brain are taking over and flooding their bodies with stress hormones. With the right tools and practice, young people can learn to control this stress response.

You can refer to the stress toolkit in the Parent and Carer guide and encourage young people to try and use tools they haven't used before.

**Approx. duration 5 minutes**

## Stress



**Prolonged stress affects  
our ability to think, learn  
and remember**

# CURIOSITY

You may be thinking 'why is this in here?'. Exploring curiosity is a really useful and important tool to get young people to think and explore about what works for them and what resilience means to them.

This might be an opportunity for you to open up a conversation about what they were curious about when they were younger. Make the point that it's curiosity, experimentation and wanting to discover and learn things that will accelerate their learning and development and open up possibilities for the future even now for them. They might also be curious about what they can achieve and how successful they can be. It's that sense of wonder and exploration.

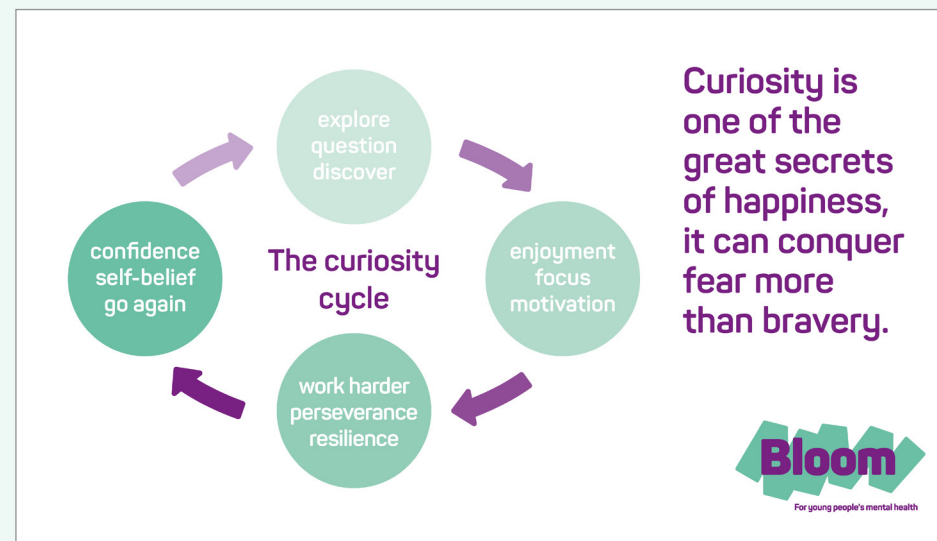
Curiosity is an attitude. It is associated with having an open or 'growth' mindset, where we are open to new ideas and ways of doing things. Instead of being 'closed' to new ideas or things that don't chime with our current beliefs and values, curiosity is about being open to new possibilities. This can help us see more options when making decisions about the future and can help us to become aware (curious) about the benefits of taking one course of action compared with another. Once we make a decision and choose an option, it can help us to be alert to changes, improvements and alternatives when they present themselves, rather than being blinkered and set in our ways.

## Activity: Ask them how curiosity has worked for them in the past?

Pick up on any responses where they have been curious about something that led to enjoyment and motivation and then led to perseverance and working harder, which ultimately led to increased self-esteem.

- Ask them to think of one way they are going to open up a conversation with young people about curiosity when they get home?
- Ask them what the enemies of curiosity are? What reduces a person's ability to be curious?

**Approx. duration 5 minutes**



## There are enemies to curiosity, and these things can prevent us from building resilience:

### 1. Comfort zone:

**Activity:** Ask them what their comfort zone looks like and in pairs to share a time they've pushed themselves out of their comfort zone in the last year. Then think of a time a young person they know well, has done the same. Give them 2 minutes for this.

Ask them to share with the whole group what they felt like after they pushed themselves out of their comfort zone, or what the young person acted like after pushing themselves outside of their comfort zone.

**Learning:** Going out of your comfort zone aids learning.

### 2. Learned helplessness:

As a parent or carer we always want to do what's best for young people, we want to protect them from things that are dangerous physically but also want to protect them emotionally.

Learned helplessness is where we feel we have no power, and no choices available to us, therefore we let other people make our decisions for us, or we do nothing and hope things work out. Learned helplessness closes down our options for the future and makes it less likely we will make a good decision. Young people may become dependent upon us to solve that problem for them regularly, or perhaps not trust themselves.

**Learning:** Giving young people the skills/encouragement to understand options and take action is good for curiosity.

### 3. Closed mind:

That this is black and white thinking. "This is right, that's wrong." This is how I am and how the world should be vs. I am open to new ideas and ways of doing things and I respect and indeed celebrate different views, cultures and ways of being. A closed mind or inflexibility means we are less likely to encounter views, things and people that spark our curiosity.

**Approx. duration 5–6 minutes**

## The 'enemies' of curiosity



# RATIONAL COPING STATEMENTS

## Activity: Ask what are Rational Coping Statements?

'Rational' means based in logic and reality, more likely to have hard evidence, or routed in fact and not opinions or feelings. It will not lean on exaggeration or fantasy. So what is the point of using rational self talk?

- Alongside taking a few deep breaths, rational coping statements help us to stay calm and to respond to situations, rather than react emotionally; they help to keep us grounded
- Rather than saying or doing something in the spur of the moment that we might regret – e.g. panicking, losing your temper, saying something you don't really believe – this can help us take a step back

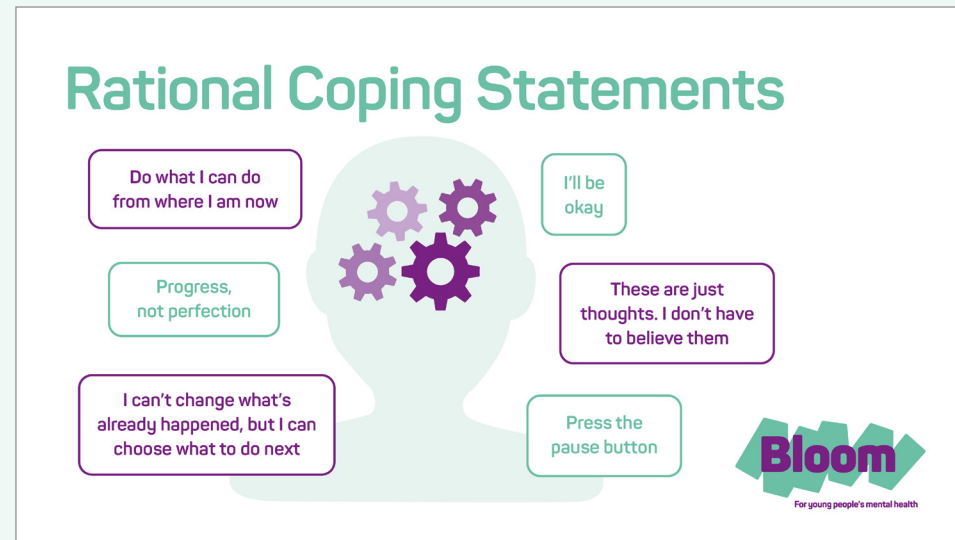
## Activity: Read through the Rational Coping Statements on the slide.

Ask when this might be applied to a situation relevant to them.

For example if a young person has procrastinated and left studying until the final week before their exam a thought like "I can't change what has already happened but I can choose what to do next" might be helpful. Or if they are being very harsh to themselves and commenting negatively on their ability or their appearance then the phrase "These are just thoughts, I don't have to believe them" might help.

You can tell young people that rational self talk can be a tool for when the going gets tough; it can help them come up with their own rational self talk for the 'usual suspects' their inner critic brings up regularly, and have them written somewhere they can see to remind them.

**Approx. duration 5–7 minutes**



# CELEBRATING SMALL STEPS

Celebrating the small wins encourages motivation. Evidence shows that if you record progress, even in some small way this helps boost confidence. When you accomplish something, it activates the reward centre of our brains, allowing us to feel a sense of pride. We should encourage young people to celebrate by reminding them of the small wins they perhaps haven't noticed or marked themselves.

## Activity: Ask "What are your small wins?"

They can write this down on a sticky note, flipchart or have an open discussion. Ask them to share some of their small wins.

You can also support young people by helping them plan small wins into their day, for example:

### 1. Straightening up their bed before they leave for school or college

This might be a 'hard sell' but explain that when they complete this simple task, it incites a nice burst of dopamine first thing in the morning. This can spark the initial feeling of accomplishment and will help with relaxation when they get back at night.

### 2. The 'two minute rule'

If they can do a thing in less than two minutes, encourage them to do it. Checking off a very small thing can help build momentum and propel them forward to accomplish much larger tasks later on. The other positive is that they will have a surge of dopamine each time something is crossed off their list, no matter how small it is. For example, can they pack their school bag for the next day as soon as they get home? It will save them time in the morning.

### 3. Ten minute creative time

Taking time to reflect internally is linked with their emotional well-being. This can support them to form creative ideas and consolidate memories. Encourage them to write or doodle or create a new outfit or setting in their favourite video game- anything that wasn't in existence before they started it. Maybe have creative time in the same room as

## Celebrating the small steps

- Celebrating the small steps encourages you to work harder towards your main goal
- Dopamine (a hormone in your brain) is released when you accomplish something and that creates a feel-good feeling
- Therefore, you are more likely to work towards that bigger goal if you break it down and celebrate the small wins!



their siblings or you. I'm sure they can spare you ten minutes! Encourage them to tell you what they have created.

### 4. The power of reward

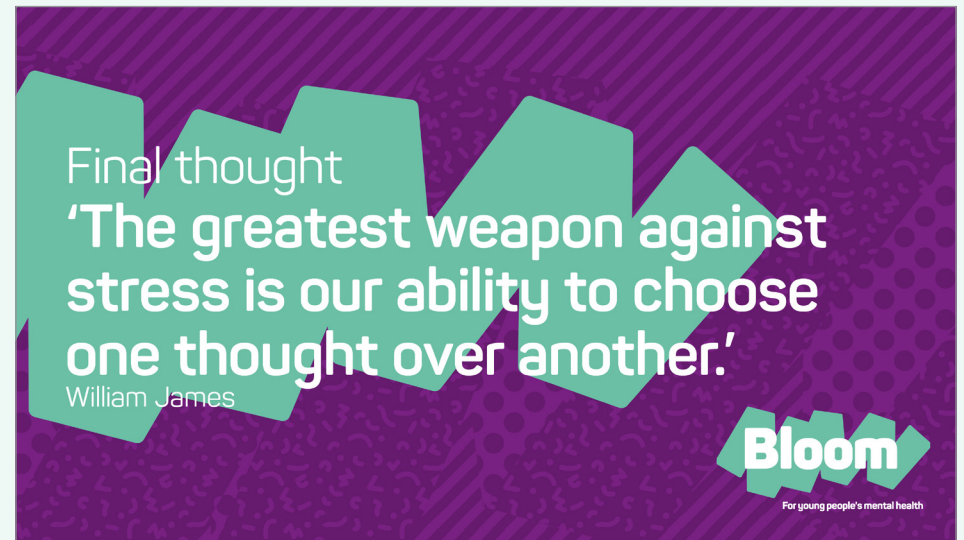
Set a small reward for each day: having something to look forward to improves wellbeing. Ask what they are going to have or do as their reward to themselves for going to school and achieving that day. Maybe that's some time watching their favourite box set, going to the park with their friends after school etc. When they return home ask them to take the time to pause and celebrate when you actually achieve one.

**Approx. duration 4–5 minutes**

Thank you for coming to this presentation today, I hope you have found today useful. Our final thought for today is one from the philosopher William James "The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another".

**Closing activity:** everyone to share something useful they're taking away and one action (big or small) they'd like to commit to going forward.

**Thank parents and carers for taking part.**



# SIGNPOSTING TO ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

**In a crisis, where someone's immediate safety is at risk:**

## Call 999, or visit A&E

(unless the person is already in touch with mental health services and has their own direct crisis contact number for the team supporting them)

**In a non-crisis situation, important first points of call are:**

- Your GP
- England and Scotland: Call NHS Direct or NHS 24 on 111
- Wales: Call NHS Direct Wales on 111 or 0845 46 47
- NHS Choices website [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)
- NHS 24 (Scotland) [www.nhs24scot](http://www.nhs24scot)
- Northern Ireland: call the person's GP or local social services. Or the Emergency Social Work Service on 028 9504 9999 out of hours

In addition to the above, the following are a list of services that may be useful to yourself or someone you know. Mental Health UK has no official affiliation with these sites and organisations and can't take responsibility for the content, but we have found to the best of our knowledge that they are informative and will be useful. Please also note that information regarding services does go out of date, and this information was correct at the time of publishing.

[www.mind.org.uk/information-support/for-young-people/](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/for-young-people/)

[www.mind.org.uk/about-us/mind-cymru/](http://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/mind-cymru/) (Wales)

A mental health charity offering both frontline services and online information. It provides A-Z information about mental health and information for young people and their parent and carers on their website.

Info line: 0300 123 3393

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z>

Website with a useful A-Z of key mental health topics.

[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

<https://youngminds.org.uk/shop/publications/c-23/c-70/>

Website with useful factsheets for young people, parents and carers.

Parents helpline: 0808 802 5544 (Mon–Fri, 9.30am–4pm)

### Scotland

[www.children1st.org.uk/help-for-families/parentline-scotland/](http://www.children1st.org.uk/help-for-families/parentline-scotland/)

Children first has advice and information on their website.

Parents helpline: 08000 28 22 33

### Northern Ireland

[www.parentingni.org/](http://www.parentingni.org/) Website with information and advice.

Support Line: 0808 8010 722

[www.minded.org.uk/families/index.html#/](http://www.minded.org.uk/families/index.html#/)

A website developed by Health Education England and the Department of Education to help families understand and support young people, from parenting tips to getting help in a crisis.

[www.themix.org.uk/](http://www.themix.org.uk/)

A charity that provides free, confidential support for young people under 25 via online, social and mobile.

0808 808 4994

[www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/self-care/](http://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/self-care/)

An organisation who provide information for young people, parents and schools. This link takes you to a 'hub' of ideas and tools for young people to use to maintain their own mental health