

Staying Well: Maintaining Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing



Devised by the Psychology Department of the Brothers of Charity Services Ireland, West Region, Galway Services

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Living through the Corona virus pandemic is a stressful time for everyone. This leaflet has been devised to assist in promoting positive mental health and wellbeing for persons with moderate and severe/profound intellectual disability. It also aims to provide guidance on how to recognise signs that a person may be struggling with their mental health. A similar self-care guide called “Minding Me and My Mental Health” has been developed by the Psychology Department for people with a mild intellectual disability.

It is known that people with intellectual disability not only experience the full range of mental health problems, but are actually at an increased risk for doing so. As it is a stressful and unpredictable time at the moment, it is important that carers are aware of this increased vulnerability.

The people we support are experiencing changes in their lives and in the way their service is being delivered as a result of the pandemic. For example, some people have returned to their family home; carers and routines have changed; people are not seeing others they are used to seeing, like friends, family and members of staff; social outings are limited; and some carers now look different due to having to wear personal protective equipment such as face masks. There may be a number of people we support who do not understand Covid-19, but nonetheless their lives have changed significantly. Carers themselves may also be experiencing stress and worry, which may be picked up by the people they support.

All or some of the above factors can contribute to the development of emotional or mental health difficulties in individuals with intellectual disability or can in fact worsen existing mental health difficulties.



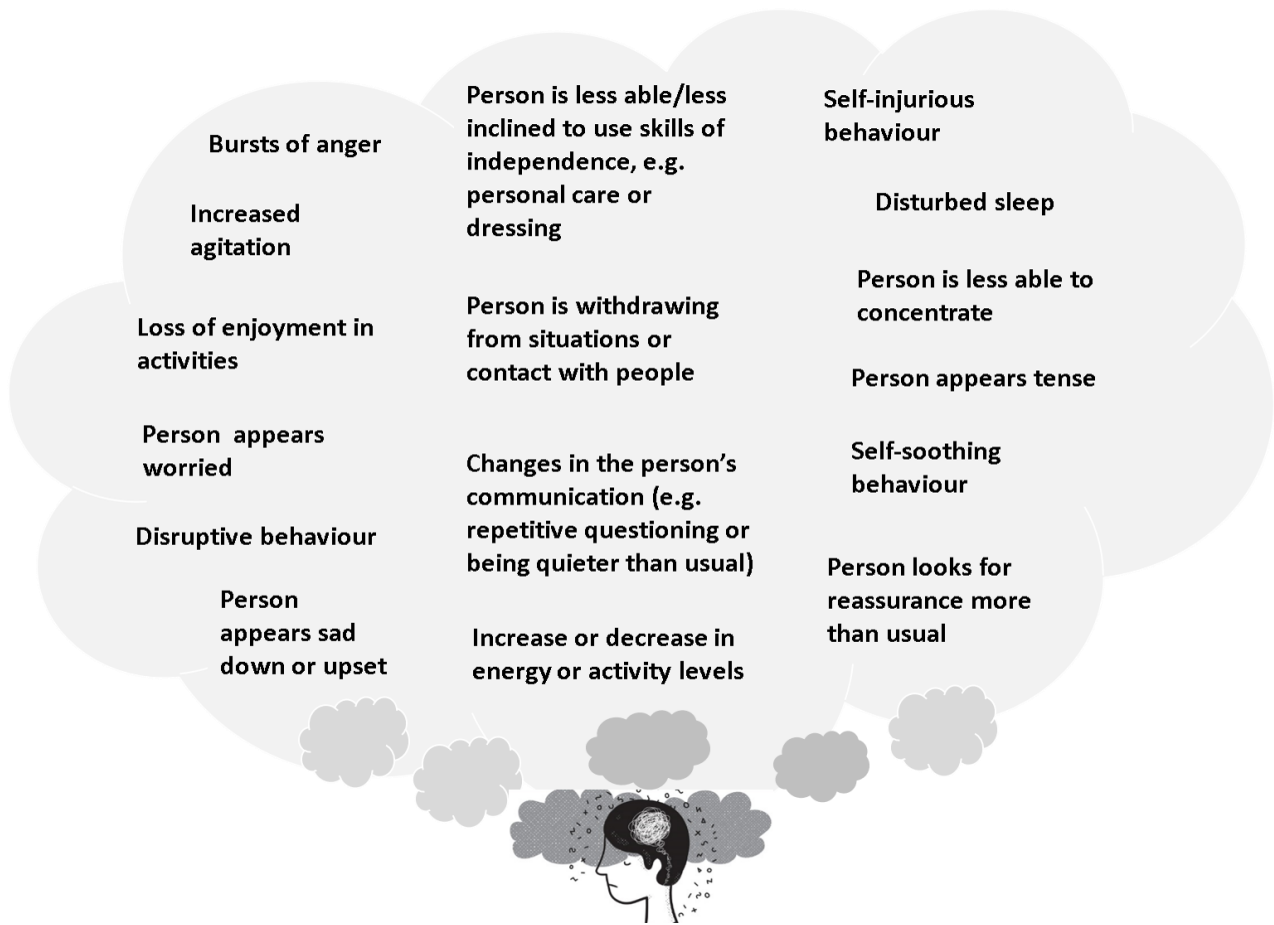
Barriers to Identifying Mental Health Difficulties in People with Intellectual Disability

Mental health difficulties may present in different ways for people with intellectual disabilities. The usual signs and symptoms may not be obvious.

People with intellectual disabilities often have communication difficulties which can make emotional symptoms difficult for them to express, and for carers to identify.

We also know that people with intellectual disabilities sometimes use behaviours in an attempt to cope with overwhelming emotions such as stress and anxiety. There can be a readiness to label the behaviour as ‘challenging’, which can often mask the underlying mental health difficulty being experienced.

Signs that People may be Struggling with their Mental Health



Promoting Positive Mental Health

Physical Health

Physical health is an important part of our overall wellbeing:

- Help people to engage in daily physical activities and exercise
- Encourage healthy eating habits
- Support a good sleep routine



Regular exercise



Healthy food



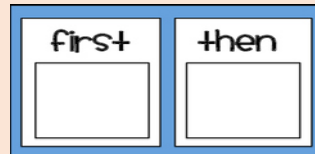
Good sleep

Maintaining Routines

The importance of routine and familiarity is key during unpredictable times:

- If a person's routine has changed, ensure that this is represented in a manner which they can access, e.g., through visual schedules or objects of reference.

Ideally, people need some time to prepare for change in routines.



- Highlight the important benefits of taking care of oneself and maintaining good personal hygiene and appearance, e.g., having a daily shower, applying makeup or aftershave can make us feel good.

Supporting Positive Mental Attitude and Motivation

- Creating new routine based positive activities and experiences are really helpful in keeping us all feeling positive and motivated during this period. Having something to look forward to, and marking the weekend as different to the week days remains important to us all. Some careful and creative scheduling may be required.
- Look at adapting activities which cannot be accessed currently so that they can be facilitated in the home setting. For example, creating a home movie night experience, recreating a nail salon experience from home, or holding a Mexican/Italian themed evening with food, decorations and music/karaoke.



Promoting Choice and Autonomy

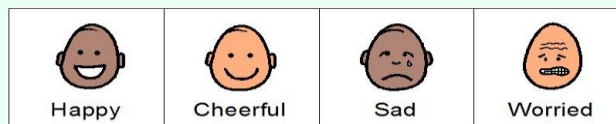
- People often experience a sense of loss of personal control during times of uncertainty. This often compounds the stress associated with challenging times.

Seek out and provide as many opportunities as possible for people to make choices actively throughout daily life.

My Choice Board

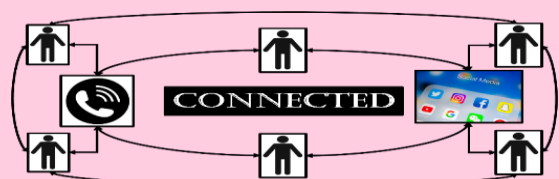
Encouraging Communication

- Create regular opportunities for people to ask questions and talk about the changes they are experiencing.
- Ensure that people have the opportunity to talk to someone (a staff or family member) about how they feel, so that any feelings of worry or frustration can be validated for them.
- Visual aids such as emotion cards along with other communication supports may help this process. Individualised communication supports should also be used for people who are non-verbal as much as possible, to aid emotional expression.



Keeping Connected with Family and Friends

- It is really important to stay connected and in touch with the people that matter in our lives. A plan could be developed for the person, identifying who they can be supported in maintaining contact with, and in identifying the best platform for this, whether it be by phone or social media.



Keeping Connected with the Wider World

- While we are all living with significant restrictions at the moment, it is easy to feel increasingly isolated from the outside wider world. The internet and social media platforms can offer a wide range of opportunities to experience the wider world in a positive way.



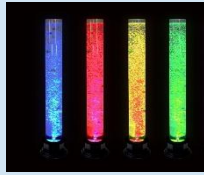
- Support people for example to take virtual tours of museums (www.naturalhistory.si.edu/visit/virtual-tour/past-exhibits or www.wildlifeart.org/visit/virtual-tour) zoos (www.dublinozoo.ie/animals/animal-webcams or www.switcheroozoo.com, concerts (check out www.billboard.com for listings), photo walks (www.virtualphotowalks.org) or a journey around the world (www.airpano.com/360video_list.php)
- Encourage people to enter online competitions such as those being run by the “That’s Life” team in the Brothers of Charity.

Encouraging Opportunities for Relaxation

- Encourage the person to engage with activities which are known to help him/her to relax and feel calm (such as foot spas, relaxing music, bubble baths, etc.).
- Explore some additional relaxation exercises, which are accessible to the person. For example, some people with sensory needs may find lights particularly soothing, especially those of a repetitive predictable nature such as spinning lights, bubble tubes or lava lamps. Others may enjoy relaxing imagery to music (see many examples

on www.youtube.com). Assisting a person to complete simple tummy breathing exercises through modelling, may also help them to relax.

- Consider the benefits of creating a coping box for a person which could contain personalised comforting items for them such as photographs, scented creams, diffusers, aromatherapy oils, stress ball, fidget items etc.



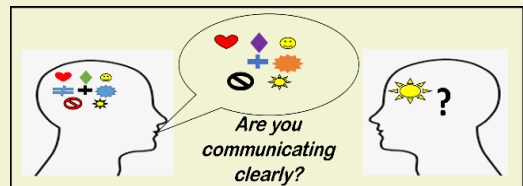
Information

It is important to provide information appropriate to the person's level of understanding at this time.

- Information on Covid-19 should be provided to people in the most accessible way possible. Given the variation amongst people's level of understanding and communication ability, please consult the Speech and Language Therapy Department of the Brothers of Charity on how best to provide this information.
- As questions arise, it is important that they be answered in a way that is understandable for the person. It may be necessary to repeat this information a number of times to aid full understanding. Also, it is important to be mindful that people's ability to process new information can be affected by factors such as stress, and as such they may need more time to process the information than is usual for them. It may also be helpful to consider the environment where this information is

provided. For example, a quieter environment free from distractions may be needed to help the person process new information.

- It is also important to be mindful of not unintentionally communicating fear when explaining how to keep safe.
- A very useful self-care guide for frontline staff was developed by members of the Psychology Department entitled “Mind your mind on the front line” which all frontline staff are encouraged to consult.



It is important to remember that people may require some increased individualised time with staff or family members during this time. Additional time may be needed to provide the supports listed above, but also for more general reassurance.

Who to Contact for Further Support and Advice



Being supported in the ways described above by carers who know them best and with whom trusted and caring relationships are established will help the person through this very challenging time. However, even with this proactive support, some people may require additional assistance in relation to their mental health.

If additional assistance is required you can:

- Contact your local psychologist or psychiatrist or the person’s GP.
- If required, referrals for psychology can be directed to:
East Sector: Dr Maria Mannion, Senior Clinical Psychologist (Tel: 087 9195344)
West Sector: Dr John Gregory, Senior Clinical Psychologist (Tel: 087 7885146)