

Sharing a love of learning

**ROYAL FREE**

**HOSPITAL CHILDREN'S SCHOOL**





## The students in our day school


We cater for young people in KS4, **Year 10 & 11**, who experience a range of **mental health challenges** which mainly revolve around anxiety related difficulties, depression and **emotionally based school avoidance**.

## What difficulties do they face in school?

The difficulty that most of our young people have in common is Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). EBSA is defined as a psychological challenge for young people '***who are reluctant to or fail to attend school for emotional reasons***' (Thambirajah, 2007) which often results in extended absences from education.

Those affected tend to experience profound emotional distress of varying degrees at the prospect of attending school. This is what **differentiates EBSA to school truancy** which is usually associated with behaviourism or conduct disorder whilst school avoidance tends to be underpinned by anxiety, fear, **intense emotional upset** and other mental health issues.

All of these issues present a need for a sensitive approach on the part of staff but may also require a response of **positive challenge**, on the part of staff, to avoid these student behaviours becoming entrenched, worsening over time or having an impact on the other students at schools.



# Challenge Model

- We have developed a strategy of **positive challenge** for our young people which aims to result in increased attendance, punctuality and engagement in school.
- For most students, this means they need to be willing to alter their behaviours, even in the face of unpleasant emotions such as anxiety or anger. They will always embark on a journey of personal **change and growth** with full support from our staff whilst aiming to gain appropriate qualifications by the end of year 11. We encourage them to be brave and work through their difficulties in order to develop **resilience** to return to mainstream education post 16.

We are not therapists, health care professionals nor can we guarantee a cure. We work as part of a multi-disciplinary team to help young people **overcome the fears and anxieties they hold with regard to education through exposure and support.** We put in place clear boundaries and expectations whilst creating a nurturing and supportive environment. We are able to highly **personalise the curriculum** to suit the individual needs and interests of the pupils.

Our team aims to help our young people learn to **contain** their fears and anxieties and take some responsibility for themselves and others. We also aim to support them with their **communication** and **social skills** so that they can take a pro-active part in society and progress in their education.

After one or two years with us, most of our pupils will be able to go on to do this for themselves at **college or sixth form.** However, for some it will take more intervention and support after they leave us.



# UNEXPECTED CHANGE

Significant life changes, including **world events**, can have a tremendous impact on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. They can trigger a range of **unpleasant emotions** including anger, confusion, loss, frustration and high levels of anxiety. This can affect their **academic attainment**.

**Mental health challenges** during the pandemic have been linked to many significant associations such as **school closures**, increased time in **isolation** away from peers, health concerns, disruption of routine and increased susceptibility to domestic violence or chaotic home lives.

**KEY QUESTION** – how can schools adapt to this new climate of **uncertainty** – managing a range of fluctuating feelings and sitting with the **not knowing** - how can we as educators support with this?



# Ways we can experience loss and bereavement

- Academic – loss of structure, routines, future academic goals
- Home – loss of routine, freedom, restrictions, change to relationships.
- Bereavement by death – family relationships and bonds, friends, own mortality
- Wellbeing – mental health and physical fitness are linked, loss of liberty/ opportunities to maintain these via exercise/ outdoors / social engagement / poor habits /nutritional impact





# The role of the school

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During times of great uncertainty and chaos, **schools** are able to provide reliability, structure and routine - they can embody a powerful role when home life can be unstable or chaotic.

With knowledge, consideration and effective teamwork, the **school community**, even operating virtually, can manage to provide stability and support to a young person who has experienced **loss, bereavement** and disruption by offering a safe and reliable space.

# Developing resilience

**“Those skills, attributes and abilities that enable individuals to adapt to hardship, difficulties and challenges”**

(Alvord & Grados, 2005, p.238)

Our Challenge Model is embedded in building resilience – bouncing forward and bouncing back from adversity.



# Supporting young people to achieve resilience during a global pandemic

- Encourage **positive self-talk** and model resilience, help them manage their emotions and model resilience
- Avoid **catastrophizing** – maintain perspective and a hopeful outlook
- **Remind them** that change is part of living, and riding the **waves of change** is natural
- Teach **problem-solving**
- **Celebrate their achievements** around learning and sharing (not just academic attainment)
- Validate their emotions, recognise their fears and remind them they are not alone in feeling isolated
- Support with **daily routines**/ school timetable at home
- Help them organise their time clearly between work and non-work times
- Encourage them to pursue their **hobbies**/activities that bring them joy
- Working in short bursts with clear breaks to help maintain clarity of thought
- Remind them all the time of the **progress they are making** without dismissing their underlying needs
- Provide opportunities to **reflect**



# THINKING CARDS

## Ways to support young people with potential loss

- **Promote a climate of connectedness -** An individual death or loss can feel very isolating. The very nature of our response to coronavirus has magnified that. For example, its terminology – ‘self-isolation’ ‘social distancing’. As humans we seek to communicate and be in relationships.
- **Develop ways for individuals to share their experiences.** We achieved this in our weekly ‘collective time’ sessions. Collective acknowledgment of loss can reduce isolation and promote connectedness.





- **Provide students with a sense of safety** – Pupils with mental health challenges may experience heightened anxiety during lockdown. We remind them it is normal to feel scared during an unprecedented world event. We ensure they are given relevant information to avoid them relying on unverified media. We provide consistent reassurance and help them create a sense of routine to encourage a sense of normality.
- **Promote calming activities** - Promote calming activities e.g. breathing exercise, yogas, mindfulness, relaxation – staff may facilitate if comfortable to do so. We focus on creative arts for therapeutic benefits (Art, Music and Drama)
- **Hope** – The coronavirus pandemic has changed the lives of many people and made aspirations/goals for young people extremely uncertain, potentially making them feel hopeless and less in control of their education. We acknowledge these emotions and remind them they are normal, whilst reminding them of opportunities to develop new skills and relook what the notion of “success” looks like . We remind pupils of their strengths.

# RFHCS lockdown strategies

- Creation of a **virtual timetable** for the students
- Use of **google drive** to upload resources + student work
- Weekly **collective time** “assemblies” – dynamic opportunities to collectively address some of the mutual feelings of uncertainty/anxiety, discuss topics, play games, have fun and boost the spirits of the young people.
- Online 1:1 Dramatherapy & SALT input
- Online 1:1 and group music sessions
- Online **parents support group**
- Online **Trauma Informed Practice** staff training
- Online **staff wellbeing** support sessions
- Regular phone contact with tutees
- Distribution of **laptops** and printers to the students’ homes
- Fun creative **challenges** ‘recreate a famous artwork using items from your home’
- High level of differentiated work + **1:1 LSA input**





# LinkEd Up project

-> Helping young people with EBSA re-engage  
in education after/during lockdown



Do you have young people not fully returning to school after lockdown?



- We are worried that a few young people may not be returning to school or have sporadic attendance after lockdown.
- We want to work with SENCOS to try to ensure that those young people do not develop habits that become entrenched.
- Research shows that early intervention is key to turning Emotionally Based School Avoidance around.

LinkEd Up is currently planned as three weeks of zoom sessions run by the RFHCS and occasionally young peoples own school staff would sit in on them.

- The zoom sessions would be aimed at helping young people come to terms with their anxieties about returning to school, and would seek re-engage them by establishing links with staff from their own school.
- Zoom activities during the three weeks would include drama therapy, discussions, P4C, circle time and group tutor sessions, along with Art, Music and an introduction to self help for anxiety through [thinkingcards.org](https://www.thinkingcards.org).



- If you think there maybe one or more young people at your school who are not returning, or have poor attendance after lockdown and you would like to work with us to try to address the problem, then please speak to Siobhan or Jemma at the end, or alternately please email Mike Kelly-
- [michael.kelly@royalfree.camden.sch.uk](mailto:michael.kelly@royalfree.camden.sch.uk)

The project is called LinkEd Up



# Reminder!

4 places left in our day school for this academic year

Contact: [head@royalfree.camden.sch.uk](mailto:head@royalfree.camden.sch.uk)

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