8 - 14th May 2017 is Mental Health Awareness Week in the UK – Surviving or Thriving

This year, Mentalhealth.org.uk are looking at mental health from a new angle. Rather than asking why so many people are living with mental health problems, they are seeking to uncover why too few of us are thriving with good mental health; with many people struggling to cope with the demands of life and stuck on getting through the day.

So what steps can we at Chingford Foundation School take to look after our mental health and build resilience to cope with the demands of life?

Understanding Mental Health in Chingford Foundation School. "*We can sort it out*"

There is no doubt that modern life throws us ever-increasing challenges. Young people worry about everything from schoolwork to relationships, peer-groups, social media pressures, to online risks. We may dislike Facebook, Instagram, snapchat, or the pressure to own the latest mobile phone, but short of relocating to Thaxted, on the edge of beyond (where my son and family have just moved to), this is the world in which our students and we live.

Resilience is described as the "rubber ball" factor, the ability to bounce back in the face of adversity. Put simply, resilience is the ability to cope with, and rise to, the inevitable challenges, problems and set-backs met in the course of life; to come back from them stronger, or, at least better prepared to face future challenges.

Understanding mental-health today has moved on from being viewed purely as a factor of genetics and it would seem, that no one is exempt.

There is a wealth of evidence indicating the numerous risk factors that make young people more vulnerable to mental-health issues. However, there is no single cause and no inevitability of poor mental health in response to adversity. Rather, we have the important knowledge that reducing stresses, increasing resilience and introducing effective interventions can make a huge difference to well-being.

Risk cannot always be removed but, with the right help, we can support our students to cope better despite difficult circumstances. As a school community, we may reasonably argue that risk factors such as family breakdown, job loss, bereavement, family conflict, or parental mental illness are beyond our control. However, recognition and showing empathy towards this stress is within our gift and will, without doubt, impact positively on the well-being of our students.

Of course, we can't ignore the fact that some students will develop more significant difficulties and will need to access additional support from specialised agencies. There is an overwhelming evidence-base showing that early and speedy access to the right treatment is key in helping students suffering from mental distress. Timely access to the right treatments improves prognosis and

prevents a vast range of secondary problems. Often, while on waiting lists for Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services, there is evidence that running Cognitive Behavior Therapy programmes with students and their families in Personalised Learning has had a positive impact on attendance and general wellbeing and made students more receptive to more formal assessment and treatment plans.

The good news is that resilience can be learnt. But building resilience requires practice. In Personalised Learning, programmes are also run to teach students everything from resolution of friendship disputes, mutual respect, anger management, conflict resolution, ethics, diversity, self-reflection, and self-respect. Life is tough but we can engage in practice that will begin to immunise our families.

I am sending this round to provide a launch-pad for discussions on the nature of mental health in our school. There has always been a stigma around mental health and sadly, although improving, in the words of Bill Clinton, "mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of, but stigma and bias shame us all".

Sadly, it isn't just the stigma that we need fear. It's what the stigma does and we have seen how it has inhibited many students from seeking help, which escalates self-loathing, in some cases leading to self-harm.

The World Health Organisation (2013) estimates that worldwide, 20 per cent of adolescents in any given year may experience a mental-health problem and 75 per cent of those with a mental-health condition start developing it before the age of 18.

Research consistently shows the positive impact of one supportive person whom you know is there for you. A sense of belonging is critical to our well-being, the well-being of our students and families and our ability to fully engage with all aspects of life. We all like to feel listened to and important. "That's obvious," I hear you say but are we sure that we reflect that message to students who come into our circle of care?

All of us are good at something, but perhaps we more readily acknowledge some achievements over others. This isn't good for those who fail to attain the coveted A* grades but it also has problems for those who do. I've seen some high-flying students who have been crushed by depression for feeling that nothing else they do was worthy of accolade.

One upper school student who has outstanding academic achievement was off school refusing to attend. Despite her amazing academic achievements, her own standards were so high that no manner of success was ever good enough. Furthermore, her narrow focus on academia meant that no other accomplishments, friendships, or activities added to her sense of self, pride and worth. Any failure to achieve "perfection" was met by an internal sense of judgment, negativity and catastrophe.

If we don't celebrate the lopsided cake, the good film found on Netflix or the hug from a friend, we miss the point and set ourselves up with targets that are often too high, too narrow, and too overwhelming. This student continues to excel, but as she revises for her exams, is now able to accept that when "performance" is less than her best, that other aspects of her more than compensate.

Teach yourself and our students to trust ourselves to solve problems and make appropriate decisions. Remember the ways that you successfully handled hardships in the past and use this to

build the strength to handle future challenges. If the outcome wasn't great, what could you differently next time?

Try to learn not to take yourself too seriously but to laugh at your own mistakes and weaknesses. We all do foolish things from time to time — myself more than most. (Like when I lost my car in the car park and also forgot my number plate when the car park attendant took pity and tried to assist me in finding my car). Instead of feeling embarrassed or defensive, embrace your imperfections.

Try and reinforce to our students that not everything has to be done in a certain way or to a certain standard to be worthy or enjoyable.

Another school student recently typed suicide on the google search knowing that it would be picked up and tracked in a plea for help. We need to educate our students to see that asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness and to allow others to help them set goals and take small steps in building future resilience. We need to share with our students that it is ok to fail, ok to ask for help and ok to receive it.

My strapline for problem solving is "*We can sort it out*" i.e. Identify problem; gather data; develop and implement plan; monitor and evaluate; determine next steps

My hypothesis is, we need to teach our students to understand how when things happen, something else may happen in our mind and how we interpret things may not be fact; this affects how we feel e.g.

INSTEAD OF	TRY THINKING
I'm not good at this	What am I missing?
I give up	I'll use a different strategy
It's good enough	Is this really my best work
I can't make this any better	I can always improve
This is too hard	This may take some time
I made a mistake	Mistakes help me to learn
I just can't do this	I am going to train my brain
I'll never be that smart	I will learn how to do this
Plan A didn't work	There's always plan B
My friend can do it	I will learn from them

So how can we all help to assess if a student has a mental health problem, is just a 'moody teenager' or it is something more?

Some warning signs to look out for

- Feeling down and that things are hopeless, being tearful or lacking motivation

- Having trouble coping with everyday activities.

- Having trouble eating or sleeping

- Drop in school performance or school refusal

- Avoiding friends

- Being aggressive or antisocial

- Being very anxious about weight or physical appearance, losing weight

- Extreme shyness and social avoidance

So, go on, talk to those around you, share your pride in them, ask how you can help and mostly, be there for them.

If you suspect students may need additional help with their mental wellbeing refer to Head of Lower, Middle or Upper School, who where appropriate, will refer to Sharon Goldstone, Personalised Learning, for assessment and support, or to Kay Halls, Safeguardfing Officer, who are both Qualified Mental Health First Aiders.

In emergencies of immediate risk or harm contact:
999 or local Police on 101 at any time
Or NELFT Mental Health Direct 0300 555 1000 (open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year

Any further queries contact
Sharon Goldstone
Personalised Learning Co-Ordinator
The School House
Extension 245

***If anyone is interested in staying up to date with things going on in Mental Health Awareness week, please go to

https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/campaigns/mental-health-awareness-week