

Young people's mental health

Info for young people

What's new about being 16-18?

At 16 you are legally on the road to becoming an adult. The law will let you do all sorts of things that you weren't allowed to do when you were younger.

You can:

- Leave school
- Work full-time if you have left school, although there are some restrictions on the work you can do, e.g. you can't work in a betting shop or in a bar during opening hours
- Buy lottery tickets and bet on the football pools
- Get married if your parents say you can (if your parents are married to each other, both must agree; if not married, you only need your mother's consent, unless your father has parental responsibility for you; if parental consent is refused a court may authorise the marriage)
- Have sex
- Buy cigarettes, cigars, loose tobacco and cigarette papers
- Join the armed forces if a parent says you can

At 17 you can also hold a licence to drive a car, motorcycle, scooter or tractor.

At 18 you can:

- Get married even if your parents say they don't want you to
- Vote in general and local elections
- Serve on a jury
- Make a will
- Hold a credit card
- Enter a betting shop and work in one, and place a bet
- Join the armed forces even if your parents don't want you to
- Buy and drink alcohol in a bar
- Buy fireworks
- Apply for a passport without a parent's consent
- Open a bank account
- Own land, buy a house or flat, be a tenant, and apply for a mortgage

What's so special about being 16-18?

Alongside all these new responsibilities and freedoms, you're still growing - physically and mentally. You are still exploring what your body does and what you can do with it. You're becoming much more aware of your abilities. At the same time, your mind knows more and it takes things in more sharply and quickly.

You become more questioning, more critical and you may view your parents in different ways. Maybe they are not so 'perfect' or 'horrible' as you once thought - perhaps they are just ordinary people with their own funny ways. More and more you come to see the wider world, with all its glories and its politics and wars, and realise that you're going to have to live in it and make it a better place.

What's the excitement - the fun?

Growing up can be fun because it's all about finding out and trying out new things in the world. You don't have to know everything right away – but it's great to find out more about things that interest you. It may be things like:

- A football team
- A song
- A pop star
- A film
- A boyfriend
- A girlfriend

It may be about learning a new job. Maybe it's finding out about a course you'd like to study or a place you'd like to visit. Whatever it is, finding out and learning more should be exciting.

Learning new things is about exploring and trying out. It's about experimenting. You never know what might come up next, or what you will find.

What's the downside - the fears and the worries?

There's always a downside, somewhere - there has to be. It's true that some people always look really confident - but don't be fooled by appearances. Everyone struggles with growing up - there are just too many things to be unsure about, too many 'what ifs':

What if...

- I fail my exams?
- No-one likes me, or fancies me?
- I'm unsure about my sexuality?
- I'm not ready to study further or to get a job?
- I feel like I'm going crazy?
- I'm different to other people?
- I hate my mum and dad?
- My family want to get rid of me?
- I have no money, or nowhere to live?
- I just don't know...

Maybe you...

- Have fallen deeply in love
- Just can't concentrate
- Feel a failure
- Think you're addicted to drugs and can't get off them
- Feel so angry, you're scared of what you might do next

We all worry about some of these 'what ifs' and 'maybes' at some stage in our lives. It's good to talk them over with someone else that you can trust; then you've got a better chance of sorting them out. You might get some other ideas – ideas you'd never have thought of yourself and you'll get some clues about where to go next.

But some young people get very scared or **angry** and don't know who to turn to. They may have had a hard time when they were younger. Now that they are having to face

up to the tasks of growing up and making choices about their future, they feel unsure of themselves, and scared they won't be able to cope.

Young people who feel like this have different ways of showing it. They may hit out, steal, be loud or they may begin to give up – avoid their friends, take drugs, get lost in their computers, become worried about their bodies or develop eating problems.

We all feel [depressed](#) sometimes – life is full of disappointments, losses and frustrations but not everyone feels so low that they can't break out of it, that they can't study or work properly or enjoy friendships or get on with their lives. If you feel as bad as that, you may be suffering from clinical depression and you'll need support from someone trained to help, like a psychologist or counsellor.

There are many other kinds of mental health problems, some more severe (like psychosis - [see below*](#)) than others. About one in ten young people suffer from some type of serious mental health problem while growing up that affects their behaviour, the way they eat or sleep, their ability to study and to get on with other people. These problems can last for months and prevent you from getting on with life. In such cases specialist help should be sought from people such as psychologists, psychiatrists and psychotherapists. Your GP, school counsellor, social worker, Connexions worker or personal adviser should be able to refer you to these specialist mental health professionals.

The person you see will want to help you – and won't think that you're stupid, mad or wasting their time. What you say to them will remain confidential – no-one else will know what you've talked about (the specialist will explain to you if they do have to tell someone else). They are used to talking to people who have all sorts of worries, even if you're not sure what to say or how to say it.

**[Psychosis](#) is a state of mind in which people lose contact with reality and their feelings and thoughts, and often become very confused. It affects people in different ways, but some of the most common symptoms are: hallucinations, delusions; loss of energy; mood swings. Remember, if you experience some of these symptoms, it doesn't always mean you are experiencing psychosis. ([see above](#))*

What about sex?

It's not unusual to be interested and excited about the possibilities of sex and curious about new experiences. You may be looking for warm, loving and good feelings, thrills and buzzes and know that there is a lot of fun to be had.

Some people have sex at a young age and you may be feeling pressure to have sex yourself. But actually, most young people take their time and wait to feel ready. You should always feel comfortable with the things you do and not do anything you don't want, or against the wishes of whoever else is involved. Sexual relationships are better when there is love, respect and commitment.

There are serious consequences attached to having sex. Pregnancy is one of them. There are many sexually transmitted infections to avoid too. AIDs is a very serious condition, and chlamydia ([see below*](#)), mainly in young women, is on the increase.

So, alongside the fun of sex, you've got to be serious – and think very carefully about what might happen. There are so many unwanted pregnancies, sometimes resulting in children whose parents cannot care for them for all sorts of reasons. A condom protects very effectively against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, but doesn't work 100% of the time.

**[Chlamydia](#) is caused by bacteria that can cause damage to the fallopian tubes. The only way to catch it is through unprotected sexual intercourse and so the use of condoms is very important. It is treatable with a two week course of antibiotics; partners should always be treated as well. It is important too to check regularly with your doctor as women can often have the infection without being aware of symptoms*

What about drugs and alcohol?

The excitements and dangers of taking [drugs or drinking](#) are different from having sex. But what they do have in common is the search for pleasure, for feeling good, for finding something new about yourself. There is nothing basically bad or abnormal about **searching** for these feelings. But **taking** drugs and drinking does involve other people and does carry risks. People take drugs or drink for various reasons.

Some young people try drugs at some point - usually cannabis. Most of them just try it once or twice. Some people take drugs or drink more regularly, as part of their social life. Some become addicted; this means they feel they can't cope without taking drugs or drinking excessively.

They may already have a mental health problem such as depression, and begin to feel that drinking or taking drugs helps, but in the end it only makes things worse. Some don't care, but most feel trapped and controlled by their addiction. They know that it is holding them back and that they are doing something they don't feel right with. They need help from specialist drug or alcohol treatment services. You find these by going to your GP, or Connexions adviser. You could also contact one of the places listed in the section of 'useful organisations'.

The main risks of taking drugs are their effects on your body and brain, and the risk of getting into trouble with the law. The effects of the chemicals on the brain can be very serious and they exist, in varying degrees, in all drugs like cannabis, alcohol, cocaine, crack, ecstasy, solvents, heroin, LSD or tobacco.

You can also get into serious trouble with the law for having illegal drugs on you. Even if you mean to share them with someone else, the law may see this as drug dealing.

Who is worrying about you?

Between 16 and 18 you may feel you're neither a child nor fully an adult. Legally, you may be able to do adult things, but emotionally you may feel you have a long way to go. Or maybe it's the other way round? You feel grown up, but trapped because you don't have enough freedom.

Your parents, carers, teachers, mentors and friends are all a big part of your life and you are a part of their lives. You are still in the middle of becoming more independent of them. You may feel you have to disagree with them, rebel against them, ignore them - as much as you may love them, you may have to make your point that you are and feel different. But you will most probably still need them for money and somewhere to live.

In many families with teenagers there is a fair bit of tension about. And you may feel annoyed that your parents and carers are worrying about you for nothing.

They may ask all sorts of questions:

- Are you doing your homework?
- Why so long on the telephone - it costs money?
- What have you got inside that computer?
- Are you sure that boy isn't a drug dealer?
- Why did you come in so late last night?
- What are you going to do for a living?

All of these just mean they care about you. Sometimes though, people have the opposite problem and feel no-one worries about them. If you feel like this it's important to get some help from other people around you so you get the support and care that you, like everyone, need.

What does it take to be an adult?

Adult means simply 'grown up'. But the question is - how grown up? If you are to face all the responsibilities of standing on your own two feet and having others be dependent on you - like children, employees or friends and family - you have to develop in a lot of different ways and this will take time. The more you know yourself, the easier it is to be 'grown up'. It might help to ask yourself some questions as you go along. Don't worry if you don't know the answers to all these questions - most of us don't, but they are useful to think about. This is because they may tell you about what parts of yourself you may want to change, and what parts you may want to keep the same.

You may ask:

- Who am I?
- Who are my parents and grandparents?
- What am I good at...what am I not so good at?
- What do I like about me...what don't I like?
- How well do I stand up for myself?
- How am I different to other people...or the same?
- How do I affect other people?
- How well do I know my strengths and weaknesses?
- Do I try to see other people's points of view?
- Do I try to help my friends when they need it?
- What could people trust me with?
- Am I clear what I want to achieve?

Where's the future?

The big questions for 16-18 year olds are:

- Where am I going?
- What am I going to do to get there?
- How am I going to make my money?

These are hard questions - more so for some than others. You might know early on what you want to do. Or you might not be so sure, and you need as much guidance and help as you can get. Many of you might say, "I don't know what I am going to do...", which is quite normal.

You have so many ideas and dreams and abilities (even though you may think you have none!) that it's not surprising that you may not be too sure where you are going.

All you can do is keep on thinking about it. Make a list of the things at school, and outside of school, that you:

- Like
- Think you are good at
- Know other people think you are good at

Try and put them in order - write down which are the most important. It may also be helpful to talk to your friends about what you are thinking; they will probably be going through something similar. Talk to your parents and other adults - like relatives and teachers, and listen to their advice (you don't have to take it, but it may be helpful).

Get in touch with a [Connexions](#) personal adviser - through your school, college or local youth centre. A Connexions personal adviser's job is to support you and provide information about courses, work opportunities and places that can support you in

other areas, and help you link up with other organisations. There are details about them in the section of useful organisations and the Internet is a good way of finding information.

Take your time. Don't panic, just because you don't know yet.

It may be helpful to contact some of the organisations listed below:

Brook

Brook 421 Highgate Studios, 53-79 Highgate Road, London NW5 1TL, Tel: 020 7284 6040 www.brook.org.uk

This organisation provides free and confidential sexual health advice and contraception to young people up to the age of 25.

Careline

Cardinal Heenan Centre, 326-328 High Road, Ilford IG1 1QP, Tel: 020 8514 117 - Monday-Friday 10am-1pm and 7-10pm, Email: careline@totalise.co.uk
www.carelineuk.org

Confidential telephone counselling for people of any age, on any issue.

Connexions

Campaign line: 0808 001 3219, Textphone:08000 968 336 www.connexions-direct.com

A government support service which aims to provide advice, guidance and access to personal development opportunities for young people aged 13-19 years. The campaign line will refer on to the local service.

Eating Disorders Association

1st Floor, Wensum House, 103 Prince of Wales Road, Norwich NR1 1DW, Adult helpline: 0845 634 1414 - Monday-Friday 8.30am-8.30pm, Email: helpmail@edauk.com, Youthline: 0845 634 7650 Monday-Friday 4-6.30pm, Email: talkback@edauk.com www.edauk.com

Support and information for people with eating disorders and their carers through telephone helplines, a network of self-help groups, and newsletters.

Mind

Granta House, 15 - 19 Broadway, London E15 4BQ, Mindinfo: 08457 660 163, Publications: 020 8221 9666 www.mind.org.uk

Provides mental health support and campaigns for good quality mental health services. Offers information and a wide range of publications.

Samaritans

Chris, PO Box 90 90, Stirling FK8 2SA, Tel: 08457 90 90 90 - 24 hours, Textphone: 08457 90 91 92, Email: jo@samaritans.org www.samaritans.org.uk

Confidential emotional support for anyone who is in crisis.

The Site

www.thesite.org

Information website for 16 - 25 year olds with articles on various emotional problems.

There4me

www.there4me.com

Email support service for young people between 12-16 years. There's on-screen advice about all sorts of things eg. bullying, relationships, exams, drugs, difficulties at home, to name just a few. Or you can send an e-letter to Sam, their agony aunt. If you'd prefer a confidential private session, you can talk 1-2-1 in 'real time' with an NSPCC adviser, or email for reply within 24 hours. You don't have to say who you are - you stay in control.

Traumatic Stress Clinic

73 Charlotte Street, London W1T 4PL, Tel: 020 7530 3666 - Monday-Thursday 9am-5pm, Fridays 9am-4pm www.traumatic-stress.com/tsc

The Child and Family Team offers a specialist multi-disciplinary approach to the psychological assessment and treatment of children, young people and their families following exposure to trauma. These may include: • Murder • Parental suicide • Domestic violence • Chronic exposure to violence in the family or community • Fire • Road traffic accident • Community disasters • War and dislocation (refugee project)
Services include: • Consultation • Assessment of children, parents and family • Individual psychotherapeutic work • Family therapy • Group therapy • Traumatic bereavement counselling • Medico-legal work • Professional consultations • Teaching. The service can also be taken to schools via the educational psychologist. There is also a team offering services to adults.

Youth Access

2 Taylors Yard, 67 Alderbrook Road, London SW12 8AD, Tel: 020 8772 9900
www.youthaccess.org.uk

Provides information, advice and counselling services throughout the UK for young people aged 12-25 years. Can give details of appropriate local agencies for young people.