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Early Detection of Psychological Disorders

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ARTIFICIAL
INTELLIGENCE

& SUSTAINABLE
EDUCATIONAL
TOOLS

FOR THE
PREVENTION OF

TEENAGERS'
PSYCHOLOGICAL
DISORDERS.

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PROJECT

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MENTAL
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TRAINING

TECHNOLOGY

EDUCATION



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Communicating Concerns Effectively

The importance of listening

When someone is experiencing psychological distress, an empathetic conversation can be a crucial first step towards recovery. The simple act of listening without judgement and showing genuine presence conveys a powerful message: **no one is alone in their suffering.**

This initial dialogue can not only ease the immediate emotional burden but also encourage the person to seek the professional support they may need. Here you have some tips for talking between adults and minors.



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Communicating Concerns Effectively

Key points in a conversation with an adolescent

- **Paying attention:** reacting positively to their attempts at emotional connection, showing availability and interest, and listening actively.
- **Demonstrating affection and respect:** expressing positive emotions towards your child through compliments, praise and positive comments; creating rituals that have symbolic and emotional meaning for you.
- **Building shared meanings:** building trust and stability in your relationship through understanding and empathy; creating rituals that have symbolic and emotional meaning for you.



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Key points in a conversation with an adolescent

- **Enabling your child to achieve his or her goals:** knowing and accepting your child's dreams; empowering your child's autonomy and self-efficacy.
- **Accepting their ideas and influence:** listening to and accepting their ideas and opinions, even if you disagree; being open to their persuasion, even if it doesn't mean giving in to everything
- **Mutual acceptance:** accepting them for who they are and not for the person you wish they were



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Key points in a conversation with an adolescent

- **Compromise:** showing flexibility in your decisions; reaching agreements that satisfy you both.
- **Gentle disagreement:** learning to communicate a complaint or disagreement in an assertive way; not being critical or disqualifying.
- **Repairing communication:** de-escalating your negative emotions during discussions with your teenager; interrupting the conversation if you think you may lose control and resuming more calmly afterwards.
- **Talking about difficult topics:** being open to talk about sexuality, alcohol and drugs, mental health, divorce, death, etc.



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Communicating Concerns Effectively

Difficult to communicate and how to avoid it

In communicating with people experiencing emotional difficulties, it is common to adopt **attitudes** that, while well-intentioned, can be **counterproductive**. The tendency to minimise problems, to offer immediate solutions or to judge the situation may make the person feel misunderstood and close themselves off from sharing their experiences. It is therefore important to explore more effective forms of communication that facilitate accompaniment and emotional support.



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Difficult to communicate and how to avoid it

Here is a list of attitudes that we tend to take impulsively, and we offer you a much **healthier alternative**:

- **Being hypercritical** -> not attacking their way of being, not labelling; pointing out your disagreement with specific facts or behaviours.
- **'Talking to the wall'** -> not being mentally absent during conversations with your child; using active listening techniques.
- **Constant interruptions** -> letting your child finish without cutting him/her off; not offering advice or solutions in a rushed manner



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Difficult to communicate and how to avoid it

- **High rigidity** -> reasoning and negotiating with the adolescent; not constantly telling him/her what to do, letting him/her decide for him/herself
- **Being defensive** -> not counter-arguing against their complaints ('mine is worse'); not counter-attacking against offensive comments and/or disqualifications your teenager makes to you.
- **Derogatory comments** -> not insulting or humiliating them, even if we are annoyed; taking care of our non-verbal communication.



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Difficult to communicate and how to avoid it

- **Stay quiet** -> informing them of issues important to them or the family; addressing concerns your child may have and offering reliable information
- **Denial of difficulties** -> not minimising your child's discomfort, accompanying and observing him/her; seeking advice or expert help in case of no improvement or worsening.

Remember! We are not trying to express our feelings, we are trying to **understand** the adolescent's context and **modify his/her behaviour**. The adolescent has to see us as **allies** and he/she has to understand that the change is something **positive**.



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Engaging the family

To strengthen students' mental health, the relationship between parents and teachers must be built on a deep understanding of each family's strengths. Every household has unique resources, experiences, and skills that can contribute to the student's well-being, making it essential for educators to recognize and value these aspects. Based on this understanding, family engagement strategies can be designed to not only address each family's specific needs but also enhance their strengths. This involves creating open and flexible communication spaces, adapting interactions to each household's circumstances, and providing opportunities for collaboration that allow parents to engage in their child's education using their own skills and knowledge.



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Engaging the family

Both parents and schools play a crucial role in preventing mental health problems by fostering healthy habits and supportive environments. Key areas of focus should include ensuring proper sleep and nutrition, encouraging regular physical activity, and promoting healthy social interactions. Establishing consistent bedtime routines, limiting screen time before sleep, and encouraging balanced meals rich in essential nutrients can significantly impact students' emotional and cognitive well-being. Likewise, physical exercise should be integrated into daily life, whether through organized sports, active play, or simply walking to school. Beyond physical health, fostering positive social relationships by teaching respectful communication and conflict resolution skills helps create a supportive community where students feel valued and understood.



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Engaging the family

Another essential aspect of prevention is the promotion of socio-emotional skills such as empathy, self-regulation, and resilience. Schools and families can nurture empathy by encouraging children to recognize and validate others' emotions, for example, through storytelling exercises where they imagine different perspectives. Self-regulation can be developed by teaching mindfulness techniques, such as deep breathing or reflective pauses before reacting in emotionally charged situations. Resilience, on the other hand, can be strengthened by normalizing failure as part of the learning process and encouraging students to view challenges as opportunities for growth rather than as obstacles. When children develop these skills, they are better equipped to manage stress, build healthy relationships, and adapt to difficulties.



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Engaging the family

It is equally important for adults to maintain a physically and mentally healthy lifestyle, both to have the psychological resources to support children's emotional needs and to serve as role models. Children learn by observing their parents and teachers, so when they see the adults around them managing stress constructively, maintaining healthy routines, and fostering positive relationships, they are more likely to adopt similar behaviors. Educators and caregivers should prioritize self-care, engage in hobbies that bring them joy, seek emotional support when needed, and maintain a balanced approach to work and personal life. By doing so, they not only enhance their own well-being but also create a healthier and more emotionally stable environment for children to thrive.



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Asking for help

The first to detect a possible problem in an adolescent are usually the people in his or her closest circle: parents, teachers or friends. However, it is likely that they do not have all the necessary information or certainty about what is really going on in the adolescent's mind. Therefore, communication between the social environment, the school and the family is essential. Depending on the problem, it can be managed within these social agents, but in some cases it is essential to resort to the intervention of a professional.



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How to know if professional help is needed?

The distinction between a mental problem and a mental disorder is crucial. A mental problem refers to temporary psychological difficulties caused by stress or life events, such as anxiety before an exam or sadness after a breakup. These issues usually resolve with time or support. In contrast, a mental disorder is a clinically diagnosed condition that persistently affects emotions, behavior, and daily life, such as depression or anxiety disorders. While mental problems can be distressing, they do not necessarily indicate a disorder. The key differences lie in their duration, severity, and impact on overall functioning.



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How to know if professional help is needed?

Mental health difficulties can vary greatly in intensity, and while mild problems do not always require professional intervention, psychological therapy can be beneficial for anyone. Many people, however, struggle to distinguish the severity of a situation and may not fully understand what therapy involves. This uncertainty can sometimes delay necessary intervention. Recognizing when to seek professional support is essential for promoting well-being and preventing more serious difficulties from developing. To help determine whether psychological assistance is needed, consider the following guidelines.



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How to know if professional help is needed?

When personal resources are insufficient: If an issue persists despite attempts to resolve it using common coping strategies or available support networks, seeking professional guidance is highly recommended. In particular, if an adolescent's behavior continues to raise concern despite efforts from family, teachers, or peers, a psychologist can provide the necessary tools to address the situation effectively.



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How to know if professional help is needed?

When in doubt, prioritize intervention: If you are uncertain about whether professional help is necessary, it is always advisable to consult a specialist. Reaching out to a psychologist preemptively, even in cases that may not seem urgent, can provide valuable insights and prevent the problem from escalating. On the other hand, postponing help in a critical situation can lead to more serious emotional or behavioral consequences. Seeking guidance early ensures that individuals receive the support they need at the right time.



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How to talk with the family

Communication between school and families is a fundamental pillar for the educational and emotional development of students. However, not all interactions generate the desired positive impact. To strengthen collaboration with families, it is essential that education staff adopt assertive, clear and empathetic communication strategies. Whenever possible, it is advisable that these interactions be led by a school psychologist or educational psychologist to ensure effective and sensitive communication. The following are key points for establishing effective dialogue with parents and caregivers.



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How to talk with the family: What to DO

- Establish rapport
- Explain the rules of confidentiality
- Sit at the level of the informant; thus, if the student is a young child, sitting at the same level as the child is important
- Use open-ended questions Do follow the lead of the informant
- Use your active listening skills (PACERS)
- For children, do use toys, props, or games to help them feel at ease
- Use illustrations or examples with children to help clarify a question
- Respect the informant's defense mechanisms (i.e., silence or "I don't want to answer that question")



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How to talk with the family: What NOT to DO

- Do not ask questions you already know the answer to
- Limit the use of “wh” questions (e.g., What, why, when)
- Do not expect children under the age of 6 to distinguish time of events
- Do not use psychological jargon
- Do not ask yes/no or closed-ended questions
- Do not make judgments on answers
- Do not ask “why” questions to ascertain motives
- Do not repeat the same question if a “silent” response is received
- Do not confront the informant



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Confidentiality and Sensitivity

Confidentiality in the educational and youth mental health context is a fundamental pillar that sustains trust between students, parents and educational professionals. It is defined as a commitment to keeping sensitive information shared by the student private, establishing a safe space where young people can express their concerns and seek help without fear that this information will be disclosed without their consent. This principle is especially relevant when dealing with adolescents, who are at a crucial stage of developing autonomy and need to feel respected in their decisions and confidences.



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Confidentiality and Sensitivity

It is important to understand that concerns about confidentiality can significantly affect students' help-seeking behaviour. Young people are more likely to share their problems and seek support when they are confident that their conversations will be treated with discretion. However, many students experience fear or uncertainty about what information will be shared with their parents or teachers, which may lead them to hide important problems or avoid seeking professional help altogether when they need it.



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Communicating Concerns Effectively

Confidentiality and Sensitivity

Clear and ongoing communication about the limits of confidentiality is essential in the educational environment. Students need to understand from the outset what information can be kept private and in what situations professionals are obliged to share information with parents or authorities, especially in cases involving risk of harm. This transparency helps build trust and allows young people to make informed decisions about what information to share and with whom, thus fostering their autonomy and personal responsibility.



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Communicating Concerns Effectively

Confidentiality and Sensitivity

Managing confidentiality requires a delicate balance between respecting student privacy and keeping parents informed about their children's well-being. Educational professionals must develop clear protocols for determining what information is essential to share with parents and how to do so in a way that does not compromise student trust. It is critical to recognise that the ability to make decisions about the privacy of their information is not necessarily tied to a specific age, but may vary according to each student's individual maturity and experiences.



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Confidentiality and Sensitivity

Breaches of confidentiality can have serious consequences for the relationship of trust between the student and educational professionals. When students discover that their information has been shared without their consent or prior knowledge, they may develop 'selective storytelling' strategies or stop sharing important information altogether. Therefore, it is crucial that any need to share information is discussed in advance with the student, explaining the reasons and seeking their understanding and cooperation in the process. This respectful approach helps to maintain the integrity of the supportive relationship while ensuring the safety and well-being of the student.