



SCHOOLS, TEACHERS & STUDENTS

Responding to challenging behaviour

The journey from adolescence to adulthood is not always a straight and simple path. It is one filled with bends, ups and downs, and can therefore be a very difficult time for young people. An integral part of this journey involves figuring out who they are and where they fit in the world. For young people vulnerable to mental health difficulties, this journey is particularly challenging and often associated with behaviours that may deviate from the expectations of others. Some serious challenging behaviour can include: self-harm, aggression and acting out, severe anxiety causing panic attacks or dissociation, extreme withdrawal, and incidents of intense and overwhelming distress leading to uncontrollable crying, screaming, or running away.

Steps for responding to challenging behaviour

- 1 Establish safety: The immediate safety of the student, peers, and staff needs to be ensured
- 2 Approach the person with a desire to understand
- 3 Validation: Validate how the young person is feeling and remain compassionate
- 4 Focus on your relationship, how you can help and what support you can organise
- 5 Consult with peers and appropriate staff regularly

Key principles for responding to a crisis

- Remain calm, supportive and non-judgemental
- Avoid expressing shock or anger
- Stay focused on what is happening in the here and now. Avoid discussions about the person's childhood history or relationship problems as these can 'unravel' the person and are better addressed in ongoing treatment or when the person is calm
- Show compassion and express empathy and concern
- Explain clearly the role of all staff involved including how, when and what each will be doing to support the person
- Conduct a risk assessment. Remember, the level of risk changes over time, so it is important to conduct a risk assessment every time the person presents in crisis
- If required, respond to the immediate risk by actively seeking emergency help such as calling an ambulance to attend to the immediate care needs of the person.
- Follow-up after the crisis, and ensure you make further appointments or refer the person to a counsellor or other professional
- After the crisis, ensure that the follow-up appointment and referral was successful
- Review the crisis to learn from it and ways to improve responses in future



Additional strategies to help young people

Below are recommended strategies that take into account the unique difficulties that young people with complex mental health issues experience.

- 'Time in, not time out': Young people with complex mental health issues may have experienced abuse whilst growing up. Time out may therefore replicate the rejection these young people have experienced and may reinforce their view of themselves as unworthy and unlovable. Instead, allow the young person to have 'time in' with you where they can sit and complete tasks or work. Reframe their disruption as a need for attention, connection and help
- Emotion thermometer: It can be helpful for the young person to rate their emotion on a 1-10 scale. E.g. "I am a 9, I need some quiet time." This can be helpful as many young people with complex mental health issues have trouble expressing their emotions appropriately with words
- Quiet time: Emotional sensitivity is often heightened in young people with complex mental health issues, particularly personality disorder - some refer to the experience as having a 'hyper-sensitive soul'. Being in a high stimulation environment can therefore be overwhelming. Allowing 'quiet time' in a low-stimulation environment may assist the person reduce their reactivity and the risk of a behaviour outburst
- Reward, not punishment: Positively reinforcing behaviour rather than punishing will be more effective at changing behaviour for young people with complex mental health issues
- Natural consequences: It is not helpful to see a young person with complex mental health issues as 'special'. Everyone should respect the usual conventions of a social community. A person with complex mental health needs may have difficulty understanding or applying social conventions, and may struggle to understand other people's intentions or behaviours. However, explaining these to them, and expressing normal disapproval when social norms are violated, is the best way for them to learn. Note that because of their emotional fragility such conversations may be more difficult. Ensure when giving feedback on poor behaviour that it is specific to the behaviour and its consequences. If a young person hurts someone, they should apologise to that person
- Grounding: When a person is finding it hard to concentrate, is dissociating or detaching themselves from others, try using exercises to ground them. Mindfulness exercises can be a good example. Another good strategy is to help them focus on the physical world - ask them to tell you what they can see in the room, the colours and shapes, what they can hear in the room - the sounds, what they can feel in the room - the texture of a chair, furnishings. Such exercises will provide an opportunity for them to concentrate back in the here and now
- "I see you need help with": When you become aware of challenging behaviour try using the phrase "I see you need help with... (moving to a different activity, completing your work)". This will both respond to the behaviour whilst also reinforcing desired behaviour
- Praise the behaviour, not the person: It is important to praise the behaviour rather than using internal statements. For example, saying "I see you made a good choice to finish your work" is more effective than saying "good boy". Similarly, describe challenging behaviours rather than responding "bad boy". Young people internalise these statements and for people with a personality disorder it only reinforces the negative view that they already have of themselves

