

Mental Health **red Lights** in children and young people

Guidance for staff & parents on what to look out for

If you notice one or more of these behaviours or changes* in a child or young person, there may be cause for concern and they may be at risk.

- Persistent low mood/unhappiness/irritability
- Bruises or any obvious signs of harm or self-harm
- Declining school performance for no obvious reason
- Social withdrawal and isolation
- Severe anxiety
- Persistent insomnia
- Sharp change in school performance and/or attendance
- Persistent loss of appetite or restrictive eating
- Noticeable weight loss or gain
- Extreme over-defensiveness or paranoia
- Regular exclusion from school or repeated school absenteeism
- Severe aggression towards peers or authority figures
- Suicidal talk
- Distressing unusual perceptions, hallucinations, voices or extreme beliefs

NB *This is not an exhaustive list! Trust your own knowledge of a person and if *you* feel concerned about a child or young person, take a quiet moment to ask them how they are doing and if it feels like they give a superficial reply, ask them again (the 'double tap').

What to do next. Try and discover what is going on sensitively and calmly. Avoid making assumptions and as much as possible, try to keep your own anxieties under control. Remember not to promise confidentiality and if you think they are at risk, be as collaborative as possible in agreeing what needs to happen next to help keep them safe. Trust your 'gut' instinct and if concerned, act swiftly. If discussion meets with resistance, find out who else they could / would speak to (a colleague, friend or relative, whom they know and trust to open up to). If both approaches are blocked, seek professional help e.g., from school pastoral staff, a GP or another professional.

What can help /stop C&YP reaching out for help from adults when they need it?

- **Stay in touch with what's going on for them** with genuine interest and a lack of judgement. This can be challenging and most young people like more privacy and down-time; but extreme self-isolation is a red light. Pushing adults away can be when they need us most!
- **Don't be alone in your concerns** speak to other adults and work together to support what's best
- **Protecting us as well as shame and fear about our reactions...** what we'll do next and worry that things will get worse if people know... are what stop more young people from being honest with adults, even when they are really struggling or afraid themselves.
- Adults hold a responsibility for keeping C&YP safe, but really **listening to them, and including them** (age appropriately) in what happens next is key to reducing risk of harm.