



Is supporting mental health really a teacher's job?

Teachers are under so much pressure already, is it appropriate to ask them to focus on mental health as well? Shouldn't we be freeing up teachers to focus on academic teaching rather than spreading their attention ever thinner?

Fears about teacher capacity are well founded. Many teachers are overloaded. But to ask whether teachers have a role in supporting mental health is to miss a crucial point: all teachers already have an influence on young people's mental health and wellbeing; the question is whether that influence is accidental or deliberate, negative or positive. It's not about whether or not to do this, it's about whether to make it explicit and strategic.

Teachers do not need to become clinicians, but they do need to see their role as a teacher clearly. Teachers are in the business of cognition, learning, memory, the mind – it stands to reason that young people's mental health is both something they affect and something they need to nurture in order to do their job successfully.

Teachers steward young people through some of the most high pressure moments of their early lives – exams and life-altering decisions – and they are the nearest adults as some young people experience challenges with peers or in their lives beyond school. Research by the NHS shows that teachers are the professional adults most frequently approached by children and young people about mental health concerns.¹

Teachers have both an opportunity and a responsibility to provide or signpost support and to respond appropriately when they learn of wider issues their pupils are facing.

Teachers influence pupils' mental health daily, sometimes encountering situations that are beyond their comfort zone.

It is understandable when schools and teachers feel overwhelmed by mental health or do not think they have time to address it. The irony is that when schools take a coordinated, evidence-led approach to mental health, the work of teachers becomes easier, more effective and more enjoyable. When the conditions in school foster wellbeing and support mental health, teachers are freed up to focus on academic learning, young people are happier, more resilient and more engaged in lessons, and there are clear processes for supporting those who are struggling. Instead of individual teachers dealing with issues on a case by case basis, there is a joined up approach that reduces the burden on everyone, in turn increasing the wellbeing of teachers.

Teachers and young people are under huge amounts of pressure. A whole school approach to mental health can reduce that pressure.

Teachers will need to change what they do, but this is primarily a matter of modifying existing practice and introducing small new habits, rather than adding a whole new dimension to their role. With the right strategies, teachers can use the challenges of academic learning as a safe space within which pupils can develop their resilience and learn techniques for overcoming challenges. Changes to the classroom culture and environment can make young people feel safer and happier.

Teachers influence pupils' mental health daily, the question is whether they are doing it more or less well, and more or less deliberately.