



What parents need to know about Mental health content online

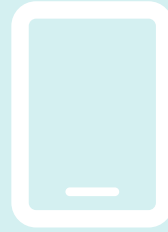
As parents, it can feel like it's hard to keep up with all the content available to our young people online. That's completely understandable – there really is a lot to learn and understand about this fast-changing online world.

And when your young person is struggling with their mental health, it can be tough to know what to do to help. Some young people withdraw when they don't understand the complexity of emotions they're processing, or act out as they try to re-establish a sense of stability. Ultimately, our young people are looking for support or information to help them understand why they feel the way they do.

Professor Ruth Page from the University of Birmingham has been conducting some research on the influence of online content to support or hinder young people's mental health journeys. Care for the Family has partnered with the research, to help parents and young people navigate this topic together.

Use of social media

Did you know that social media is used by **one third of young people** as a source of 'DIY' mental health support?¹



If your young person is struggling with their mental health, it's important to know where they're likely to look for support. Many of us as adults utilise the internet to ask health-related questions to determine what we're experiencing – our young people are no different.

Some of the content available to them can be helpful. It raises awareness of different mental health experiences, provides peer support and offers examples of help-seeking. However, it's important to teach our young people how to recognise the differences between the types of content available.

The kinds of mental health content our children might encounter on social media include:

- Educational posts about how conditions are diagnosed and treated
- Advice about wellbeing and positive mental health
- Stories of personal experience

Educational posts

Educational posts by accredited professionals or organisations can be extremely beneficial as a young person seeks to understand what they're thinking or feeling.

But how do they know if what they're looking at is from a professional service? Would they recognise if that content was coming from an individual without appropriate credentials, or if those credentials were fake?

Personal stories

We also know that young people value hearing from others who have experienced similar things. It's an encouragement for them to know they're not the only one, to hear top tips and ideas to help process what's happening or find courage to carry on.



Professional and personal content can offer complementary ways of supporting our young people. Information from professionals can provide a reliable source of advice while relatable personal content encourages a sense of community. So how do we help them understand the content they're seeing or searching for, and what can be helpful, or possibly harmful?

Is it helpful or harmful?

Here are some questions which can help you assess whether social media content about mental health is helpful or not.

What support is being offered?

Helpful content includes information about where to find support from reliable sources like professional services, charities or support lines. There are also many positive and helpful apps and resources in the digital space to support young people through mental health challenges.

Why am I watching this?

Clickbait 'hooks' like controversial claims about mental health or graphic images are designed to prompt curiosity and boost views. This can expose children to unhelpful content, sensationalising harm and misinformation.

Top tip:

Practising a 'three second pause' before clicking can reduce the risk of encountering harmful content.

Signposting to further support

- **Aye Mind** offers a list of digital resources available for young people, which is supported by research: ayemind.com
- **Care for the Family** has a 'Helpful organisations list' for parents and young people on our app or via our 'Parent Support' pages on our website: cff.org.uk/parenting

Did you know?

Some mental health content is illegal under the Online Safety Act², such as promoting suicide and self-harm. Most social media sites have safety guidelines that ban illegal content and restrict viewing sensitive content. But relying on those guidelines isn't enough, we need to equip our young people with the skills they need to make wise choices if, and when they come across content that concerns them.

Evaluating content about mental health is an important skill that helps us minimise risks and understand the benefits this content might offer.

What effect does this have on me?

Responses to mental health content can vary from person to person. Developing emotional awareness is an important skill that helps each person manage their reactions.

For instance, we know that:

- Personal stories about mental health issues can be inspiring, but sometimes distressing or triggering.
- Advice about nutrition and exercise can be helpful for some, but may be difficult if you're navigating issues with your body image or struggling with an eating disorder.
- Mental health campaigns might raise awareness, but increase a child's anxiety about their own experiences.

Top tip:

Take time together to explore the platforms and apps that support wellbeing. Doing this together can be a great way to start conversations based on their age or stage of development.

Whether it looks like it or not, our young people look to us for support and guidance. We are the atmosphere keepers in the home and can provide that warm and loving environment for them to feel safe to ask questions and explore what's going on in a healthy way.

Look after yourself



Supporting our young people through mental health challenges isn't easy. Remember to take time to look after yourself too. Our 'helpful organisations list' can signpost you towards specific support charities and organisations. Care for the Family also has a Careline telephone support service available – simply call, 029 2081 0800 for more information.

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¹ Stem4, 'Anxious and at breaking point', stem4.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Anxious-and-at-breaking-point-stem4-July-2023-survey-Sep-23.pdf

² Ofcom, 'Online Safety', ofcom.org.uk/online-safety