

SAFEGUARDING in Focus

Mental Health

Mental health, particularly young people's mental health, has become a critical issue in society. Stories of patients being treated in hospitals miles from home due to lack of services and social media use leading to depression and even suicide are repeatedly in the news headlines. I know that this is something that is high on the agenda of the Four Oaks Head Teachers as we look at ways of working together to address the issues in our locality. Professor Matthew Broome (MBChB Medicine, 1997), Director of the Birmingham Institute for Mental Health has written on this very topic in the last month. "On one hand, there is a shocking amount of stigmatisation of people with mental health conditions. On the other, people with severe mental health conditions, such as psychosis, are experiencing real distress and often need more support that they and their families can access. These services are underfunded in the NHS, despite recent calls for parity of provision in physical and mental health care" he says.

Birmingham's population is among the youngest and most diverse in Europe, and appropriately therefore it is important to turn our attention to the mental well-being of our pupils in an attempt to give them strategies to recognise that mental health is as important as physical health. Three-quarters of lifetime mental disorders begin before the age of 25 and in recent years there appears to have been a marked increase in the numbers of young people accessing mental health services. One factor in this rise may be the economic recession, as suicide rates have increased since the downturn. Yet we are seeing more young people troubled by self-harming, eating disorders, depression and anxiety. Some young people are experiencing more stress at school and can be at risk of developing body image disorders after spending time on social media.

At Hill West we are keen to acknowledge that these are real issues that our young people may face, if not now then at some point in the future and want to engage in a positive dialogue about mental health and well-being in our school and our community. As with many illnesses it is important that we think about moving away from an approach that's primarily based on treating the illness and shift the focus to prevention. "The foundations for virtually every aspect of human development - physical, intellectual and emotional - are laid in early childhood. What happens during these early years has lifelong effects on many aspects of health and well-being - from obesity, heart disease and mental health, to educational achievement and economic status" (Sir Michael Marmot, 2010). As such at Hill West we have developed a whole school progressive learning journey that focuses on children's personal development and well-being. We have engaged with 'Relax Kids' Sutton Coldfield and deliver weekly 'mindfulness classes' to children across school. These classes focus on helping children manage their feelings and anxieties through a mixture of relaxation and breathing techniques.

Relaxation tips for Parents (courtesy of Relax Kids)

Letting Go

In our stressful world, it is important to develop an ability to let things go easily. This is vital for our mental and spiritual health. Try to find moment in the day or at the end of the day, where you can let go and release everything that has happened. This is especially important to do before bedtime. You may like to fill an imaginary balloon with any stresses and anxieties and let it go, or try throwing unwanted thoughts and feelings and watch them disappear or float away. Use your imagination, be creative and make this an enjoyable experience for yourself.

Eat Slowly

When we are rushing from one activity to another, it is easy to forget to look after ourselves and just eat on the go. If you can, try to sit down to eat and eat as slowly as possible – enjoying every mouthful. Your body will thank you for this and you will feel the benefits of deep relaxation. If you can, bless your food or say a short prayer for a few moments. This may sound strange, but there have been studies that our thoughts and intentions can have a profound effect on our food.

Smile

Even if you don't feel like it – smile. Watch as this little facial expression can make a difference to your mood. For a deep relaxation, try this Buddhist exercise of tummy smiling. Imagine you are smiling from the depths of your stomach. As you practise this, you will find that you instantly feel more relaxed and content.

Take a Break

If you are able to stop during the day, schedule a short 5-10 minutes break for yourself. This will help you feel more calm and in control. Use these few minutes to experience deep inner calm and silence. Just allow your thoughts to slow down, let go of the tension in your neck and shoulders and imagine you are being showered by drops of peace and a bubble. If you have time, kick off your shoes and socks and walk on the grass outside. As you build up a practise of this, you will notice how you can be refreshed and rejuvenated in just a short time.

Stop and Breathe

Stop for a few moments and let your mind become still. Take in a deep breath and breathe in a feeling of peace. As you breathe out, breathe out peace into the room. Close your eyes and give yourself a 30 second face massage. End with a brisk rub of the ears for a fantastic rejuvenator.

Practise Meditation

Sit or lie down and let your mind drift away with this meditation. Close your eyes, be very still and imagine you are lying down on the beach. Feel the warm sand underneath your body. You can hear the waves of the sea. Now, very gently you are going to relax each part of your body. Start with your feet, let your toes completely relax and become soft. Now release all the tension in your ankles and let your legs become soft and heavy. Relax the muscles in your tummy and back, feel your back sinking into the soft golden sun on your face and body as you sink further into the lovely soft sand. Enjoy this wonderful feeling of being calm and peaceful. Stay there for a few more moments, enjoying the feeling of being completely relaxed.

For more Relaxation Tips for both adult and child, visit www.relaxkids.com/tips