



Supporting Trainee Teachers with Anxiety and Depression

If anxiety or depression has a significant impact on someone's life it is considered to be a disability and, as such, is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act, 2010. If you are working with a trainee with anxiety or depression, you can offer understanding and practical support for the challenges they may face with some aspects of the course.

Supporting someone with anxiety or depression involves creating a compassionate, flexible, and psychologically safe environment. There is no expectation or responsibility for you to provide support for managing their condition – this is best left to mental health and medical professionals. You can, however, signpost them to sources of support and check they have been able to access them.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a feeling of unease, such as worry or fear, that can be mild or severe. Everyone has feelings of anxiety at some point in their life, but some people find it hard to control their worries. Their feelings of anxiety are more constant and can often affect their daily lives.

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) is a common condition that has a significant effect on people's lives. People with generalised anxiety feel anxious most days and about a wide range of things rather than a single event or concern.

Anxiety is the main symptom of several conditions, including:

- panic disorder
- phobias, such as agoraphobia or claustrophobia
- post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- social anxiety disorder (social phobia)

Depression

Depression is more than simply feeling unhappy or fed up for a few days. Most people go through periods of feeling down but when you are depressed, you feel persistently sad for weeks or months, rather than just a few days.

There is a misconception that depression is trivial and not a genuine health condition. This is wrong – it is a real illness with real symptoms. Depression is not a sign of weakness or something you can "snap out of" by "pulling yourself together". With the right treatment and support, most people with depression can make a full recovery.

Depression has a range of symptoms, including:

- **Psychological:** Continuous low mood or sadness, feeling hopeless and helpless, having low self-esteem, feeling tearful, guilt-ridden, irritable and intolerant of others, having no motivation or interest in things, finding it difficult to make decisions, not getting any enjoyment out of life, feeling anxious or worried, having suicidal thoughts or thoughts of self-harm.

- **Social:** Avoiding contact with friends and taking part in fewer social activities, neglecting hobbies and interests, having difficulties with home, work or family life.
- **Physical**- moving or speaking more slowly than usual, changes in appetite or weight (usually decreased, but sometimes increased), constipation, unexplained aches and pains, lack of energy, disturbed sleep – for example, finding it difficult to fall asleep at night or waking up very early in the morning.

Suggested strategies for support

- Provide opportunities to share feelings and experiences in safe spaces and listen to worries and concerns without judgement
- Provide written instructions where possible and encourage trainees to write information down - to support memory and focus.
- Provide clear feedback that is positive and encouraging — avoid being overly critical
- Provide quiet spaces for breaks or decompression
- Offer some flexibility and reasonable adjustments to reduce stress if needed, such as a temporarily reduced timetable, adjusted start/finish times and being able to work from home sometimes when not teaching or in meetings
- Ensure that expectations are clearly communicated and tasks are structured to reduce overwhelm.
- Signpost to sources of support within school, if possible, eg: staff wellbeing support or counselling
- Signpost to external resources and services such as *Education Support* and *Mind*
- Encourage drawing on the support of family and social networks if possible
- If trainees have disclosed to you they are taking medication, encourage them to let you know about any changes to this that may impact on how they are feeling
- Support them to:
 - prioritise
 - break down big tasks into smaller steps
 - set clear boundaries between work life and home life
 - celebrate wins and look at these successes when they need a boost
 - not dwell when things go wrong – with teaching things will go wrong and no one is perfect – share examples of your own experiences when things didn't go to plan and what you learnt from them
 - plan windows of time when they don't do any work

Considering the wider school context

- Provide mental health training for all staff to reduce stigma and increase empathy
- Have clear policies on mental health support and reasonable adjustments
- Encourage open conversations that normalise mental health challenges
- Appoint mental health leads and mental health first aiders for staff and pupils