



4. Support for young people

4.4 Understanding and dealing with emotions, relationships and sex

Introduction

This section talks about emotions, how to deal with them and what help is out there. It also covers sex and relationships.

Emotions

Just as people's bodies can become unwell, people's minds can become unwell too. Mental health problems are more common than you might think – three children in every classroom has a mental health problem.

After having a spinal cord injury you might be feeling all different kinds of emotions from one day to the next or even from one minute to the next! This is totally normal and everyone who experiences a spinal cord injury goes through a period when they are trying to understand what has happened to them, and what this means for their future.

This section has some advice from other young people who have had a spinal cord injury. It will hopefully show that **you are not alone**, and maybe give you some ideas of how you can positively deal with your own feelings.

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My advice to young people going back to school after an injury is not to worry about it, because the longer you are there the easier it gets. It does take a while to adjust. It takes time. But you will find different ways of doing things in the school and outside the school. Take your time to settle in and give it chance and don't give up.

Danielle, 16

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My friends and family were shocked when they found out about my spinal cord injury. Looking back it was probably just as hard on them as it was on me. But not once did they give up on me. My family and friends were my rock, if it wasn't for them I wouldn't be here now. They kept me going, they would never let me slip behind, and they would always check how I was. As time went on they got used to it and they got used to my different types of needs.

It's easy for me to say, looking back on it, that you shouldn't push out your family and friends, as much as you want to, as much as it's hard to let them in. Obviously when you're in a dark and depressive place you can't see any other way out but pushing your friends and family away is a big mistake because you need them there. You need someone to talk to, and you need your rocks to see you through.

Ben, 17

Laura's story

How did you deal with your emotions?

Early on during hospital I listened to music a lot. I listened to the band Green Day for a whole year. If the album American Idiot didn't exist, neither would I. You kind of find things to latch on to, to occupy your head. I got into different kinds of music. When I was in hospital I was lying in bed in Southport this guy encouraged me to learn the guitar. Now I'm grade 5 guitar. Music for most teenagers is a big thing that helps you through life, and for someone who's been injured it's even more important.

I started going to drama lessons which boosted my confidence enormously.

In hospital you find it easy to talk to people because they all understand. They understand about catheters, and day to day stuff like how difficult it is to get dressed. Then you leave

hospital and you're thrown into this world of 'normality' and no one knows anything.

When you're a teenager or a kid it's really difficult to want to open up and talk about the ins and outs of your injury. I was really uncomfortable talking about catheters, when you go to the toilet and take a bit longer than everyone else; people ask you why you're taking so long. I would just go bright red. You don't explain and you feel isolated from everyone because you can't say anything to people.

For a long time I didn't have anyone to talk to, apart from my mum. My mum and dad would get it, but I was quite lonely.

After my course with Back Up, I got in touch with them and arranged some mentoring. I had a mentor who was injured at a similar age to me. That was really good because I got to speak to someone who knew what I was on about, and knew the ins and outs of a spinal cord injury. I spoke to her on the phone after school for so many weeks. It was really good to talk to someone who understood what I was going through, it was reassuring.

After the mentoring I realised that I could open up to my friends. And now I can talk to my mates. It's about having that confidence to talk to people about things so that they understand you more.

If you want to find out more about Back Up's mentoring services call us 020 8875 1805 or email Polly at polly@backuptrust.org.uk



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Many teenagers are terrified about what lies ahead for them in relationships and with sex... But the relationships and sexuality issues for teenagers are very much the same for everyone else.

Michelle Donald, Psychosexual Therapist

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Some young people have said they don't feel like sex and relationships are possible in their lives anymore or that they can't believe anyone will ever fancy them. They need to hear the message that they are capable of being attractive and part of happy, healthy, loving relationships just like everyone else is.

Zoe Chevalier, Clinical Psychologist

Talking about how you feel

Emotions and feelings are an everyday part of life. How we feel can influence many parts of our life. Sometimes your feelings may seem really strong, controlling and that they are taking over what you do.



Whether at school or at home, if you are struggling to deal with your feelings then there are people you can talk to. It may be that you just want to talk to someone about the situation you are in or tell them the things that you are finding difficult to cope with.

As discussed above, at Back Up we have a [mentoring service](#) where we can team you up with someone who is a similar age or has a similar level injury. You can talk to them and they can offer advice based on their own experiences of spinal cord injury.

If you don't feel ready to talk to someone on a regular basis, then you can just call into our office and have a chat with someone on the team to find out more about the support we offer and ask any questions you may have. You can call our office on **020 8875 1805**.

[ChildLine](#) is the UK's free helpline for children and young people. They are a confidential service, which means that they won't tell anyone else what you talk about unless they feel you or someone else is in immediate danger. They are at the end of the phone 24/7 to offer comfort and support - so if you feel like you need to talk to someone in the middle of the night, they will be at the end of the phone. You can call them on **0800 11 11**. If you don't feel like speaking on the phone, they also have a [one-to-one online chat](#) service that you can find on their website.

You can also find free, confidential help from [The Mix](#). They can offer emotional support and talk everything through with you to find out the best way that they can support you.

Coping with your emotions

Talking to someone else about how you feel is not always easy. There are different ways

of managing and coping with your feelings, such as listening to music which Laura talks about above. Other coping techniques may include:

- exercise
- writing your feelings in a journal
- taking deep breaths
- engaging in an activity you enjoy
- social support from family and friends

After your injury you may be feeling a whole range of emotions such as frustration or anger about what has happened. Feelings like anger are your body's way of dealing with something happening to it and so feeling angry about your injury sometimes is understandable. Dealing with and managing anger is important and there is a lot of support out there to help you with this. You can find out more on ways to cope with your emotions by visiting [here](#).

Self harm

Self harming is when a young person inflicts pain on themselves on purpose in some way, such as cutting, scratching, burning. Young people can use self harm as a way of coping with their emotions. Feeling angry, anxious or stressed can build up to a point where self harm is used to deal with this intensity of emotion.

If you are self harming, it may be that you are using this as a way of coping with your emotions or to feel some control in a situation where you may have none.

Although self harm is more common than a lot of people think, it is important to remember that it is really dangerous. By self harming you are putting yourself at risk of being seriously hurt, possibly killing yourself.

There is help out there. Asking for help can be scary and is a hard thing to do, but it is a positive step forward to changing things for the better. To find out about organisations that can help, visit [here](#). You can also watch videos of people talking about their experiences of self harm, common questions surrounding it and what to do next by visiting [here](#).

If you want to find out more about what self harm is, ask questions, read about other young people's experience of self harm and find out how to get help, visit [selfharmUK](#)

Family and friends

When you are feeling low or finding it difficult to cope with your emotions, you may feel like other people won't understand. They may not have been through the same experiences as you, but they may have felt similar emotions at some point in their lives.

Family and friends care about you and can be a good place to get support from when you are finding it difficult to cope. They can offer emotional support, such as talking things through with you or visiting your GP with you. They can also offer practical support, such as talking about the ways they cope with emotion or coming along with you to a social event. To find out more about how family and friends can provide support, visit [here](#).



If you don't think you have any family or friends that you want to talk to, this doesn't mean that you are alone. There are organisations that you can call with people who will be at the other end of the phone and are there to listen and try to support you in the best way for you. **ChildLine** or **Samaritans** are places you can contact if you want to talk to someone immediately.

At Back Up we have also recently created our Under 18's forum for young people affected by spinal cord injury. Here you can communicate with other young people who have a spinal cord injury and may be experiencing similar things to you. To join this group, add **Beth Back Up** as a friend on Facebook.

Remember, if you are struggling, don't be afraid to ask for help. Most people at some point in their lives will feel overwhelmed by something or find it difficult to cope. You may have a friend or family member who you feel comfortable talking to or maybe you'd prefer to talk to someone who doesn't know you and can provide support. There are lots of people and organisations who can help you to cope with your feelings and offer support.

More information and advice about emotional well-being

[Young Minds](#) is a charity that offers information to young people and children about mental health and emotional well-being.

[Mind](#) gives information about where children and young people can get support with a mental health problem.

[ChildLine](#) can help and advice about a wide range of issues, you can talk to a counsellor online, send ChildLine an email or post on the message boards.

[CAMHS](#) offer child and adolescent mental health services. You can find information for children and young people and how to arrange an appointment with your local CAMHS.

[The Mix](#) is the UK's free, confidential helpline service for young people under 25 who need help, but don't know where to turn. They also have a free app that you can download.

[Papyrus](#) speak for free to young people under 35 that are feeling suicidal.

[Samaritans](#) are there for you to talk to anytime you like, in your own way and off the record.

[The Project](#) is committed to supporting and improving the emotional wellbeing and mental health of young people, age 12-24.

[selfharmUK](#) is a project dedicated to supporting young people impacted by self-harm, providing a safe space to talk, ask any questions and be honest about what's going on in your life.

[Youth Access](#) is a national membership organisation for youth information, advice and counselling agencies. Provides information on youth agencies to children aged 11-25 but does not provide direct advice.

Relationships and sexuality

Sex and relationships might be something that worries you after your injury. Sex might not be exactly the same as it would have been without your injury, but the good news is that many people with a spinal cord injury go on to have good long term relationships, get married and have children.

If you want to find out more about sex and relationships you can read the Contact a Family (CAF) leaflet for young people with a disability [here](#)

[The Site](#) is a website for young people that covers loads of topics including advice on sex and disability

[In Touch](#) is a site about sex, sexual health and relationships, especially for young disabled people

Or go to the [Brook website](#) for more general advice