



Resource

Emotions and Mental Health

Young people with long-term physical conditions, such as JIA are more at risk of suffering from poor emotional and mental health, such as depression and anxiety. It's important to be aware of this, but to know that there is also a lot that can be done to help.

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A video modal with a blue border. The top left shows the JIA at NRAS logo. The top right shows three cartoon children: a girl with dark skin and hair, a girl with blonde hair, and a boy with a green cap. The bottom half of the modal has a green background with the text 'Looking after mental health in JIA' in white.

Looking after mental health
in JIA

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Young people with long-term physical conditions, such as juvenile arthritis are more at risk of suffering from poor emotional and mental health, such as depression and anxiety.

Long-term conditions can be managed but they cannot be cured and they come with a possibility of social isolation, low self-esteem, stigma and discrimination. This can certainly give way to a mental health condition.

The following information is general guidance on mental health and young people.

For expert support and advice, please consult a professional specialising in mental health. There are useful website links at the end of this document.

Anxiety

Risk factors for anxiety and depression include school-work problems, bullying, exam pressure and physical illness, and they can co-exist but not necessarily.

We all worry a certain amount, anxiety and stress in some situations is necessary. For example, we wouldn't cross a road safely if we weren't slightly anxious about the traffic; but excessive worrying and persistent anxious thoughts every day could mean someone has a general anxiety disorder. For example, typically

- A young person may have trouble sleeping or wake up often when asleep
- Having a finicky and obsessive mind-set known as 'perfectionism' goes hand-in-hand with anxiety disorders

Relaxation Techniques

- Self-help strategies include relaxation methods; you cannot be relaxed and anxious at the same time. The nervous systems in the body which controls anxiety and relaxation work in opposition to each other; therefore if you can learn a relaxation technique that works, you will be able to control anxiety more effectively.
- The method favoured by clinical psychologists is called "progressive muscular relaxation". This involves tensing and relaxing the muscles throughout the body. Working from the feet towards the head, the muscle tensing is held for about 5 seconds, and then allowed to immediately relax. As you work through the muscles in the body, tensing and relaxing eventually this creates a feeling of warm heaviness spreading throughout the whole body.
- Learning to distract oneself can help to turn off the stress tap. Discover which one works best; mental games, puzzle books and crosswords can help to focus the mind as long as they are not too difficult.

Depression



Depression is one of the most common mental health problems. When someone becomes depressed, generally their level of activity reduces and patterns of thinking change. Signs of depression include:

- Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness
- Loss of interest in daily activities
- Appetite or weight changes
- Sleep changes
- Anger or irritability
- Loss of energy
- Self-loathing and reckless behaviour

Self help strategies include using an activity diary to help make, share and stick to plans and working on changing thought processes with a view to thinking becoming more rationale and positive. When something happens in life that is more of a negative experience than a positive one, young people who are depressed or anxious may over think things and this can lead onto increased unhelpful thoughts. Positive thinking plays an important role in emotional well being. It's about approaching life's challenges with a positive outlook but at the same time not ignoring the negatives, just seeing oneself in a positive light and making the best out of bad situations.

There is a lot of information on "negative self talk" on the web; Self talk is the stuff that we mentally say to ourselves; however it is important to remember that anxiety for example is an emotion that can

also motivate us to change and do something about a situation! So if we ignore it all the time, we may end up not making a changes or doing anything about a situation that we can potentially resolve. So some level of negative activity can be good for us.

How effective “positive thinking” is depends on many factors including the individuals belief systems and coping mechanisms; each person has to find what works for them, but it is important to acknowledge negative feelings and emotions, don't deny them!

The trick is the balance between being optimistic and realistic.

Self Harm

It's a behaviour, not an illness, it's not attention-seeking and is often a secretive and private act.

Self harm can be used to:

- Communicate feeling of distress
- Give relief from emotional pain and tension
- Regain feelings of control
- Self punish for feelings of guilt or shame

Self harm can range from minor injury to dangerous and life-threatening behaviour. Young people self harm for many reasons, including bullying and poor body image. Possible warning signs that a young person is self harming are:

- Unexplained accidents or injuries include cuts, bruises or cigarette burns to sometimes easily hidden areas of the body
- Low self-esteem
- Isolation, irritability and mood changes
- Poor performance or results at school or work
- Loss of interest in favourite hobbies or sports
- Keeping fully covered, even in warm weather. Also avoiding situations where revealing clothing is expected (for example PE at school)

There may be a number of reasons for their behaviour e.g. coping with emotional pain.

- If the young person is experiencing emotional trauma, depression or anxiety, provide information regarding effective help and treatments. There are website links below.
- Professionals who can help include the school nurse, psychiatrists, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), clinical psychologists, counsellors, drug and alcohol treatment services and mental health services.

[Young Sibs](#)

YoungSibs is an online support service for children and young people who have a disabled brother or sister.

[Selfharm UK](#)

SelfharmUK is a project dedicated to supporting young people impacted by self-harm

[Bullying UK](#)

Bullying UK is a leading charity providing advice and support to anyone affected by bullying.

[CALM \(Campaign Against Living Miserably\)](#)

CALM is leading a movement against suicide, the single biggest killer of men under 45 in the UK and the cause of 18 deaths every day.

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