

SHORT GUIDE FOR YOUNG ADULTS ON MENTAL HEALTH



GET STARTED

WELCOME!

INTRODUCTION

Young adulthood is a stressful time of life. Even in normal circumstances as many as [one in five young people from 15 – 24](#) experience significant psychological distress in any given year and [surveys](#) indicate that during the COVID-19 pandemic this may have increased further with experiences of depression, anxiety and loneliness being even higher than in adults. This is hardly surprising considering how much disruption there has been to people in education and those making the transition from education to adult life.

If you or someone close to you is in this situation, they may seek help from their doctor, and this may lead to a further journey into the mental health system. This can be frightening because you may be asked to discuss things and agree to things about which you have little knowledge or understanding.

As about [half of the mental health problems](#) affecting individuals in adulthood have their onset during adolescence, it is important for young adults and the people around them (e.g. families, friends, carers, teachers or professionals) to seek information and find answers to their questions, which is why [Mental Health Europe \(MHE\)](#) has produced this short guide. It cannot of course provide all the answers, but MHE hope that it will give pointers to where to find out more and the courage to ask and keep asking if you are not satisfied.

This guide is the fifth instalment of [MHE's series of short guides](#), all written with the same general aims. The previous publications covered the topics of [psychiatric diagnosis](#), [personal recovery in mental health](#), [psychiatric drugs](#) and [ending coercion and restraint in mental health services](#).

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

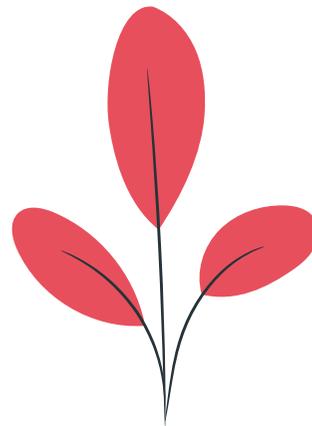
The [World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#) defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.” Mental health is an integral part of everyone’s general health and is as valuable and important as physical health.



HOW AND WHEN DO MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS DEVELOP? ARE THERE RISK FACTORS?

Some claim that mental health problems are caused by biomedical factors and genetic predisposition, suggesting that a person might be predestined to experience them regardless of other factors. However, many people, including psychologists and some doctors, are questioning the validity of this approach as it does not capture the complexity of the topic.

Mental ill health or mental health problems should be understood as a state where a combination of factors – such as stressful life events or unfavourable social, economic and cultural environments – negatively influence the well-being of a person and cause different levels of stress.



These factors can occur at any point in a person's life and are a part of the human experience.

There are also risks to mental health that all young adults may take, sometimes without realizing it. These risks may be excessive alcohol or recreational drug use, gaming on-line, pornography, other potentially addictive activities or sleep deprivation. Risks could also be related to too much pressure at school or at work or accepting decisions of others that do not correspond to what a person really wants in life. It is important to talk openly about these experiences which happen to a lot of young adults when seeking help and not to be embarrassed.

WHAT IS A PSYCHIATRIC/MENTAL HEALTH DIAGNOSIS?

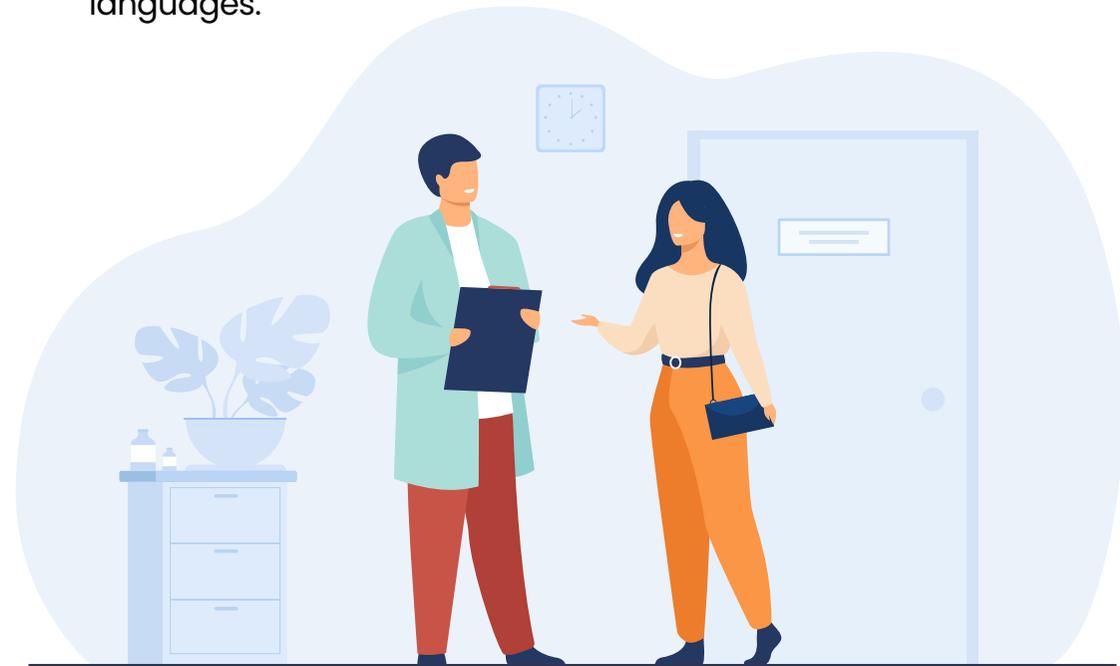
Medical diagnosis is the process of determining which disease or condition explains a person's symptoms and signs. The information required for a medical diagnosis is typically collected from a history and physical examination of the person seeking medical care.

A psychiatric or mental health diagnosis is different: there are often no physical symptoms, nor are there any biological tests that show the presence of a mental health condition like in the case of a physical health problem. Although tests can be important to rule out other physical health conditions which may be causing the symptoms, a health professional making a psychiatric diagnosis must rely on a person's own description of their thoughts and feelings, alongside observations of their behaviour. In this sense, it is often said that the person best placed to make a diagnosis is the person themselves, supported by information and empowered discussion with health care professionals and peers.

It is even more important to express yourself, explain openly what has happened to you, how you feel about it and what you want to do, as mental health services have

become more and more medicalized in Western society, with the risk for young adults to become chronic patients in psychiatric care when the principles of self-determination, empowerment and recovery can make all the difference.

More information on the topic can be found in the [MHE Short Guide to Psychiatric Diagnosis](#), available in different languages.



WHAT IS A PSYCHIATRIC MEDICATION?

In some cases, people that receive a psychiatric diagnosis are prescribed psychiatric drugs as a form of treatment.

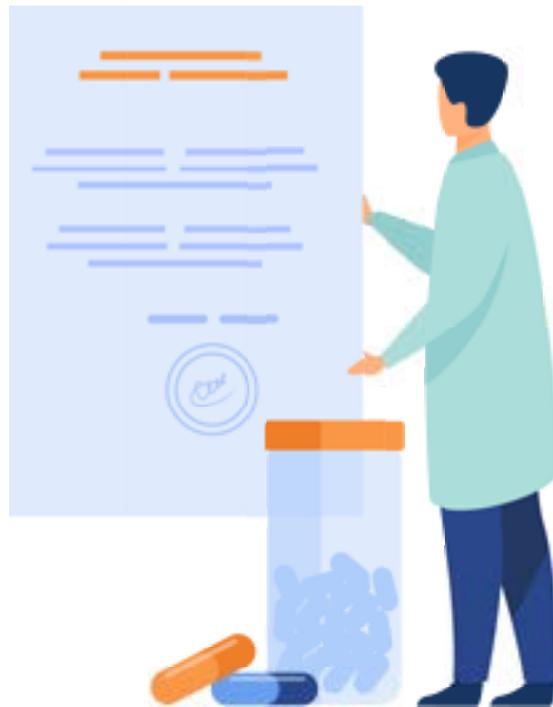
Psychiatric medications are substances capable of affecting the mind, emotions and behaviour. They can alter the way a person thinks, feels and sees the world. Some of their effects are experienced as beneficial and may reduce symptoms, for instance by producing a temporary sense of calm or wellbeing that may be preferable to the previous state of distress or agitation.

On the other hand, as with all drugs that act on the chemistry of the brain, there can be other less desirable effects that are unpleasant, impair functioning and can endanger general health, just like with alcohol, nicotine or other recreational drugs. The adaptations that a body might have to make to deal with the changes

produced by the drug can also mean that if you stop taking it, this can produce unpleasant effects that last for a long time.

In this sense, psychiatric drugs should be considered as tools that may, or may not, be helpful to persons at particular points in their lives. Psychiatric medication can be extremely helpful or even lifechanging for some people, but you should make sure you understand both the risks and the benefits of the particular medication before you make a decision.

The decision to take or cease taking psychiatric drugs should be up to the person taking them. This means with their informed consent and with the right kind of support during all stages of the process. Choosing to take psychiatric medication is not something to be ashamed of or to see as a weakness, so do not be afraid to ask for support with this. More information on the topic can be found in the [MHE Short Guide to Psychiatric Drugs](#).



WHAT ARE SOME COMMON MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS?

There are two main sources to categorise mental health problems: the International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD) and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).

Because there are often no defining physical or biological markers or tests for mental health difficulties, the manuals rely on the collective opinions of panels of experts who decide how to describe different forms of mental health conditions. They compile lists of thoughts, feelings, experiences and behaviours which fit the illness they have named and described. These lists in medical terminology are described as symptoms.

In reality, all of these symptoms are also experienced by people who are not described as mentally ill or distressed and for whom the impact on their lives may be temporary or unproblematic. What the manuals do not always take into account is that people experience and express thoughts, feelings and behaviours differently: what may be a problem for someone at a certain point in life, might not

have been a problem before or a problem after that – and it might be a whole different experience for someone else.

What is important to remember is that people do get better, whether because the condition goes away or because they find a treatment that works well for managing it. We are all different and experience our mental health difficulties in a personal way.



HOW CAN YOU RECOVER FROM A MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM?

Recovery from a mental health problem is a very personal journey and can differ greatly from one person to another. It does not have to be a linear path, nor lead to a fixed and final destination.

The first step is to ask yourself what feeling better and what recovery looks like and feels like to you. It could be, for instance, no longer having a diagnosis or no longer experiencing the challenges associated with the diagnosis or problem. For some, it could also mean feeling better and knowing how to live with mental health problems. Secondly, it is good to think about who you trust to talk with about this and what has been proven to be helpful to you in the past, as well as what did not help. Finally, you might want to pinpoint one thing that you could actually do that would make you feel better, even something really simple.

As these answers emerge, you will start to have a clear idea of your plan for personal recovery based on what you want and of who might support you in this.

As this can be a complex and sometimes daunting process, you might want to find more information in the [MHE Short Guide to Personal Recovery in Mental Health](#).



I AM UNCOMFORTABLE / ASHAMED ABOUT MY MENTAL HEALTH: WHAT CAN I DO?

Talking about your own mental health and experience is a personal choice and you should never be forced to disclose information or feelings that you do not want to share. Unfortunately, stigma and misconceptions about mental health can make it more difficult to open up even when you would like to.

To begin, it is always better to be comfortable with your own story before sharing it and starting by writing it down can be a helpful first step. This will also help you to think about how much you want to share, when and with whom.

Secondly, finding people that have or have had experiences similar to yours – as your peers – and listening to their stories can also be beneficial. This can support you to become more comfortable and confident in articulating your own story, as well as create a connection with your peers that might be able to help. There are many organisations, led by people with lived experience of mental ill health, which offer support, advice and who campaign for better policies in the healthcare and le-



gal systems. Some are mainly concerned with particular conditions, such as [ADHD-Europe](#), while others represent persons with lived experience who want to improve the way people in mental distress are treated, for example the [European Network of \(Ex-\)Users and Survivors of Psychiatry \(ENUSP\)](#). As MHE is a network organisation with a variety of members that cover different topics, you might want to check if [one or more of our members can be there for you in your country](#).

WHERE CAN I ASK FOR HELP?

You might decide to share your experience with someone at school, university or work to ask for help. If so, you should find someone with whom you can talk with on a confidential basis. If you choose to talk with someone who is in charge of ensuring that your education or work continues, you should know that there should be no repercussions following your decision to share information, but it is important to proceed with caution. For some people, it is not necessary to stop studying or working and take time off. If they feel that continuing their studies or their work just as before or on a less intense basis would be helpful, then this is the most suitable course of action and adjustments should be made if they would like them. For others, work or education is the problem, therefore changing jobs or schools could be the best decision for them. This is where finding a counselor or mentor in your educational or working environment can be of help to sort out what is best on the condition they have your trust.

You might also decide to seek the support of a health professional, such as your family doctor, a psychologist or a psychiatrist. In that case, it is important that your own opinions of what you are experiencing are understood and taken seriously and your preferences regarding solutions

and treatment are respected. If what the health professional proposes is clearly not what you want or does not work for you, it is important to have the courage to say so and ask for changes or search for a new professional. Although sometimes difficult, it may be necessary to consult several professionals before finding the right one for you. Above all, if a health professional tells you that the illness they have diagnosed is not treatable or that you will never study or work again, do seek a second opinion immediately. There is no problem for which you cannot get support.

If at any point you need someone to act as an advocate to support you, you should not be afraid to ask a trusted friend or a trusted member of your family. Depending on your relationship with them, support and encouragement from your family and friends can be vital in the process and give you the strength to object to any measures or plans that you do not think are acceptable for you.



HOW DO I TAKE CARE OF MY MENTAL HEALTH?

The way each person can take care of their own mental wellbeing is very personal. There is no recipe that fits everyone. Looking after your own mental health is also a trial-and-error business: try out what could work, make adjustments if needed or look for new solutions, until you find what is best for you. It may be something that seems simple but isn't right now (going to sleep earlier or being on time) or more ambitious (joining a new club, going hiking or swimming). Although it can be challenging and there might be setbacks, patience and courage will help you find what is right for you. What is important is that you stay try it and prioritise it, believe in yourself and work together with your family, friends, supporters and professionals to help you on the way.

Take a look at this list of ideas that MHE put together that may help you: [110 tips for positive mental health](#). We also created a list with [specific tips related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health](#).



WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS?

Recovery is always possible, and it looks different for everyone: it is important to find the path and start the journey that works best for you. At no point during the process, should you feel obliged or coerced into doing something or continuing a treatment that you are uncomfortable with or that is not working for you.

If you are a minor, you should know that your opinion matters and that you have the right to informed consent under international human right standards. The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), which has been signed and ratified by a vast majority of countries in the world, sets an obligation for states to “assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” ([Article 12](#)).

If you are offered medication, it is important that you give your full consent to the treatment and that you receive and understand all of the information about that medication before making a decision and that you feel free to ask questions at any stage. It is also important to be aware

that medication for some conditions may help you to feel better in the short term, but it is also useful to ask for counselling, psychotherapy or mentoring at the same time in order to allow you to explore your long-term goals and recovery, if this is the case for you. If at any point you wish to stop taking medication, you should be able to do so and should receive adequate support.

In addition to MHE Short Guides on psychiatric diagnosis, psychiatric drugs and recovery, you might also wish to check our Short Guide on [ending coercion and restraint in mental health services](#).



HOW SHOULD WE TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH?

When it comes to mental health and mental ill health, the words we use matter more than we think. The way we talk about mental health and people experiencing mental ill health can reinforce negative stereotypes and be stigmatising, without us even realising it. For instance, focusing on labels or symptoms alone can reduce or even belittle the



complexity of a person's experience. People who have received a mental health diagnosis may feel they have lost their identity as they knew it before, so it is important to realize that no one should be reduced to a diagnosis. There is the assumption that mental health problems are always caused by an underlying brain issue, yet for many conditions there is no direct evidence to support this idea.

For many people, the distress that leads them to seek professional mental health help has roots in social disadvantage: poverty, poor housing, insecure and low-paid jobs, inadequate early childhood care, missing out on formal qualifications, living in stressful environments or having to move home frequently.

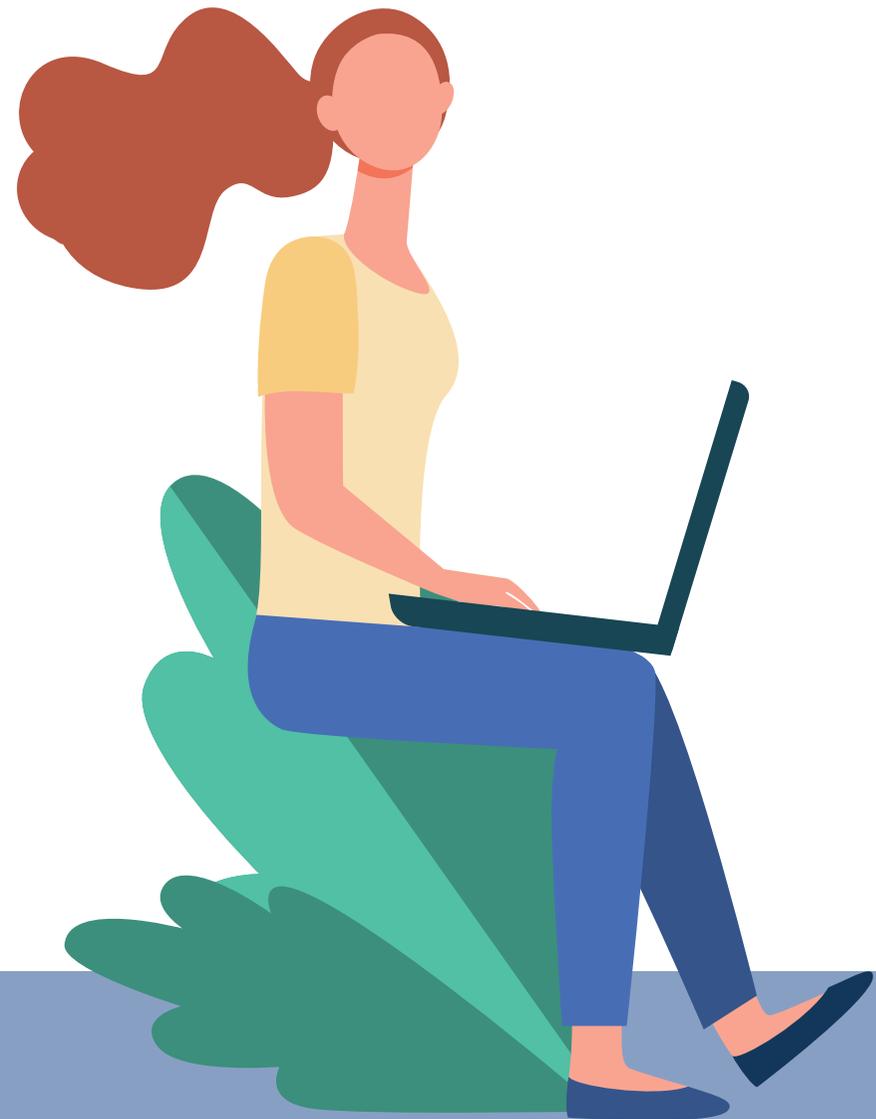
However, language can also be a powerful tool for creating awareness and fighting stigma. MHE put together an [infographic on the use of language and how to talk about mental health](#) (available in English and French). We have also issued a [guide to explain terminology used in the mental health field](#).

HOW DO I FIND INFORMATION ONLINE AND THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA?

You could start by looking up the resources and links shared in this guide. They will provide you with more detailed information on topics like psychiatric diagnosis, medications and their use, as well as recovery and self-care. You will find more information on [our website](#) and our social media channels ([Twitter](#), [YouTube](#), [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#)).

On our [members' page](#), you can find more information about members near you or members focusing on a specific mental health problem.

Finally, in case you would like to seek support or talk to someone, we have compiled a [map of helplines and organisations providing mental health support in various European countries](#).



SOMEONE I KNOW IS NOT DOING WELL: HOW CAN I HELP?



There are a few simple steps that you can take to support someone near you that is struggling with their mental health and well-being. The most important thing to remember is that as these experiences are very personal, what the person might be feeling or thinking may be different from what you feel or think. They may be going through a unique process where old attitudes, meanings, goals, skills and roles are changing. Be respectful of their journey and do not impose your own view – try instead to support the creation of a space where these changes are possible, and you can talk about it together.

It may not be easy to approach a fellow student or co-worker who might need your help, and the best thing to do is to ask them confidentially how they feel and if there is anything you can do to help, without making a judgement. Reaching out with empathy to another person can make a big difference.

At the same time, be mindful of your own wellbeing and look after your mental health too. Supporting someone who is struggling with their mental health can be a journey for both of you: make sure you have the support that you need as well and remember that the other person's recovery process is not your sole responsibility.

Here are some steps you might wish to take:

- Educate yourself on mental health, recovery, the value of peer support and educators, mentoring and counselling, treatments and self-care. Look up the resources and links in this guide.
- Keep lines of communication open with the person you are supporting even when it is difficult. Many family members and carers are afraid to say the wrong thing. The person who means so much to you is still there, even if they have changed.
- Ask permission from the person you are supporting before speaking with any key workers and other mental health professionals if you are worried about them.
- Seek out a family peer support worker, like a family member or carer with lived experience of supporting an individual who has had mental ill health. They can provide you with information, emotional support and practical tips on navigating services.
- Take breaks when you can and try to do so without feeling guilty. It is not selfish to do this. It is essential.



RESOURCES

In addition to the resources and links mentioned above, here some additional material that could be useful:

- Information on body dysmorphia from the [National Health Service \(NHS\)](#) in the United Kingdom and [the International OCD Foundation](#);
- Information on [skin picking disorder](#);
- Information on [trichotillomania or hair pulling disorder](#);
- Information on [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder \(ADHD\)](#). Information is also available [here](#).





ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH EUROPE (MHE)

With 70+ organisations in 30 countries, MHE is the largest independent network working to advocate for positive mental health and wellbeing and to protect the rights of people with mental ill-health. We continuously champion social inclusion, deinstitutionalisation and respect for the human rights of people with psychosocial disabilities. We raise awareness to end mental health stigma throughout Europe.

For more information, please see www.mhe-sme.org

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