Mental Health as a Continuum

This activity is a great introduction to explore students' values and beliefs in relation to mental health and to then explore the dynamic nature of mental health.

Preparation

- Print off the Mental Health Continuum Cards and if possible laminate them in order to allow them to be re-used with other classes.
- Set up the continuum across the classroom with **Mentally well** at one end and **Mentally unwell** at the other end.

Activity 1

- Distribute the cards amongst students - ensure that you have at least one card per student.

- Explain to students that each card includes a term that is used to describe a person in relation to their mental health.

- Instruct students to take their card and place it along the continuum where they believe it fits e.g. if someone is described as *"Life of the party"* would they be closer to the **Mentally well** end, closer to the **Mentally unwell** end or somewhere in between.

- Once all of the cards have been placed along the continuum, ask students to walk up and down the continuum and have a look at where others have placed the terms.

- Ask students to identify any card which they think could be placed somewhere else along the continuum. Ask students to pick up the card and explain their reasons why they believe it should be in a different place along the continuum.

Key messages to discuss

1. Often students will place the *Life of the party* card at the **Mentally well** end of the continuum, however, research shows that excessive partying, dangerous alcohol use and sexual promiscuity are indicators that the young person is having mental health difficulties. This behaviour if it is ongoing, should be a flag for teachers, parents and friends that the young person is not coping.

2. Students will normally place those terms that describe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, PMS etc at the **Mentally unwell** end of the continuum. It is important to emphasise that just because someone has been diagnosed with a mental illness does not necessarily mean they are mentally unwell. The majority of people who are diagnosed, receive professional help and maintain their treatment regime can be **mentally well.** You can use the analogy that it is just like a person suffering from asthma - if that person takes their medication as prescribed and lives a healthy lifestyle they can manage their asthma and it will have little or no impact on their physical health. It is exactly the same for a person who is diagnosed with a mental illness.

3. Feeling blue, feeling flat, feeling down, grieving, upset etc are all naturally reactions to a variety of situations and are all part of the natural fluctuations that occur in relation to people's mental wellbeing. However, if someone is feeling flat, blue, down or grieving for an extended period of time (more than two weeks) then this is when it starts to become a concern. It is important to remember that one in five students in your class will experience a depressive episode before they are 18 and prolonged feelings such as these are an early indicator of possible depression.

Activity 2

- Ask students to refer back to the Mental Health Continuum and ask them to think about where they fit at this minute - **don't ask them to move there or share**. Now ask them to think about where they would have fit last week and then last year. Discuss whether their position changed. It is important to ensure students understand that our mental health and wellbeing fluctuates constantly.

- Ask them to think now about the influence the following situations may have on their mental wellness:

What if ....

- they lost a close friend?

- their pet died?

- they got a great exam result?

- a family member had financial concerns?
- they were worried about a friend being depressed?

Ask them to think about what some of the factors are that may cause a person to move up or down the continuum.

Discuss the sorts of strategies that young people may use to cope with one of these situations. Ask students to think of who they may be able to turn to if one of these situations happened to them - Do they have a support network? Do they know where they can go for help?

Key message to discuss

1. After undertaking these activities some students may feel the need to find out more as they may be concerned about a friend or family member. It is really important to provide students with a place to go to find out more. ReachOut.com (Insert link) has information about a range of mental health disorders as well as powerful personal stories from young people who have either experienced a tough time themselves or have supported a friend or family member with a mental illness.