Mental Health and Wellbeing

for members of parent carer forums

Practical Steps to Enhance Your Mental Wellbeing

- **Emotional Support** – talking about how you feel on a regular basis is one of the core pillars of staying mentally well and recovering from mental ill health. Think about who your emotional support network is – people who you can trust and confide in about how you feel. Getting stressful emotions "off your chest" is vital for mental wellbeing.

  If you're concerned about your mental health, or have trauma from the past, or if you don't have an emotional support network, consider professional emotional support:

  - GP – medication, referrals to IAPT, CBT, other support services
  - NHS self refer to psychological services: www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-psychological-therapies-service/
  - Mind - mental health charity provides free counselling services
  - Free bereavement counselling around the UK by borough/county
  - Free or low-cost therapy services: www.freepsychotherapynetwork.com/organisations-offering-low-cost-psychotherapy/
  - There are a small number of pre-paid and fully confidential counselling sessions accessible via Contact's provider CIC – speak to your Parent Carer Advisor

- **Serotonin** – this is the neurotransmitter (chemical messenger) which plays a big part in our feelings of mental wellbeing. A really simple way to boost your mental wellbeing is to take plenty of natural daylight each day. When we have sufficient daylight (coming in through our eyes) it boosts our serotonin naturally. Give yourself permission to take a break, go outside into the daylight, in the middle of the day ideally. Try to make it calm, relaxing, screen-free time. If you're able to go for a brisk walk or some other type of cardio exercise, even better.

- **Sleep** – adequate sleep is really important for our mental health. Serotonin (see above) synthesises into sleep hormone Melatonin, and so getting some daylight in the middle of the day is the first step for a good night sleep. Reducing the amount of light coming in through the eyes in the hour before bed allows our melatonin levels to rise. So lowering the lights in your home in the hour before bed, and switching off screens such as phones, tv, tablets, laptops etc can help you to wind down and get a better night's sleep. Consider listening to a bodyscan meditation when you get into bed – this is a type of mindfulness practice which can help you to sleep better. On the **Mindfulness UK app** – the "Preparing For Sleep" recording or the "bodyscan meditation" can be really great at helping us to wind down. Give it a try!

- **Mindfulness** – mindfulness is one of the most powerful tools we have for improving mental health. Just 10 minutes of mindfulness meditation per day can significantly reduce stress, anxiety and depression, and improve sleep. Mindfulness allows us to be more aware of the present moment, providing us with a way to more skilfully navigate our thoughts and worries. Try the **Mindfulness UK app**, which has a selection of mindfulness meditation practices for you to experience, and consider making regular time to "be mindful" – taking time to engage in the present moment. This could be using one or more of your senses to connect with the moment, focusing on the rhythm of your breathing, feeling the air coming in and out of your nose, allowing your muscle groups to completely relax one by one.

- **Physical Activity** – When we get our bodies moving, it's good for our physical health as well as our immune system health and mental wellbeing too. Activities that get the heart pumping tend to be really excellent for mental health as they stimulate our serotonin, but muscle strengthening exercises, stretching exercises, yoga, gardening etc are also beneficial for mental wellbeing.

- **Nutrition & Gut Health** – there's a very close link between our diet, gut health and mental health. Ensure you are eating some protein every day as protein contains the amino acid tryptophan which is the building block of our neurotransmitter serotonin. Fibre-rich foods are also really important as they keep our digestive system moving, and also provide a good food source for the beneficial bacteria in our gut. When the beneficial bacteria in our gut have a good amount of fibre to consume, they thrive and crowd out the toxins, viruses and unhealthy bacteria in our gut. This also supports our immune system which is largely located in the gut. If you have any gut health issues or digestive issues, I'd definitely recommend seeing a dietician or nutritional therapist to see if they can create a special plan or "nutrition protocol" for you.

I'd also encourage you to include plenty of omega 3 fats in your diet – these are hugely beneficial for our physical and mental wellbeing as they are anti-inflammatory. Good sources of omega 3's include oily fish such as salmon, mackerel, sardines, kippers etc, or flax seeds/linseeds. Alternatively a high quality omega 3 supplement can be very worthwhile. 1000mg a day of a high quality omega 3 supplement such as Biocare is a good shout.

Mindset Shifts

- **Avoiding "The Rescuer" role**

Helping others is a wonderful thing to do, and meeting the needs of others, instead of ignoring them, is part of what defines humanity. But when a person's identity and self-esteem is based on being "the one who rescues" it can be damaging to themselves and others.

Here are the signs that helping others has turned into "rescuing" and has become unhealthy:

- You question your purpose in life if you're not saving someone
- You feel abandoned if no one needs you
- You are drawn / attracted to people who need help
- You feel like everything must be controlled / micromanaged
- You emotionally manipulate people if they feel distant from you

If this sounds like you, I'd recommend speaking to a counsellor and work on creating healthy boundaries between yourself and others. There's also some good books, support groups and tons of internet coverage on this topic – "Codependency" is the term that is usually used to describe the behaviour of the Rescuer, so that search term is a good place to start.

- **Setting Boundaries**

Think of boundaries as lines on a tennis court – they help determine whether the ball is in or out, a good serve or not.

When we are aware of our own personal boundaries, it can help us to understand and assert what's ok or not ok for us, and whether we do or don't have capacity to take on new requests / projects / support etc.

Setting boundaries means giving ourselves permission to put ourselves first when we need to

Boundaries can help us to work out when we should say "no"

- **Saying No**

When we give ourselves permission to set personal boundaries for ourselves, sometimes we are asked to do things that go beyond our boundaries.

Then our options are:

1. Say yes and feel resentful, miserable etc

2. Say no and feel guilty / miserable about it

3. Say no and <u>not</u> feel guilty / miserable about it

Some tips for saying No … I recommend being civil, assertive and courteous:

- I would like to help but I don't have capacity right now

- I'm sorry but I'm unable take this on at the moment

- It's not something I can help with unless I reprioritise the other tasks you've set me

Or you might find a more direct approach – just saying "no" – works best for you
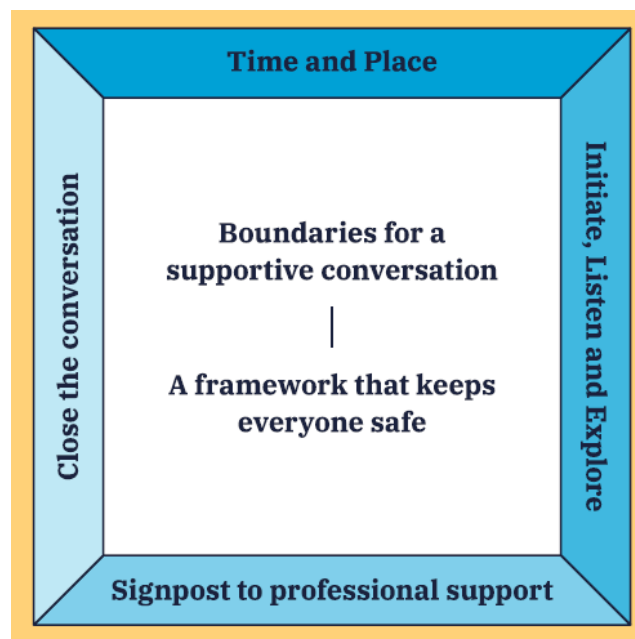
- **Overcoming Perfectionism**

Perfectionism is a mindset that tells us we are a failure if we are not perfect. It's much more than just wanting to get things right.

Perfectionism leads to stress, anxiety and low self-esteem. It is not sustainable and is not good for mental health.

If you describe yourself as a perfectionist or are aware that you have perfectionist tendencies, I'd recommend investigating the "good enough" way of thinking as an alternative to the "perfectionist" way of thinking with a counsellor. There are also lots of good books on this topic, such as "When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Strategies for Overcoming Perfectionism"

The Framework for Supportive Conversations

- It's important to be supportive if a friend or colleague or another parent carer is struggling with their mental health, however it is useful to have boundaries around supportive conversations, to prevent you from becoming their counsellor

- This is where a "framework" or boundaries around supportive conversations can be helpful:

Time and Place

Close the conversation

Initiate, Listen and Explore

Boundaries for a supportive conversation

A framework that keeps everyone safe

Signpost to professional support

Time and Place

Try to find a suitable **time and space** – confidential, uninterrupted, when you have time to listen and focus

Initiate, **Listen, Explore**

It can be helpful to Initialte a conversation with someone who seems to be struggling with their mental health:

- "I wonder how you're feeling?"

- "How are things going for you at the moment?"

- "I've noticed a change in you lately, I wonder if you'd like to talk?"

- If they are <u>reluctant to talk</u>, let them know you're not going to judge them if they're struggling, and that you are willing to listen if they change their mind

If they are willing to talk, or if they initiate the conversation, here's some **active listening** tips:

Do:

- Do allow them to speak, don't interrupt or speak over them

- Do listen with empathy, take a moment to walk in their shoes

- Do try to get a sense of how they're **feeling** (eg afraid, sad, angry, frustrated, embarrassed, overwhelmed, lost, confused, shocked, guilty, ashamed, worried etc)

Don't:

- Don't make it about you

- Don't say: "don't worry", "don't be silly" or "it will be ok" (these common phrases tell the person they are *wrong* to feel the way they do, and can be invalidating)

- Don't judge them

- Don't try to cheer them up

- Don't focus them on the positives

- Don't give advice unless they ask for it

Accept that this is how they are feeling and **validate** them by demonstrating empathy, example:

- "That sounds really difficult" and/or

- "I'm sorry you're having a hard time"

- Acknowledge that they are not in a good place, and that you have heard them

- **Explore**

  Ask: what do you think might help with the situation?

  Ask: Are you getting any help or support?

- **Signposting**

- If they are not getting **professional support**, ask them if they would find it helpful (don't tell them that they need it) example:

- "That sounds like something a professional could help you with – would it be helpful for me to send you some information on where you can find some professional support?"

- "Do you think professional support would be helpful?"

- "Are you aware of the professional support options that are available?"

  If they are interested to know what professional support is available, here are some **signposting options**:

- **GP** – medication, referrals to IAPT, CBT, and other support services

- NHS self refer to psychological services:

  www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-psychological-therapies-service/

- Mind mental health charity provides **free counselling** services

- Free **bereavement counselling** around the UK by borough/county – search "free bereavement counselling" and your county or borough name

- Free or low-cost therapy services: **www.freepsychotherapynetwork.com/organisations-offering-low-cost-psychotherapy/**

- A good source for finding a privately funded counsellor, including many who offer reduced fees on request: **www.counselling-directory.org.uk**

Closing the Conversation

Closing the conversation is often the most challenging part! But if you feel like you're being drawn in to someone's problems or mental health issues more than you feel comfortable with, it can be helpful to know how to bring the conversation to a close.

Some people find ending conversations easy, others don't

It can be useful to bring the conversation to a close by arranging a follow up conversation, example:

- "Thanks for letting me know how you are. Let's catch up again once you've had a chance to speak to a professional"

- "I hope it's been helpful to talk. Let's catch up again soon to see how things are going"