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## COVID-19: Low Mood in Young People: How to Support Yourself and Others December 2020

Please listen to the Psychology in Schools Podcast on this topic: <https://youtu.be/Wmlur9gu394>

So, we've all been through the first lockdown and we've had to adjust to the tightening and loosening of COVID-19 restrictions and the continued uncertainty about how the pandemic will play out. This is not easy for anyone, but for young people, the pandemic has hit at a time when developmentally-speaking, young people are establishing their own identities and usually spending less time with their parents/carers and more time with their peers. This is a crucial stage of life when young people start to discover who they are and what's important to them and what they may want from their futures. The pandemic has interrupted this natural process and for many young people they have been spending more time than usual with their families, less time with their peers and restricted opportunities when it comes to finding jobs, enjoying social events and hobbies, attending university or travelling. It is therefore not surprising that rates of low mood amongst young people have increased significantly in recent times and many young people report feeling unmotivated, sad and less optimistic about the future.

So, is it the case that the longer the pandemic goes on, the more we can expect young people to experience low mood? Or can we help young people to reflect about the ways in which they coped with the first lockdown and learn from this, thinking about those strategies that helped before and build resilience and psychological strength? Well, we know a lot about low mood in young people and the common signs to look out for (persistent feelings of sadness, irritability, changes in sleep and eating patterns, a sense of hopelessness, feeling worthless, lack of motivation, lack of enjoyment and fatigue) and we also know that once low mood takes hold, we can become stuck in a cycle of sadness, a lack of motivation, decreased activity levels and consequently a lack of enjoyment and intensified low mood. Research clearly tells us that increasing our levels of activity when we feel low in mood helps to combat these symptoms and increases our experiences of enjoyment, pleasure and a sense of purpose. When it comes to the pandemic, it is easy to see how activity levels and social opportunities for young people have been curtailed. It is also important to acknowledge that there were more opportunities to get outside, exercise and meet friends during the warm summer months and the longer daylight hours.

So, what can young people learn from the first lockdown about how to look after their emotional and psychological wellbeing and can we adapt helpful strategies as we move through the various changes to lockdown and tiers? Well, adapting strategies is probably a good place to start. For instance, many

The NSFT NHS Psychology in Schools team promotes positive wellbeing across the school community by working with school leaders, school staff and students

young people have reported that getting outside in nature, exercising and meeting friends outdoors were important to them during the summer and helped to combat low mood and gave a sense of routine. In times when schools and colleges are open and daylight hours are much shorter, we could feel that these strategies are no longer possible but maybe we just need to adjust *when* we do them and for *how long*, rather than throw them out altogether. For example, some young people report that they developed a new habit of exercising every day over the summer but this has now stopped because there is less time available to do this. Being flexible about our activities and readjusting the ways in which we do them, can be a really helpful strategy. We can still benefit from these activities (getting some fresh air, running with a friend, listening to music) even if we can't do this every day or at the same times or for the same length of time. Planning a weekly routine which involves scheduling activities that bring pleasure and enjoyment and a sense of achievement, can really help to boost mood and provide a sense of purpose. This may be a simple goal of baking at the weekend and sharing this with family, as this activity can bring a number of benefits (relaxation, enjoyment and connection with others).

Having a plan is a great way to start to develop routines that later become habits which enrich our lives and build our resilience. Motivation can be hit hard by low mood and it can feel a real struggle to get started on activities and projects, particularly when you're feeling exhausted (another symptom of low mood). However, planning small achievable goals and approaching these step by step can be a great way to get started, and this is often the hardest part. It is important to bear in mind that tiredness and fatigue associated with low mood is helped by *increasing* activity levels and more activity leads to feeling *more energised*, so getting active is key when we feel low and unmotivated! When planning activities, it is important to introduce those that are meaningful to the young person and reflect their own personal values and interests (rather than only planning activities that 'should' or 'need' to be done, such as school, college or university work).

It is also important to acknowledge the very hard times we are in now and this is particularly difficult for young people, who are at a crucial stage of their development and so keen to get on with their lives and the plans they had made. We often talk about feeling of loss and grief when we no longer have the people around us that we had before, and this can bring understandable distress and sadness and it is particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. We should also acknowledge the feelings of sadness, disappointment and frustration that can arise from the loss of our *expected* futures, those things we expected would happen but didn't, which is very relevant to young people today. We are in very challenging times and practising self-compassion and kindness towards ourselves is an important activity. It is easy to be self-critical, blaming yourself for the things you didn't get done or didn't achieve (we may have planned to learn a new language during lockdown or learn to play a musical instrument, but it just didn't happen). Well, this is where self-compassion comes in, as we are all doing our best in challenging circumstances and we need to be flexible with our goals and kind to ourselves. Setting smaller achievable goals and being sure to recognise every achievement can help to build confidence and combat feelings of hopelessness and a lack of motivation. Spending time at the end of each day thinking about the positive things that have happened and small goals that have been achieved is an important habit to get into. In the field of positive psychology research, spending time each day feeling gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness and the experiencing of more positive emotions and relationships. Examples of this practice are feeling thankful for a good friend that you have or appreciating that you live in a warm house or feeling grateful that you have had fun holidays in the past. This approach can also help us to maintain a hopeful and optimistic attitude towards the future and in these times of fear and uncertainty, this is something which can help to build

resilience. Recognising those times when we want certainty and predictability is the first step and acknowledging that this is a natural human instinct, as we tend to feel more in control of our lives when we know what to expect. We need to remember to be kind to ourselves and recognise that tolerating uncertainty is tricky and it can feel uncomfortable at times. So, hopefully after reading this blog you will have a sense of the helpful habits you can get into, to promote positive emotions, combat low mood and build meaningful activities into your life. So, remember: -

- Plan small achievable goals that provide a sense of enjoyment, achievement and purpose
- Recognise and acknowledge your successes and achievements, however small they seem
- Practice gratitude each day, taking time to appreciate all that you have in your life
- Combine activities in order to achieve more than one goal e.g. social connection with exercise or social connection with baking or gaming)
- Introduce flexibility and adaptability when it comes to planning your goals. This is a great skill for life and it helps us to build stronger mental health and resilience.

Suffolk Parent And Carers Together (PACT) offer support and resources for parents <https://www.parentsandcarerstogether.co.uk/about>.

Suffolk Wellbeing <https://www.wellbeingnands.co.uk/suffolk/>