

Jami

Mental
Health
Shabbat



19 - 20 January 2024

Toolkit



Our partners



CONTENTS

- 2** Welcome by Jami
- 3** About Jami
- 4** How can I mark Jami Mental Health Shabbat?
- 5** Host a Shabbat meal and fundraise for Jami
- 6** Key facts on mental health
- 7** How to have conversations about mental health
- 9** Where to get help with your mental health
- 10** Mental health and Judaism
- 11** Guidelines for sharing lived experience
- 12** Youth materials and ideas
- 31** University students
- 36** Young adults
- 39** Sermons

WELCOME

Dear Friends,

This year's Jami Mental Health Shabbat is being marked during a particularly challenging time for our community.

The tragic events within Israel over recent months have taken their toll on many of us, emotionally and mentally, bringing the community closer together. It's at times like these when we realise how being part of a community, and the support that brings, becomes more important than ever.

Now in its 8th year, Jami Mental Health Shabbat provides the perfect opportunity for us to come together to connect and talk about how we are feeling. And there seems like no better time than now to be creating a safe, inclusive and accepting space to be having these conversations, to be learning more about the impact of stress and anxiety on our mental health, and to be supporting those around us.

We hope that this toolkit proves a valuable resource in helping to make Jami Mental Health Shabbat 2024 a particularly meaningful one for you, your family, synagogue, school, youth or university group. And we also hope that as many of you as possible will host a Shabbat meal in your home or within your community to enjoy quality time with friends and family while raising vital funds for Jami's essential services.

Thank you for your support.

Jami





Jami is here for when mental illness and distress makes everyday life a struggle.

We guide people through their mental health recovery, support families and carers, and educate community leaders to build our collective resilience.

Over 1,650 people currently benefit from Jami's services, including Mark who regularly attends our groups at Head Room.

“Jami’s staff are so lovely. I want to engage with people who understand me – and they do.”

And because our support is provided by experts with lived experience, it is delivered without judgement and with deep empathy.

To find out more, please visit jamiuk.org, email info@jamiuk.org or call 020 8458 2223

About Jami



How can I mark Jami Mental Health Shabbat?

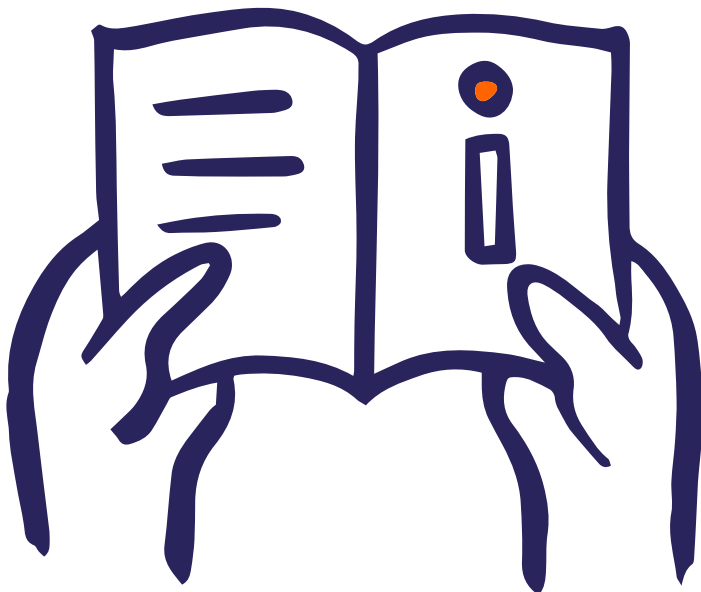
This special Shabbat is an opportunity for us to encourage conversations on mental health, raise awareness of mental illness and distress and share ideas on how to support ourselves and others within our community.

There are many ways for you, your synagogue, school, student or youth group to get involved and everyone can mark Jami Mental Health Shabbat in their own way.

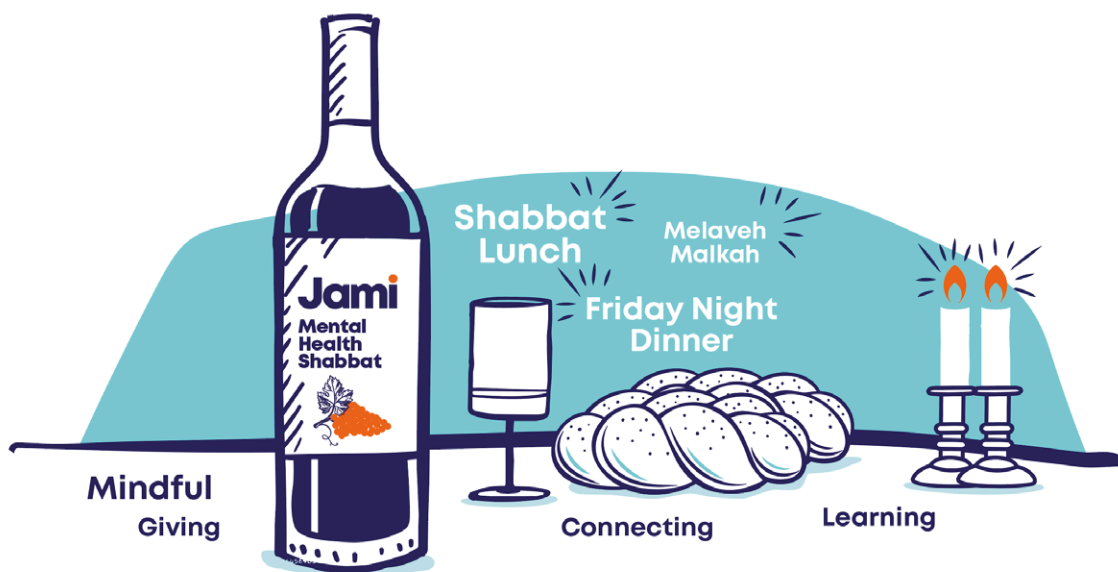
Some communities choose to arrange for members of their congregation to share their lived experience or invite mental health professionals to lead a talk, discussion or panel event.

This toolkit of resources has been put together to assist you, including sermons, youth activities, and much more.

For support in getting a conversation going in your community for Jami Mental Health Shabbat, make use of our resources in this pack or email Laura Bahar at laura.bahar@jamiuk.org



Host a Shabbat meal and fundraise for Jami



Hosting a meal for Jami Mental Health Shabbat is a great way to raise vital funds and awareness of Jami's services while spending quality time connecting with your family and friends.

Asking your guests to make a donation to Jami instead of gifting flowers or wine can make a real impact in enabling Jami to support people in the Jewish community whose mental illness and distress makes everyday life a struggle.

We will provide you with some useful resources to support your event, such as recipes and family friendly conversation cards.

To sign up to host a meal

go to <https://jamiuk.org/get-involved/jmhs/#host>



Key facts on mental health

What is mental health?

Mental health refers to our cognitive, behavioural and emotional wellbeing - it is all about how we think, feel and behave. It helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others and make choices.

Mental health also includes a person's ability to enjoy life - to attain a balance between life activities and efforts to achieve psychological resilience.

What is mental illness?

A medically diagnosable illness that can result from a number of factors, including biological or developmental. It can affect the way we feel, act and think and disrupts our ability to work or carry out other daily activities and engage in satisfying personal relationships. It can be managed through prevention, diagnosis, treatment and mental health recovery.

What is mental health recovery?

Mental health recovery means being able to live a good life, as defined by the individual, with or without symptoms. It is a unique and personal experience that can have its ups and downs. Mental health recovery focuses on what a person CAN do rather than on what they can't. It is not necessarily easy or straightforward. Many people describe the need to persevere and to find ways to maintain hope through the most trying times.

Parity of esteem

The principle by which mental health must be given equal priority to physical health. It was enshrined in law in 2012. The government requires NHS England to work for parity of esteem between mental and physical health through the NHS Mandate. This has still not yet been realised.

Key facts on mental illness

- Data from a survey held in November-December 2022 tells us that 26% of the Jewish community are living with mental illness, distress and trauma, or had done so in the three months prior to the study. And these difficulties affect over 55% of under 25s. (Institute of Jewish Policy Research, 2023)
- In 2021, there were 5,583 suicides registered in England and Wales, equivalent to a rate of 10.7 deaths per 100,000 people. (ONS, 2022)
- In a Student Minds survey of 1,037 students, 57% of respondents self-reported a mental health issue and 27% said they had a diagnosed mental health condition. (Student Minds, 2022)
- People with mental health problems are nearly twice as likely as those without to say they have felt unable to cope due to the rising cost of living. (Money and Mental Health Policy Institute Report, 2022)



How to have conversations about mental health

If you are concerned about someone and think they may be struggling with their mental health, here are some tips to help you start, manage and bring the conversation to a close.

Starting the conversation

- Ask someone how they are doing or feeling. Encourage them to engage, with an open question focused on them and their wellbeing.
- Use your own experiences as a conversation starting point. Be clear on what you're happy to share before you get started.
- Find a quiet place with an informal atmosphere, such as a café.
- If someone approaches you wanting to talk and you can't give them the time they need there and then, show them you recognise that they've taken a positive step by speaking to you. Then explain why you can't talk now and arrange a better time to have the conversation. If they are in urgent need of help, be sure to signpost them to support.

Someone in urgent need of help

If you think someone needs urgent help, for example, if you think they might attempt suicide or self-harm or have seriously harmed themselves, you can support them in the following ways.

- If they are not safe by themselves, stay with them and help them call 999 for an ambulance, if you feel able to do so. Or you could help them get to A&E.
- If they can keep themselves safe for a little while, get quick medical advice by contacting NHS 111. Or you could help them make an emergency GP appointment to see a doctor. You can also encourage them to call the Samaritans on 116 123 to talk to someone, 24 hours a day.

Managing the conversation

- Give someone the space and time to talk as it makes it more likely for them to open up. Reflecting the words they've used can encourage them to open up even more.
- Actively listen to the person by giving them your undivided attention. Leave any questions or comments until the person has finished, so you don't interrupt them.

- Use empathetic statements such as: “I appreciate this must be difficult for you...”
- Avoid clichés. Comments like “pull yourself together” or “you’re just having a bad day” are unhelpful.
- Avoid asking too many questions, especially closed questions (which require a “yes” or “no” answer) and those that begin with “why?” Ask open questions to invite a more detailed response:
 - Can you describe how you’re feeling?
 - How do you look after yourself?
 - What support do you have in place?
- Remind them that mental health problems are more common than people think, and that they can affect anyone at any time.
- Reassure them it’s positive they want to talk about their experience, and that they’ve acknowledged they want support (if this is the case).
- Remember to listen rather than give advice – the person needs to be able to act for themselves.
- Ask if they’re aware of sources of support, and signpost them to relevant information and help, rather than telling them what you think is best. It may be helpful to ask “What would you like to happen in this situation?” This will help to empower and encourage them to take the course of action that seems right to them. Be clear about what you can do, as well as what you can’t.

Closing the conversation

Offering a listening ear and showing your acceptance, warmth and regard can go a long way to help someone. However, there will come a point when you need to close the conversation. This may happen naturally, or you may have to provide a gentle indication that it has come to an end. Closing conversations effectively helps to reassure the person that their thoughts and feelings have been listened to and helps to clarify next steps.

- If you have to bring the conversation to a close, you could say something like: “It’s been good to talk. We’ve covered a lot.”
- Invite them to take some time to reflect on what you’ve discussed, and to consider what they may want to do next. Do understand, however, that it may not be possible to get a clear idea of the next steps they’ll take.
- Ask practical questions, such as “Will someone be there when you get home?” or “Is there a friend you can go and see?”
- If you feel it would be helpful, and you’re able to commit to giving more of your time in this way, you may want to arrange another time to meet and talk.



Where to get help with your mental health

If you or someone you know needs mental health help, there are a variety of options depending on the issue of concern.

- **Jami Qwell** – free, safe, anonymous mental health counselling and online support from the UK’s leading online mental health platform. To find out more go to qwell.io/jami
- **SHOUT** – 24/7 crisis text service – Text **Jami** to **85258**
- **Jami** is here to help with mental health support: jamiuk.org/get-support/referral, call **020 8458 2223** or email info@jamiuk.org
- **Jewish Listening Line** on **0800 652 9249** (Sunday-Thursday, 12pm-12am; Friday 12-3pm)
- **Ring your GP or out-of-hours service for an emergency appointment**
- **Contact your Community Mental Health Team (CMHT) if you have one**
- **Samaritans** – Call Samaritans on Freephone **116 123** (24 hours a day)
- Call the **Papyrus HOPELINEUK**, on **0800 068 41 41** or text **07860 039 967** if you are under 35 and worried about how you are feeling. Or call if you are worried about a young person.
- Call **999** or **NHS Direct** on **111** (England) or **0845 46 47** (Wales)
- Don’t hesitate to call **999** in mental health emergencies



Mental health and Judaism

The sources below can be used as a starting point to discuss how mental health fits into religion and culture. How does Judaism recognise the importance of looking after ourselves? What ideas from Judaism can we use to boost our wellbeing?

You may want to think about other textual sources or ideas in Judaism which support our mental health e.g. trying to use technology less or not at all over Shabbat can boost our mental health by giving us a break from screen-time. This gives us time to maximise face-to-face communication or focus our time on other hobbies and activities we enjoy.

A valuable lesson

“It is long past time for us all to break the silence and speak openly about mental illness. It is time for this last stigma to fall and fall quickly in the recognition that we are all created b’tzelem Elokim (in the image of G-d)” – Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot, 2001

A key part of education is leading from the front. Just by educating about mental health we are raising awareness that we all have mental health and we need to look after our wellbeing to maintain it. We are role modelling the importance of looking after ourselves and teaching a valuable lesson.

Do we have the concept of mental illness in Judaism?

Prayer for the sick

Refuat Ha’Nefesh, V’refuat Ha’guf / Healing the soul and healing the body

Judaism shows us a connection of healing the soul and healing the body; there is no division between mental and physical illness. There is only illness. Likewise, everyone has both physical and mental health which changes over time and needs looking after.

Does Judaism help?

“The support individuals derive from the members, leaders and clergy of religious

congregations is widely considered one of the key mediators between spirituality and mental health. Spiritual or religious support can be a valuable source of self-esteem, information, companionship and practical help that enables people to cope with stress and negative life events” – Mental Health Foundation, The Impact of Spirituality on Mental Health.

Religion and culture can provide us with a sense of community and belonging. Within these communities we know that there are people we can turn to and trust when we need them.

How does Judaism help?

Pirkei Avot 1:6

Aseh Lecha Rav, V’Kneh Lecha Haver

Make for yourself a Rabbi (teacher) and acquire for yourself a friend.

We all need someone to talk to sometimes, whether we turn to a Rabbi or Rebbetzin for guidance or a friend for support. Most of us will have a community, family and friends who we can turn to.

Parshat Va’etchanan 5:12

Shamor et Yom HaShabbat

Keep (Guard) Shabbat

However we choose to mark Shabbat, Judaism recognises the need to “switch off” from our busy lives and reconnect with those around us. Whether we find comfort in, or feel connected to familiar routines and rituals, or choose not to use technology for a while, these are great ways to boost our mental health.

Pirkei Avot 1:14

Im Ein Ani Li, Mi Li. U’KeSheAni L’Asmi, Mah Ani?

If I Am Not For Myself, Who Will Be For Me? And If I’m Only For Myself, What Am I?

This reminds us of the importance to look after ourselves when caring for others. Finding the balance between looking after our own welfare and the welfare of others. It’s the equivalent of putting your oxygen mask on first, before you help others.

Guidelines for sharing lived experience

If you choose to tell your story on Jami Mental Health Shabbat, here are a few suggestions to help you stay in control of what you share.

Spend time on this

Think about which parts of your story you wish to share and write a first draft. Put that away for a couple of weeks and then revisit it. Have you opened up about experiences that actually feel too raw to share with others? Can you make some edits and tweaks?

Keep it simple

A human story simply told has the power to grip an audience and capture both hearts and minds.

Expert by experience

You are an “expert” on your lived experience. Don’t forget that.

Set boundaries for questions

Decide what you are prepared to answer questions on and what you will not discuss.

People are naturally curious and their questions may feel too intrusive. So, decide if you are prepared to take questions after your talk. There may be areas that you do not wish to answer questions on. Some speakers, for example, who talk about their experience of eating disorders make it clear they are not prepared to answer questions about their weight or what they eat.

Be proud

Sharing your story is a courageous act. By sharing your account, you will inspire those who listen, who also identify with lived experience of mental illness, and educate and inform others.

Reflect

Give your talk to a friend or relative and reflect on how telling your story makes you feel. Then imagine telling the same story to a room full of people. It will feel different, so if anything felt too triggering or made you feel vulnerable in front of one person, think about how you might feel in front of others.

Make final edits and practise

We suggest that you write and rehearse your story several times before it gets a public outing.

Personal stories

There are many online resources where people share their personal stories via video or on a blog which our communities can access. For example, Time to Change Wales and Mind both provide real life personal stories which can be found here:

timetochangewales.org.uk/en/personal-stories/

mind.org.uk/information-support/your-stories

Look after yourself

Whenever we’re taking on something big, it’s important that we make time to look after ourselves. Think about who you may want to spend time with or chat to after you’ve given the talk. Perhaps there’s an activity or hobby that you really enjoy and would like to do. It’s great to plan ahead with this to ensure you have the time to unwind.

Youth materials & ideas

This range of fantastic resources has been developed for use by teachers and youth leaders in the run up to Jami Mental Health Shabbat as well as throughout the year.

We hope these activities can support you in how you educate and talk about mental health with young people.

These resources can be used to develop your understanding of how a range of factors can contribute to young people's wellbeing.

We have provided you with practical examples of age-appropriate activities to promote wellbeing in young people which will work in both formal and informal education settings.



Guidelines and tips for

Speaking to young people about mental health and wellbeing

Why do we need to talk about mental health with young people?

- 26% of the Jewish community are living with mental illness, distress and trauma, or have done so in the three months prior to the study. And these difficulties affect over 55% of under 25s. (IJPR 2023)
- A variety of stress and pressures on young people, including social media and technology, can affect their ability to cope and impact possible mental health issues.
- We know that most adults living with mental illness experienced their first mental health problems at a young age. In fact, 50% of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by the age of 14 and 75% by the age of 24.
- If young people know that support is available for their mental health and they know where they can get this support, we help build the foundations for a better future.

How do we talk about it?

- We need to use boundaries when working with groups of young people. Setting out the aims for our conversations about the subject can help us stick to these parameters. Our aims for these sessions may be:
 - To raise awareness about mental health as something that affects us all
 - To encourage people to talk to each other rather than isolating themselves
 - To encourage the young person to seek help when they need it. If you broke your ankle you would not wait to see if it could get better on its own. We should take the same approach with our mental health
 - Use a “light” voice when talking about the subject. If we convey anxiety or seem uncomfortable with the information, we give the impression that this is a hard or “heavy” discussion

Key points to educate young people on mental health

- We all have mental health just as we all have physical health.
- Mental health is about the way we feel about ourselves and the world. Our feelings and thoughts are part of our mental health.
- No one can see inside our head, so we need to tell people how we feel.
- When our feelings and thoughts seem to be out of control or worry us, we need to speak to a trusted adult. We may decide to speak to someone we know well and feel comfortable with, such as a parent or carer, grandparent or other family member or a school counsellor or teacher. There are also charities, such as ChildLine and Young Minds, where we can speak to someone anonymously.
- We can get help to get better when experiencing mental health problems.

How do we look after our mental health?

- Talk to our friends and socialise with people who make us feel good about ourselves.
- Make sure we get enough sleep and enough food to eat (we need to look after our minds as well as our bodies).
- Social media can be a great way to socialise and films and TV can help us unwind but we do need to take regular breaks. We also need to be aware that light from phone screens and laptops or computers can interfere with a good night's sleep.
- Hobbies such as team sports, walking the dog, listening to music or expressing ourselves through art or writing can make us feel better and distract us from life's stresses.
- It's okay to speak to an adult we trust about how we feel.

Primary school activities

Smile activity

Suitable for Year 1+

Ask everyone to think about one thing that makes them smile.

Ask who would like to share what makes them smile. They can also say why it makes them smile if they want to.

Ask why do we like to smile or make other people smile?

Option 1 (Shabbat appropriate)

Put out pictures of lots of different things that might make the children happy. For example, friends, animals, smiles, the sun, toys, yummy foods.

Make sure you have multiples of each picture in case more than one young person wants to use it.

Give each child an envelope/box or bag and ask them to put a few pictures into their new smile box. If you don't have an envelope/box or bag, you can ask them to choose their pictures and think about where they might put them so they can see them often or to keep them safe.

Remind them that they can always think about the things that make them smile or look in their smile box. This can be useful if you are having a day that is making your face frown or looking a bit sad. We all have those sorts of days sometimes and it is important to let our teachers, friends and parents or carers know.

Option 2 (Use art materials)

Provide art materials and paper that are age-appropriate for your group to use.

Encourage everyone to draw a few things that make them happy.

You can print off some of the ideas in option 1 to help prompt or remind them what they thought about at the start of the activity when we asked them what made them smile.

For older kids

If your group are older primary school children, you can ask them to create a smile poster to help make other people smile that can be helpful to them, especially if they are having a difficult day.

Primary school activities

Mental health acrostic poems

Suitable for all years

Ask the group: “What is mental health?”

Collect their ideas on board/paper and make sure to explain that mental health is how we think, feel and behave in the world. Remind the group that we all have mental health, and it is just as important as physical health.

Give an example of how our mental health can impact our thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Such as, if we do badly on a test, we may think negative thoughts like “I am a failure” and that is likely to affect our feelings as we may feel sad or upset. This in turn will also impact our behaviour and we may lose motivation to do our work, try something new or socialise.

However, the opposite is also true. If we do well in a test, we will feel happier and have positive thoughts such as “I can do this!”. This will affect our attitude and behaviour as we might be more willing to engage with work or try and achieve something new.

Activity

In pairs or small groups, write down the words ‘MENTAL HEALTH’ vertically. Using each of these letters to start a sentence, write a line that is mental health related to create a poem. Remember, poems don’t have to rhyme unless you want them to.

For younger children, you can do words rather than poem sentences.

Offer the pairs / groups the option to read out their poems to the wider group.

e.g.

My mental health is important to me
Everyone has it naturally
Needing to look after my mental health
Talking about it with somebody else
Awareness raising is the key
Letting someone know what it’s like to be me
Helping a friend or a listening ear
Everyone needs someone to hear
About how they think and feel
Let’s be honest mental health is real
Try out different things for self-care
Have a chat with your GP, if life is hard to bear

Primary school activities

Write a letter

Suitable for all years

Ask the group why it is important to look after our mental health. Ensure they understand that mental health is how we think, feel and behave in the world.

If no one is answering, suggest they discuss the question in pairs first and then feedback to the group.

Share that looking after our mental health is important, just like we look after our physical health. It allows us to do everything that is required of us, making sure we have the energy and motivation to do school work, socialise with our friends, help others, engage in extracurricular activities or hobbies, exercise, try new things, take time for ourselves etc. Looking after ourselves is also important to help us manage better when times are hard or we are struggling with something.

Explain that the word we use for looking after our mental health is self-care. We should all be practising self-care weekly but it is not a replacement for seeking help from a trusted adult or a GP if we need it. Some of us may need both.

Activity

Ask the group to write a short letter to a friend who lives far away and is having a hard time at school. What would you include in the letter? What would you do to reassure your friend or offer advice?

If there is time, you can invite some of the group to read out some or all of their letter if they want to. Make this an option only.

Ask the group if there is a difference between how we speak to our friend in the letter when they need support and how we may speak to ourselves.

If no one suggests it, ask the group if we tend to be kinder and more understanding to our friends, then we would be to ourselves.

A great way to practise self-care is to remind ourselves to speak to ourselves like we would a friend.

For example, when we make a mistake or don't do as well as we hoped in an exam or piece of work, would we tell our friend they were stupid or should have tried harder? Or would we be kind to them and reassure them that no one noticed the mistake, that it wasn't a big deal and that there are things we can do so it doesn't happen again?

Primary school activities

Self-care

Suitable for all years

Ask the group for some ideas for self-care.

You could either gather these from the group who, in turns, can give an idea starting with each letter of the alphabet, e.g. a for art or b for break (taking a break) or work in partners, thinking of two things they already do and one thing they would like to try. Invite everyone to share at least one idea for self-care. See how many different ones you can collect.

Acknowledge if someone suggests talking to someone they trust or with a friend. Make sure this is included on your list.

Explain that talking is one of the most important forms of self-care and this may mean talking to an adult we trust, be it a parent or carer, teacher, youth worker or a healthcare professional like a doctor. We may need to talk to an adult when the situation is more than we can manage or requires extra support. At other times, speaking to a trusted friend may be helpful.



Primary school activities

Self-care bingo

Suitable for all years

Self-care bingo is a great activity for primary school / year 7 pupils to get them thinking and talking about what they've done recently to look after themselves. It could be spending time outdoors, listening to music or trying something new.

Aims and objectives

To encourage young people to compare and discuss with one another what they do for their own wellbeing.

Instructions

Explain to your pupils that you are going to play bingo with a twist!

Give everyone a self-care bingo card and a pen.

Each pupil should walk around the room and ask one another "What do you do for self-care?"

If someone's answer is on the sheet, write their name in the appropriate box. If not, write their idea at the bottom of the bingo card.

You can only ask each person once.

Keep playing until either a line or the whole page is completed.

Time required

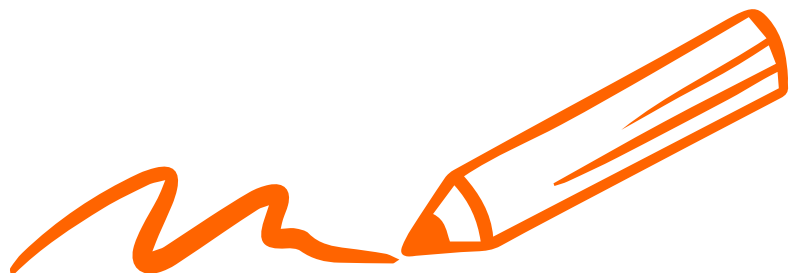
Approximately 30 minutes

Resources required

Bingo cards and pens

Alternative option

Have your kids make their own self-care bingo cards with art materials. Encourage them to fill in the squares with their own self-care ideas, then play self-care bingo.



Resources

Self-care bingo

Ate something delicious	Did something I've been putting off	Made a healthy food choice	Spoke to someone I trust	Took a nap
Said "no" to something when I was busy	Practised mindfulness or yoga	Played a game	Watched a movie or TV show	Made a to-do list or organised something
Listened to music	Made a gratitude list	Pampered myself	Volunteered my time	Got creative with art materials
Took quiet time	Spent quality time with someone I love	Tried something new	Exercised	Had a hot drink
Read a book or magazine	Spent time outside	Went to bed early(ish)	Took a relaxing bath	Cut myself some slack

Primary school activities

What is mental health?

Suitable for Years 5 and 6

Part 1

1. Tell the group you would like them to complete the sentence 'mental health is...'
2. Use the range of adjectives listed below. You can stick these around the room or put them on pieces of paper on the floor. If you are using an online platform, put the words on a PowerPoint slide and share your screen.
3. Ask everyone to pick an adjective that completes the sentence.
4. Invite them to say why they chose it if they would like to.
5. When everyone who wants to speak has had their chance, explain that mental health is how we think, feel and behave in the world.

Adjective suggestions for completing the sentence:

Important

Necessary

Good

Scary

Bad

Misunderstood

Confusing

Interesting

Healthy

Boring

Part 2

1. Use one or both examples below to illustrate how our thoughts and feelings can change how we behave.
 - Ask them "If you were all really noisy today and I wanted you to be quiet, how might I feel?"
 - When they say something like cross/angry/sad, ask them: "Am I more likely to be nice to you and choose something fun to do, or might I be a bit more strict with you?"

OR

 - If you are watching TV and someone comes in and changes the channel, how might you feel about that?
 - When they say something like annoyed/angry/upset, ask them: "Are you more likely to politely ask for them to change it back, or might we raise our voices and shout or try and change it back ourselves?"
2. Explain that this shows how our mental health is important because it can change how we think and feel and that will change how we behave towards those around us.
3. Use this as an opportunity to let them know that if they are not feeling good about something, instead of acting in a certain way we need to tell an adult we trust how we are feeling. No one can read our minds, so we need to tell people how we feel so they can help us.

Resources

What is mental health?

Important	Necessary	Good	Scary	Bad
Misunderstood	Confusing	Interesting	Healthy	Boring

Secondary school activities

Self-care conversation

Suitable for all years

1. Share the quote: **“You can’t pour from an empty cup.”**
2. Ask the group what their initial thoughts or reactions are.
3. Then ask if they think it is relevant to what we know about self-care.
4. Acknowledge that at times it can be hard to prioritise looking after ourselves. This may be because we are very busy managing lots of pressures on our time. Or it may be because we find ourselves
5. trying to help other people so it’s hard to find time to look after ourselves.
5. Remind them that we all need to look after ourselves otherwise our batteries will run out. We all feel better when we are recharged.
6. In pairs, ask them to think about one thing they do for self-care and one thing they’d like to try out.
7. Ask the pairs to share back.



Secondary school activities

What is mental health?

Suitable for all years

1. Ask everyone to complete the sentence 'Mental health is...' with an adjective of their choice.
2. Go around the room and ask people to share the adjective that they would use.
3. Share some key messages about mental health as follows:
 - We all have mental health just as we all have physical health.
 - Mental health is about the way we feel about ourselves and the world.
 - Our feelings and thoughts are part of our mental health.
 - We need to look after our mental health, just as we would look after our physical health.
 - We can support our wellbeing by doing things we enjoy or help de-stress us.
 - No one can see inside our head, so we need to tell people how we feel.

OR

1. Ask everyone to complete the sentence 'Mental health is...' as concisely as possible.
2. Ask them to consider what is the most important message about mental health.
3. Encourage them to include hashtags.
4. If you have whiteboards or pieces of paper/pens this is a fun way to do it. Or you can ask people for their thoughts or if you're online to share them in the chat function.
5. Share some key messages about mental health as above.



Secondary school activities

Mythbusting mental health quiz

Suitable for years 6-9

Part 1

Put your groups into teams. Depending on how many young people you have, there may need to be more than two teams.

Ask them to pick a team name.

Tell them that you will read a mental health quote to them and they will need to answer true or false.

Agree a way for the teams to answer. This could be hands up, a buzzer if you have one, a noise each team will make or someone from the team standing up.

If they get the answer right they are awarded a point.

If they can explain why or give more accurate information, they will get an extra point.

After each myth is 'busted', use some of the key messages in the resources to provide more information.

You may want to think of a fun way to keep score. This can be done by keeping a score board or by assigning sweets/beads/buttons to each team: one per point.



Secondary school activities

Mythbusting mental health quiz

Suitable for years 6-9

Mythbusting mental health quiz

(with key messages about each quote for you to share after each question)

Only some people have mental health – FALSE

We all have mental health in the same way that we all have physical health. They both need looking after as they can impact each other.

Our mental health changes over time – TRUE

Our mental health is always changing and will go up and down. Sometimes big life events or stresses may cause it to change. Other times it could be a build up of lots of little things in a short time period which impact our mental health.

I can look after my mental health – TRUE

This is the concept of self-care. There are things that we can do to help boost our mental health which can make us more productive and motivated and give us more energy. One of the most important forms of self-care is talking about our thoughts and feelings with a trusted adult. Part of looking after our mental health is also getting support from a medical professional if we are worried about our health.

We shouldn't talk about mental health – FALSE

It's really important that we talk about mental health. By speaking about it, we teach others to do the same thing too. When

we talk about mental health we help combat stigma because people may not fully understand mental health and therefore treat people differently. It also helps to highlight how important it is that we look after our mental health and get support if we need it.

Mental health is as important as physical health – TRUE

Our mental health and physical health are equally important and make up our overall wellbeing. When our mental health isn't as good as it could be, it might start to affect our immune system so we're more likely to pick up a stomach bug or a cold. If our physical health needs a boost, it may start to impact our mental health and we may find our mood becomes lower or we become more stressed.

Mental health isn't the same as mental illness – TRUE

We all have mental health but we don't all have a mental illness diagnosis. It is thought that in this country one in four British adults experience at least one diagnosable mental health problem in any one year and one in eight 5-19-year-olds had at least one mental disorder when assessed in 2017.

Secondary school activities

Mythbusting mental health quiz

Suitable for years 6-9

Stress won't impact my mental health – FALSE

Stress is one of the areas of our lives which is most likely to impact our mental health. If we think about the times when our mental health might have needed a boost, it's likely to be during times when we were stressed - possibly during exam season or when we had a deadline. If our stress levels are increasing and we're finding it difficult to manage, it's important that we talk to a trusted adult about it. They can help us think about ways to manage our stress. Having someone to talk to can also be good stress relief.

I shouldn't go to my GP about my mental health – FALSE

Our doctor is the right person to go to if we have concerns about our mental health. They are there for both our physical and mental health because, as we've seen, they are connected. A GP can help us think about who we can talk to or some self-care options and, if needed, refer us to other professionals for further support.

Mental health can affect how I feel – TRUE

Mental health is all about how we think, feel and behave in the world so it is linked to how we feel. Our thoughts and emotions can be an indication of our mood and the state of our mental health.

My mental health can affect my physical health – TRUE

When our mental health needs a boost or our stress levels are high, we may experience changes to our physical health. These are most likely to include headaches, aches and pains from being tense and stressed, or being more likely to pick up a cold or stomach bug.

Part 2

After the quiz, ask the group why it is important to mythbust around mental health.

If needed, you can prompt them by thinking about where we get our mental health information and if it is always accurate.

If needed, suggest the group discusses the answers in pairs or smaller groups before sharing their thoughts.

As a whole group, think about what might happen if information is inaccurate. For example, people may not know where to get help, people might not look after themselves, stigma may increase, etc.

Secondary school activities

Mental health influencers

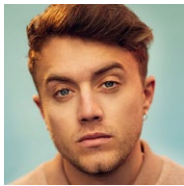
Suitable for Year 9+

1. Divide the students into small groups.
2. Assign each group one of the mental health influencers, which can be found in the resources below.
3. Tell them they will be taking part in a debate to find the most influential mental health influencer.
4. They will have 10 minutes to discuss in their teams why their influencer has contributed the most to mental health and raising awareness.
5. One by one, each team will have three minutes to pitch their argument to the other groups.
6. Let them know that when they have 30 seconds left of their pitch, you will raise your hand to warn them.
7. At the end, everyone has one vote but they can't vote for the person they pitched for. You can do this by raising hands, writing the name on a piece of paper or ticking a name off on a piece of paper, ballot style.
8. Count the votes and announce who was voted the most influential mental health influencer.
9. Open up the discussion about why it is important that we still educate and raise awareness about mental health.
10. Ask the group if they think this has improved in recent years and if they think we still need influencers for mental health and why.
11. Finish off the discussion by asking if influencers need to be high profile like the people we discussed. Help them think about what we could do to raise awareness about mental health.



Resources

Mental health influencers



Roman Kemp

In a powerful open letter addressed to the Government calling for more mental health support teams in schools, Roman Kemp shared: “At

the age of 15, I was diagnosed with depression and experienced suicidal thoughts for the first time. I would regularly find myself struggling to get through each day. I know firsthand that, even if people like myself are lucky enough to have a loving, privileged and tight-knit family, that isn’t always enough,” he wrote. “Proper support needs to be in place for those who need it, and the sad reality is that in 2023, it’s often individuals and charities who are trying to cover the gaps in a system that is becoming increasingly overwhelmed.”



Kristen Bell

In an interview with The Off Camera Show, Veronica Mars star Kristen spoke out about her anxiety and depression,

and how nobody should feel shame over taking medication to control their mental health.

“I got a prescription when I was really young and I still take it today and I have no shame in that because my Mom had said to me: ‘If you start to feel this way, talk to your doctor, talk to a psychologist, see how you want to help yourself.’

“If you do decide to go on a prescription to help yourself, understand that the world wants to shame you for that. But in the medical community, you would never deny a diabetic his insulin.”

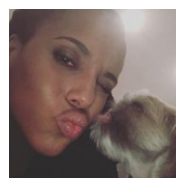


Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson

Appearing on an episode of Oprah’s Master Class, Dwayne – who suffered from

depression in his early 20s – emphasised the importance of not hiding or being ashamed of mental health issues.

“I found that with depression, one of the most important things you could realise is that you’re not alone,” he said. “You’re not the first to go through it; you’re not going to be the last to go through it... I wish I had someone at that time who could just pull me aside and [say], ‘Hey, it’s gonna be okay. It’ll be okay.’ So I wish I knew that.”



Kerry Washington

Speaking to Essence magazine, the Scandal star talked about her unhealthy relationship with food and

compulsive exercising.

“I used food as a way to cope - it was my best friend,” she said. “I’d eat anything and everything, sometimes until I passed out.

“But then, because I had this personality that was driven toward perfectionism, I would tell people I was at the library, but instead go to the gym and exercise for hours and hours and hours. Keeping my behaviour a secret was painful and isolating. There was a lot of guilt and a lot of shame.”

Kerry went to therapy after being approached by her dance teacher about her eating disorder. She continues to see a therapist – as well as a nutritionist – to help her communicate her feelings instead of using food as a crutch.

Secondary school activities

Mental health in the news

Suitable for Year 9+

Part 1

1. Show the group the different newspaper headlines which are reporting about mental health, in the resources below.
2. Ask them to suggest what the story behind the headline might be. They can work in teams to do this or as one big group.
3. You can prompt the discussion by asking:
 - What do we think the story is?
 - What does it tell us about mental health?
 - Do we think it is a positive/negative headline?
4. Once the headlines have been discussed, share with the group what the story actually is. It might not be what we thought.
5. Acknowledge that headlines can be misleading, especially if we only see headlines and don't read the full articles.
6. Ask the group what might be the impact on people reading these headlines? Do they get the full story? Is it easy to misinterpret or misunderstand what's being said?
7. Ask the group to consider if the articles were stigmatising in any way e.g. Do they encourage a negative perception about mental health or those with a mental illness? What might be the impact if the media is promoting or sharing inaccurate or harmful information?

Part 2

1. Ask each person to create their own media headline.
2. The headline could reflect something about young people's mental health which they think the general public should know.
3. If needed, start a discussion on what they, as young people, think adults should know about young people's mental health or the pressures or experiences of young people in the 21st century. They can use these ideas to create their headlines.



Resources

Mental health in the news

Kylie Minogue opens up on keeping away from limelight after mental health struggles

<https://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/kylie-minogue-opens-up-keeping-30898203>

Billie Eilish, Selena Gomez and what we can learn from celebrities stepping back from social media

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/health-wellness/2023/03/03/selena-gomez-billie-eilish-celebrities-taking-social-media-breaks/11389639002/>

Prince William tells Peter Crouch it's not weak to share your feelings

<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/royal-family/prince-william-mental-health-peter-crouch-podcast-interview-duke-cambridge-a9642321.html>

'It all crumbled': pop stars on mental health in the age of Covid

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/aug/24/it-all-crumbled-pop-stars-on-mental-health-in-the-age-of-covid>

Celebrities getting candid about their health challenges can help reduce stigma, experts say

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/celebrities-health-visibility-stigma/>

Teens' anxiety levels dropped in lockdown - study

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53884401>

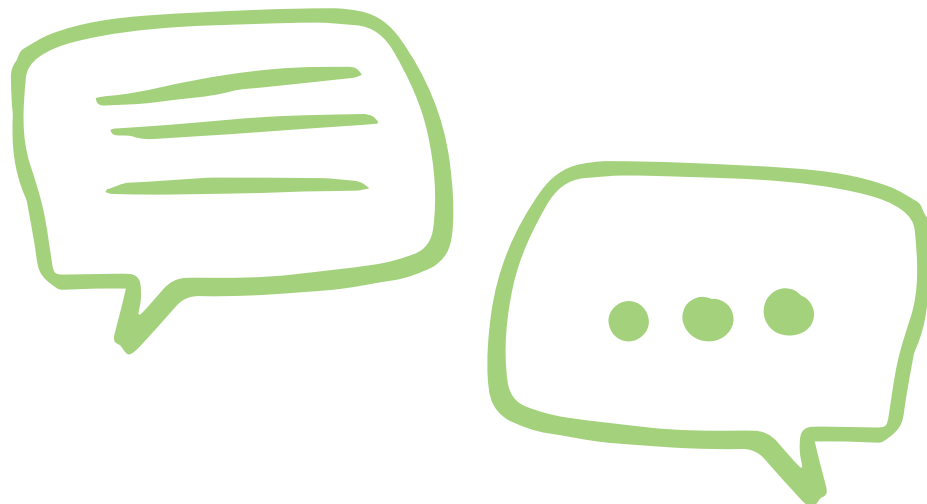
Conversation starters

Suggested activity for university students

Starting a conversation about mental health is an excellent way to challenge the stigma and get people thinking and talking about their perceptions of mental health and mental illness.

Here are a few suggested conversation points relevant to university students.

1. What are the main concerns students have about their mental health?
2. Do you think Jewish students have a different experience with their mental health on campus in comparison with the wider student community? What are these differences?
3. How does engaging with university group activities support your mental health?
4. Do you feel you have the knowledge to identify poor mental health for both yourself and others?
5. How can universities better support the mental health of their students?
6. How do you balance focusing on your self-care with other responsibilities?
7. What tips would you share with new/incoming students about looking after their mental health on campus?
8. How do you look after your mental wellbeing when preparing for the transition after finishing university?



Strength Card activity

Suggested activity for university students

University life is full of new opportunities to learn and have new experiences both in and out of the lecture theatre. This learning can help us develop and uncover strengths and transferable skills which will help us in all areas of our lives, as we move on from university life and into the workplace, further education, volunteering and with our relationships and self-development.

We know that acknowledging our strengths can help boost our confidence and self-esteem, while learning and having new experiences can boost our mental health and wellbeing.

To help you identify the strengths you already have and the ones you'd like to develop, try out our Strength Card activity.

Look at the list of strengths provided or cut them out and spread them across the table or floor.

- Ask everyone to think about three strengths they have. Give people the opportunity to speak about at least one strength they choose.
- Then, ask everyone to think about two strengths they would like to work on. Give people the opportunity to say why they would like this new strength for university life.
- Finally, ask everyone to think about one strength the person on their right has. Invite everyone to say why this person has this strength and why it is so valuable.



Resources

Strength card activity

Coherent	Well-prepared	Flexible	Confident
Charismatic	Knowledgeable	Dynamic	Concise
Understanding	Skilled	Genuine	Open
Enthusiastic	Good leader	Active listener	Friendly
Calm	Thoughtful	Creative	Open-minded
Respectful	Humorous	Personable	Intelligent
Holds boundaries	Patient	Organised	Focused
Inclusive	Authoritative	Encouraging	Accessible

Jewish identity and mental health

Suggested activity for university students

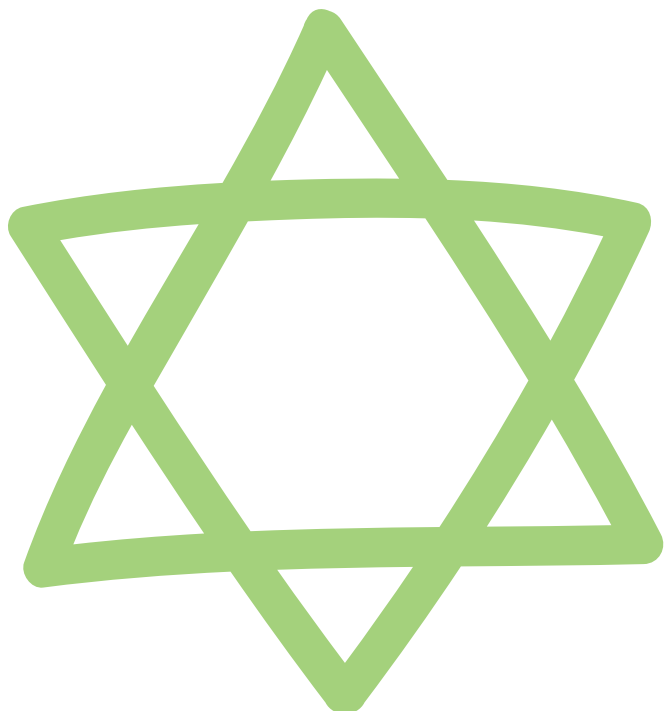
We acknowledge that our transitions to and from university, and the university experience itself, can be a particularly challenging time for our mental health.

So much of these transitions and our university experience force us to think about our identity, who we are and what kind of person we are striving to become.

To help you start thinking about this conversation, we would suggest the following activity:

Activity 1

Spread the words out face down randomly on the table (or floor) in front of you. Invite everyone in your group to pick one up and share it with the others. Discuss how the word on your card influences your identity and impacts your mental health as you transition to or from university or while you are still there.



Resources

Jewish identity and mental health

LGBTQ+	Race and ethnicity	'Jewishness'	Studying
Exams	Employability	Friendship circles	Relationships
Parents' expectations	Workplace expectations	Transition to or from university	Money / finances

Young adults

Being open to talking about our mental health and listening to others can help us maintain a positive state of wellbeing and help to break down the stigma that surrounds mental health. Continuing these conversations is more important now than ever.



Young adults

Wellbeing balloon debate

There are many different ideas about types of wellbeing or wellness. For this activity we will be looking at the 5 steps to mental wellbeing from the NHS, which you can find [here](#). This activity can be carried out in the workplace with colleagues or socially in a group setting.

- For the balloon debate, divide your group into five separate groups and assign each group one “way to wellbeing”.
- Let them know that their job is to advocate for why their way to wellbeing is the most important for their mental health. To prove this, they will need to include examples of how their way to wellbeing could be achieved.
- The debate should be structured with short opening remarks, a maximum five-minute pitch and a few minutes for questions from the other side. If possible, have someone to referee the debate and keep time.
- Allow your groups at least 10 minutes to prepare for their debate. When everyone is ready, groups take it in turns to debate with each other. The winner of each debate goes on to the second round until there is one winner.



You can use some of the following ideas about the 5 steps to mental wellbeing and prompts to help your groups get started.

1. Connect with other people

We know connection and community are vital for our mental health. Good relationships can boost our mental health by fostering a sense of belonging and building confidence. It also helps us create bespoke support networks which we can rely on when we need them.

- How can we connect with others in and out of the workplace?
- What support networks are available in the Jewish community?

2. Be physically active

Physical activity is important for both our physical and our mental health. It can help us build confidence and self-esteem. It can also challenge us in a positive way and motivate us to reach our goals. We also know that it can be an important form of self-care and help boost our mood.

- Does physical activity provide us with the opportunity to socialise and interact with others? What are some examples of this?
- Are there other aspects of physical activity that can boost our wellbeing?

3. Learn new skills

Being involved in meaningful activity can provide a sense of purpose, which is vital for our mental health. Likewise, new skills can increase our problem-solving skills and encourage us to be creative. It may also boost our self-confidence when we find success at something we previously found challenging.

- What avenues for learning can be found within our workplace?
- How can we use our hobbies to support our wellbeing?

4. Give to others

Those who volunteer and give to others report higher levels of wellbeing. It can help us feel connected and foster a sense of community. It can create a sense of reward and provide us with a sense of purpose too.

- How can we support one another within our community?
- How does volunteering give us a sense of purpose?

5. Pay attention to the present

Mindfulness is all about being in the present moment. We know that for many, being more mindful can improve their wellbeing. By being more mindful we can boost our mood and enjoy the present moment more fully. It may help us understand ourselves and those around us better too. By being mindful we may be able to slow down and approach challenges in a more thoughtful way too.

- How can we encourage each other to be more mindful?
- What options for mindfulness might exist within our workplace or community?

Sermon

Rabbi Alexandra Wright, The Liberal Jewish Synagogue

Mental illness is not an easy subject to talk about. Although the media and prominent individuals have sought to highlight mental illness, I wonder – to what extent – people still live with the stigma attached to anxiety and depression and conditions such as bipolar and personality disorders, eating and obsessive-compulsive disorders, paranoia, post-traumatic stress disorder, addictions and many other illnesses that affect so many of us.

The mental health charity Mind reports that one in four people will experience mental health issues of some kind each year in England. One in six people report experiencing a common mental health problem, such as anxiety and depression, in any given week in England. And these figures are a conservative estimate. They do not include children under the age of 16, people who are homeless or in sheltered accommodation, people in hospitals or prisons. The website also reports that only one in eight people are receiving treatment, the most common treatment being psychiatric medication. Even before the pandemic, the numbers of those reporting mental health conditions had been increasing and there had also been an increase in those who self-harmed or had taken their own life. We also know that 10% of children and young people (aged 5–16) years have a clinically diagnosable mental health problem, yet 70% of children and adolescents who experience mental health problems have not had appropriate interventions at a sufficiently early age (www.mentalhealth.org.uk).

Recently, I was contacted by a man whose 34-year-old brother had died suddenly. The brother, who had mild learning difficulties,

lived with his mother who had been diagnosed with a physical condition that left her unable to speak or eat. Despite his difficulties, he was caring for her, knew her medication and although there was a degree of co-dependency between them, he was aware enough to understand the distress her condition caused her. But the effects on him were incalculable. His physical health declined, and he stopped looking after himself and became profoundly depressed, comforting himself by eating continuously. The effect of his sudden death on his mother and siblings is traumatic and a source of deep sadness in a family already suffering because of their mother's illness.

What can synagogues and religious communities do to include and support those with mental illness? Extensive research provides evidence that there is generally a positive relationship between religion and both physical and mental health. While there are many aspects to a religious-spiritual life, it is those related to community that have the strongest relationship with mental health. Community can play a pivotal role in people's lives, particularly for those not born in the country of their residency. Recent evidence shows that religious congregations are an important source of social capital, providing individuals with a network of social ties with like-minded individuals who share their beliefs and behaviours, their ideas and interests, and their values and vision, which all may be associated with better health.

I see in my own congregation, the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, that when families or individuals move from other countries, the process of their integration and involvement in our events, services and activities may reduce loneliness and create a sense of belonging. And support is readily available. Involvement in religious communities has been shown to reduce stress, depression and suicide.

Like most other congregations, in spite of moving into the virtual world of Zoom and other platforms during the pandemic, we had to close down the many events and activities that took place in person – the friendship club, a monthly lunch, Video and Tea, Singing for the Mind, the LJS Drop-In for people seeking asylum, all our adult education and for a year, Rimon – our Religion School. And although we tried hard to maintain and create ties among members of the congregation, we know that bringing people together in person is what helps to mitigate loneliness, stress and anxiety. Zoom can sometimes underline our loneliness and isolation.

We have not even begun to process the effects of the pandemic on our society – especially on children, young people and students whose schools were closed down, and college students left isolated in their rooms, struggling with being at home when they should have been gaining a new-found independence. Many are still left with a sense of dependence, anxiety, panic and distress.

If there is a strong and positive relationship between religion and mental and physical health, it is undoubtedly – as research shows – because of community and a sense of belonging. But a close second to community relationships are the texts, music, rituals, traditions and culture that suffuse Jewish life and that provide us with a rich spiritual aesthetic.

Although Jami Mental Health Shabbat falls on Shabbat Bo when we read the ninth plague of darkness, in my own synagogue

we will add another reading of Psalm 86 – a heartfelt cry by the Psalmist asking God to preserve life, to deliver the poet from those forces that harass and oppress him or her, and a prayer to be free from their own lack of confidence and resources. Those who suffer from the anguish of poor mental health in today's world are like the poet – “poor and needy”, fearful and in need of great love and compassion.

This Psalm is a paradigm for how individuals and communities can offer more to those who need comfort and reassurance at difficult times in their lives. In the traumatic aftermath of the massacre of 1200 people in southern Israel and the cruel capture of hostages on October 7, Israelis have been shaken to their bones. And around the world, Jewish communities are experiencing a kind of “referred” or “secondary” trauma. Many of us with family and close friends in Israel are in a high state of anxiety and profound sadness. In these situations, we are called upon to listen and to be present for each other, to help build relationships of trust and confidence and to be compassionate.

The gentle spirituality of our services – their words and music, the act of bringing together a community to share moments of sadness and joy – can help bring together the broken fragments of our lives so that extremes of distress and anxiety can be mitigated by the calm and steady qualities of loving kindness and compassion, and the knowledge that each human life is sacred.

Sermon

Rabbi Anthony Lazarus Magrill, Mosaic Masorti Synagogue

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, בֹּא אֶל-פַּרְעֹה:
כִּי-אֲנִי הִכְבַּדְתִּי אֶת-לִבּוֹ

EXODUS 10:1

Come, then, to Pharaoh – for I have made his heart heavy.

This is the opening of Parshat Bo, and its Hebrew vocabulary is very revealing. God has been *Hikhbad'ti* Pharaoh's heart – has 'made it **heavy**'. This Hebrew root – Kuf-Beit-Ayin – is sometimes associated with heaviness; but more often with dignity, or even honour. The Torah will also repeatedly describe God as strengthening Pharaoh's heart, as in: וַחֲזַקְתִּי אֶת-לֵב-פַּרְעֹה; *v'Hizakti* – 'I will make it **strong**.' (Ex 14.4)

There is a pattern here: words which are terms of praise in one context become indicators of pain or imbalance or disorder when applied to the heart. Just so, entering the Land of Israel, Moses enjoins us: *Chazak v'Amatz!* Be strong and of good courage! But isn't the worst of Pharaoh's heart that it should become *chazak*? And doesn't the second *Al Khet* confession regret those sins we committed through *imutz ha-Lev*? This is another oft-repeated root; and another term which becomes an indicator of hardening, or of closing, when it is applied to the heart.

Three Hebrew roots – used to evoke strength, courage and honour – all now gesturing towards some kinds of illness, or pain, or temptation to wrongdoing. What might have become sweetness is deconstructed and reconnected, and gives rise only to bitterness; its ingredients having been distorted or set out of balance. This makes intuitive sense. We know that good attributes taken to excess have harmful-flipsides: honour finds its agonised opposite in pride; strength finds its strange twin in the refusal to own weakness; excess courage becomes an inability to ask for help. In all three, shame transforms a

positive impulse into a source of discomfort and dis-ease.

Pharaoh is afflicted in ways which will be familiar to many of us who experience mental ill-health: he feels his heart is heavy, and closed off. He is unavailable to feelings of empathy or care. In his closed-off state, he hurts people: his community, his family and himself.

A wise strand of our tradition records just how many Jews chose not to leave Egypt, and how many of those who, even once they had left slavery, yearned soon afterwards to return to their confinement. Whatever it is that afflicts Pharaoh – his doubting, his isolation, his heavy-heartedness – it was clearly catching, and weighed down plenty of the Jewish people as well. The *Meor Einayim*, an 18th century Hasidic commentator on the Torah, describes the afflictions of Pharaoh's heart alongside the Israelites' peculiar spiritual dullness.

הנה הנס של יציאת מצרים היה
שהדעת היה בגלות אצל פרעה הרשע
במצרים לכן גלו ישראל לשם להוציא
הדעת משם וקושי השיעבוד השלים

The great miracle of the Exodus was that Awareness (HaDa'at) was in exile with the wicked Pharaoh in Egypt. Therefore Israel, were exiled there too in order to bring it forth. The pain of their servitude made it whole.

Da'at – a broad term encompassing self-knowledge, intellect and sexuality

– is described as having been exiled to Mitzrayim/Egypt. Indeed, the very name *Mitzrayim* indicates some kind of constriction or narrowness. The Meor Enayim, then, understands Egypt as a metaphor for some kind of rupture in the self; a disintegration affecting all those who dwell there, in the Narrow Place. Only the pain of enslavement brings eventual insight and healing.

Or, to put it another way, whilst we live in the Narrow Place, we are never truly ourselves – there is some facet of Da’at, some insight and awareness, which we lack and which we miss. Only upon leaving Egypt – drawing free from the Narrow Place – do Israel find freedom to make their own decisions, in full and integral insight. But one final claim is also made by the Meor Enayim: that before integration and wholeness become available, – a certain hardness, a certain suffering, has to be undergone first.

The fourth bracha of the weekday amidah blesses God who is חונן הדעת – *Khonen haDa’at* – who, in good grace, grants us Insight, or Awareness. This Awareness is a powerful force and there are many paths to it. I – it is perhaps the only force capable of transforming those qualities I mentioned above of *imutz* – courage, *chizuk* – strength, and *kavod* – honour, back from sources of shame into sources of light and fortitude. Insight – *Da’at* – is always striving for a God’s eye perspective on ourselves – striving for

insight into the ways we help and harm ourselves, and into the ways even our best impulses misfire into ill-health.

Perhaps the Meor Enayim is right: one of the ways to come to insight may indeed be through an amount of inner suffering. Maybe there are things we learn about ourselves and our souls which only become clear once we’ve travelled a hard road to get them. That has certainly been my experience. And this is not to lionize mental suffering, but only to hope that its experience should not have been in vain for those who must be affected by it. For God, in our tradition, is also *Khonen haDa’at*. This is an understanding of the Divine which reaches out to us with the possibility of insight and improvement of self, that we in turn can reach towards autonomy and find new ways of doing better by and with ourselves. Parshat Bo, amongst other things, is a story about the difficulty we experience when we are closed to insight by our heaviness of heart. Bo also teaches that this hardness can come upon us without its being our, or anyone else’s, ‘fault’. But finally, Bo preaches the desirability of opening our heart; holds out the hope of learning about ourselves, and telling stories about ourselves (the therapeutic path to insight), which can thereby enable us to hold our disintegrating selves in balance. I hope you find yours.

Sermon

Rabbi Jeff Berger, S&P Sephardi Community

Many thanks to Jami for promoting Jami Mental Health Shabbat in the UK and for all that they do in our community supporting thousands who struggle daily. Jami's breadth and depth of programming is bespoke to the needs of Anglo-Jewry, something required more than ever today.

Traditionally, Jami Mental Health Shabbat has been linked with Parshat Bo because it contains the Plague of Darkness. For anyone experiencing depression or other debilitating mental health issues, being unwell can feel like the 'three days that Egyptians sat in darkness, paralysed to move' (Ex 10:23).
 ןלא-קמו איש מתחתינו--שלשת ימים

For most of the plagues, Moshe gave a warning and after the plague occurred, Pharaoh, unable to withstand the discomfort, broke down and asked Moshe for a reprieve. The plague of darkness lasted for three days, arriving without warning, and lifting without Pharaoh's supplication. This too is what people who suffer from depression often say – not knowing when it will come, how long it will last, nor what to do to chase it away.

In Parshat Bo, few will have also noticed another reference that is found during the Plague of Locusts. There, the Torah casually states that so many locusts descended on Egypt, 'they covered the eye (face) of the land and darkened the earth' (Ex 10:15).
 ןכס את-עין כל-הארץ, ותחשך הארץ

Several commentaries ponder why the Torah uses the same terminology for darkness, *Hoshekh*, here, as in the plague that immediately followed.

Most suggest there were so many swarms of locusts in the sky that the rays of sunlight were entirely blocked from reaching the

ground. Isaac Samuel Reggio, (Italy 1784-1855), asks, 'If the entire land was covered, wouldn't we know there was darkness?' Instead, he interprets this metaphorically, suggesting that the hearts of the Egyptians were 'darkened' by anxiety and fear. 'They were troubled, and their souls suffered' (Ex 10:15:1).

Offering a rational interpretation to the sequence of the plagues, Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508) wrote that the strong westerly winds that blew away the last remaining locusts, also gathered thick clouds that remained in place for three days (Ex 10:21).

From these interpretations, we understand the Egyptians experienced collective trauma, economic hardship, leading to severe mental debilitation.

One response to Jami Mental Health Shabbat is acknowledging that '*It is Alright Not to be Alright*'. As many as one in six adults experience a mental health issue in their lifetimes. Those of us who suffer should be aware that we are not alone.

Resilience is the capacity to recover from difficulties. As a national characteristic, Britain is known for our Keep Calm & Carry On mentality.

The journey through life from birth to death seldom progresses in a straight line. What is meaningful and challenging at one stage becomes less so at another. Small children are known for how quickly their whims and desires vary. Adults aren't much different.

But life is always changing – the series of destabilising events occurring over the past three years has multiplied this many times over. Our public response to Covid-19, the cost-of-living crisis, climate change, and the Israel-Gaza war have been life-changing and far more upsetting than expected. We are

constantly challenged to overcome deep-seated, unconscious insecurities and mental trauma. We are pressured to learn new skills quickly, to function at the top of our ability, in ever more complicated environments and settings.

The cumulative effect of these pressures shouldn't be underestimated. Throw in a few unexpected critical life-cycle events like child or elderly care, moving house, changing jobs, divorce, or even bereavement, and depression may not be so far off. Our resilience really gets tested.

But resilience helps us gain competence and connection.

That some people respond better than others to mental pressure is related to several factors:

1. Extended social networks of family and friends that we foster
2. An ability to keep grounded and focused on achievable goals
3. Self-esteem and confidence enable us to avoid feeling helpless
4. Competence and problem-solving skills empower us

5. Communicating our pain pulls together our support base, and
6. Being able to remain calm helps us to face each challenge anew

We build resilience first and foremost by improving self-awareness – understanding our strengths and weaknesses. Stress-reduction techniques like mindfulness-training help regulate our emotions, thoughts, and behaviour. And, having support teams we can rely on, enables us to be more authentically ourselves.

Resilience doesn't happen by chance.

Mental health issues are increasing. We have the capacity to build inner strength to cope with our challenges, but sometimes we need support. Despite the darkness around us, we are thankful for an organisation like Jami who does much more for our mental wellbeing than we realise.

Wishing you a Jami Mental Health Shabbat Shalom.

Sermon

Finding stability in times of trauma Rabbi Elchonon Feldman, Bushey United Synagogue

Following on from the abhorrent terrorist attack on the 7th October, communities across the Jewish world galvanised in solidarity and support of Israel. Rightfully we should be immensely proud of our collective response, which showed both our Jewish and British values at their absolute best. One such example of a communal response took place in our synagogue, following the Shabbat service, when we received an update from CST and opened up the floor for congregants to share their thoughts and feelings.

Many contributions focused on the practical effects of the war and the sense of isolation felt. However, it was the concluding comment which left me at a loss for words. One gentleman, new to the community, stood up and said in a shaky voice that he genuinely felt his world had been turned upside down by the recent pogrom and all of its aftershocks, and if it wasn't for the community's support, he wasn't sure if he would have psychologically managed as he was literally at breaking point from what was happening.

Since that session, I have been privy to multiple conversations, both public and private, which have echoed these same sentiments. Simply put, people of all ages, of every political persuasion and religious affiliation, are struggling. We have on our hands an existential crisis, not just as pertains to our physical wellbeing, but more significantly as it relates to our mental health.

Analogous to the Covid-19 epidemic, where the sudden coronavirus outbreak pulled the rug out from our certainty and stability, leading to hysteria, depression and anxiety, we have to accept that these reactions

and many more are in existence across our Jewish community and so many of us are already not coping.

Of course, we must affix blame for this entirely on our Hamas enemies who have succeeded with their terror attack on afflicting psychological trauma upon us, but we must now carefully consider what can be done to avoid long-term damage as we try to alleviate our own and others; mental anguish at this time.

There is a call upon communal infrastructure to learn the lessons of Covid 19 and to prioritise now mental health support for our community, and I have no doubt that Jami will be leading the charge in this regard. However, there are also practical suggestions which we can learn from our Torah on how to cope better during times of crisis.

Psychologist Rabbi Dr Ari Sytner, an expert on trauma intervention, recently discussed in a podcast three helpful steps towards creating stability in times of challenge:

Pull over

Following on from our people being freed from Egypt, we find that of all the nations in the world, only Moshe's father-in-law, Yitro, joined our people. Our commentaries explain that although the miracles of the exodus were well known, most people did not stop to reflect and understand their significance. Only Yitro pulled over and did an emotional MOT to recognise the inspiration that he was feeling to then act upon it. We too must do likewise. We have an obligation to see to our own mental health by figuratively pulling over to the side of the road to assess what is going on physically and emotionally. Without doing an internal MOT, we cannot know how

we may be struggling. If this is too hard to do on our own, perhaps do this exercise with a friend or mentor. Despite all the strains on us, we must find times to pause and assess.

Disconnect

Shabbat, our Rabbis teach us, is a gift from Hashem that forces us to stop and take a much-needed break from the week. Now, more than ever, we must recognise that our mental health is struggling with the constant bombardment of social media intrusion which has created algorithms to draw us in and not let us go. Shabbat is a great opportunity to take a digital detox, but throughout the week we must limit how much exposure we allow ourselves and others. Perhaps check in on the news once or twice a day and choose not to listen or read every message which is forwarded to you. Further, what you do read should have a ratio of more positive to negative. We need to disconnect and take mental wellbeing breaks and instead do something constructive, such as physical exercise or connecting with others.

Learn to pivot

Finally, our Torah intentionally embraces the need for a plan B. Hashem, from the onset of creation, builds a world one way, only to destroy it to start again. Later, Avraham journeys to Israel, only to have to leave because of famine. Later on, on

our way out of Egypt, we find ourselves with a 40-year detour. Even the very Torah, which we are handed in the form of the ten commandments, comes from the second set of tablets and not the first. This is an important lesson that life seldom runs with our plan A, but that doesn't mean that plan B cannot work. This teaches us the importance of pivoting when necessary to find ways of thriving, even if it's not in the way we planned to. This crisis in Israel has shaken our plan A, without a doubt, but perhaps what can emerge is a plan B; getting involved in volunteering, connecting to community, or building better links to Israel. Pivoting gives us agency over that which has been thrown at us. It helps us roll with the punches of life and is a great way to tend to our mental health.

Jami Mental Health Shabbat sadly cannot have come at a more opportune time as we, as a community, try to support each other and tend to our psychological wellbeing. Our Torah is a wonderful manual to use in this endeavour, and it is our hope that by prioritising attention towards how we are emotionally affected by the Israel-Gaza war, we can find stability and avoid, please G-d, long-term trauma. Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi Elchonon Feldman is the Senior Rabbi of Bushey United Synagogue and a practising Psychotherapist.

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