

# Jami Mental Health Shabbat

part of **JEWISH CARE**

31 January – 1 February 2025

# Toolkit



## Our partners



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Media Partner



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# WELCOME

Dear Friends,

For the last eight years, Jami Mental Health Shabbat has been a significant weekend in Jami's calendar of events. This year, it is more important than ever to raise awareness of mental illness and distress in our community.

The past 15 months have not been easy for anyone. The 7 October attacks, the consequential rise in antisemitism and the ongoing war in the region have all had an undeniable impact on our mental health and stress levels, bringing discomfort and fear to many. In response, Jami has produced a range of resources to help us make sense of our feelings and reactions, which we hope you'll find useful. To access these, visit [jamiuk.org/understand-our-reactions/](http://jamiuk.org/understand-our-reactions/)

This year's Jami Mental Health Shabbat is also significant because it marks the first one since Jami integrated with Jewish Care. We hope that our combined resources will help us reach even more people needing support, as well as those who just want to become better informed.

This toolkit should hopefully provide you with everything you need to make your Jami Mental Health Shabbat extra meaningful. If you tend to celebrate Shabbat with family and friends, please also take the opportunity to be part of our Host a Meal initiative and help support Jami's vital mental health services at the same time.

Thank you for all your support.

Daniel Carmel Brown  
CEO, Jewish Care





**Jami, now part of Jewish Care, is here for when mental illness and distress makes everyday life a struggle.**

We guide young people and adults through their mental health recovery, support families and carers looking after somebody with mental illness and educate community leaders.

Over 1,600 people benefit from Jami's services, including Carly who receives one-to-one peer support and attends groups at our social enterprise café, Head Room.

**"I've come to realise that I'm not alone and that there are others who understand what I've been through."**

To find out how Jami can support you too, please visit [jamiuk.org/](http://jamiuk.org/) email [info@jamiuk.org](mailto:info@jamiuk.org) or call 020 8458 2223.

## About Jami



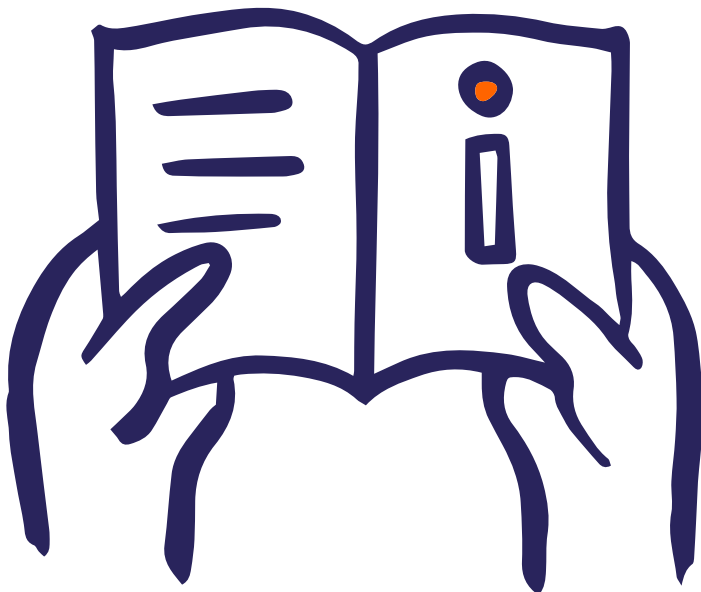
# How can I mark Jami Mental Health Shabbat?

**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 community, 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.**



# 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)
- One in five children and young people in England aged 8 to 25 had a probable mental health disorder in 2023 (NHS England, 2023)
- 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)
- Levels of anxiety among British Jews are higher than they were before 7 October and are notably higher than they are among the general population of Britain (Institute of Jewish Policy Research, 2024)



# 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. Asking someone how they are can feel overwhelming to people if they are struggling. Contextual questions can be an easier way to start conversations e.g. How has this week been? How are you feeling today?
- Share any concerns using I statements, such as “I’m worried about you, we haven’t seen you around recently.” Demonstrate your care and concern.
- 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. 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 text Shout on 85258, 24 hours a day to talk to someone.

## 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.

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.

### Closing the conversation

Offering a listening ear and showing your acceptance, warmth and regard can go a long way to help someone. However,



# 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.

- **SHOUT** – 24/7 crisis text service – Text Jami to 85258
- **Jami** is here to help with mental health support: [jamiuk.org/get-support/referral/](http://jamiuk.org/get-support/referral/) call 020 8458 2223 or email [info@jamiuk.org](mailto:info@jamiuk.org)
- **Jewish Listening Line** on 0800 652 9249 Mon-Thurs 12pm-12am, Fri 12am - 3pm. Closed Sundays, Shabbat and Jewish Festivals
- **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 HOPELINE247**, on 0800 068 41 41 or text 88247 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.

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 of finding the balance between looking after others and meeting our own needs. 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/](http://timetochangewales.org.uk/en/personal-stories/)

[mind.org.uk/information-support/your-stories/](http://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.

For more information or questions, please email [education@jamiuk.org](mailto:education@jamiuk.org)



## 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 academic attainment, relationships, body image, climate change and war, 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 can 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, youth worker or teacher. There are also charities, such as ChildLine and Shout, 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.

### Option 3

The poem 'Smile' by Spike Milligan can either be read out to younger children or used to encourage discussion with older primary school kids.

Smiling is infectious,  
you catch it like the flu,  
When someone smiled at me today,  
I started smiling too.  
I passed around the corner  
and someone saw my grin.  
When he smiled I realised  
I'd passed it on to him.  
I thought about that smile,  
then I realised its worth.  
A single smile, just like mine  
could travel round the earth.  
So, if you feel a smile begin,  
don't leave it undetected.  
Let's start an epidemic quick,  
and get the world infected!

## 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 instance of how our mental health can impact our thoughts, feelings and behaviours. For example, if we do badly in a test, we may think negative thoughts like “I am a failure” and that is likely to affect our emotions 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 as important as looking 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

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?

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.

## Primary school activities

# Self-care

Suitable for all years

Ask the group for some ideas for self-care.

### Activity

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 year 5+

Self-care bingo is a great activity for pupils to get children 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. Explain to your pupils that you are going to play bingo with a twist.

### Activity

Give everyone a self-care bingo card (found on page 19) 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.

### For older kids

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. Once the game is finished, encourage a discussion about self-care. Ask the students what their favourite form of self-care is. Ask them to consider why it's a good idea to have more than one form of self-care that they enjoy. For example, it might be too rainy to play football, or their parents may not want them to watch TV.

Ask them to think about one type of self-care they heard during the activity that they may want to try.



**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

Tell the group you would like them to complete the sentence  
“mental health is...”

### Part 1

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.

Ask everyone to pick an adjective that completes the sentence.

Invite them to say why they chose it, if they would like to.

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

■ 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?”
- 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.
- 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?

<b>Important</b>	<b>Necessary</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Scary</b>	<b>Bad</b>
<b>Misunderstood</b>	<b>Confusing</b>	<b>Interesting</b>	<b>Healthy</b>	<b>Boring</b>

## Secondary school activities

# Self-care conversation

Suitable for all years

Share the quote: “You can’t pour from an empty cup.” Ask the group what their initial thoughts or reactions are. Then ask if they think it is relevant to what we know about self-care.

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 trying to help other people so it’s hard to find time to look after ourselves.

Remind them that we all need to look after ourselves otherwise our batteries will run out. We all feel better when we are recharged.

In pairs, ask them to think about one thing they do for self-care and one thing they’d like to try out.

Ask the pairs to share back.



## Secondary school activities

# What is mental health?

Suitable for all years

Ask everyone to complete the sentence “Mental health is...” with an adjective of their choice.

### Activity

Go around the room and ask people to share the adjective that they would use.

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.

### For older kids

Ask them to consider what is the most important message about mental health.

Encourage them to include hashtags.

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.

Share some key messages about mental health.





## Secondary school activities

# Mythbusting mental health quiz

Suitable for years 6-9

Get your students ready for a mythbusting mental health quiz. They can play solo, or ask them to find a pair or put them in groups.

### Part 1 – Instructions

Check your students' knowledge with this mythbusting quiz. Use the myths and answers on the next page.

Ask them to pick a team name.

Tell them that you will read a mental health statement 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 that 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.

### For older kids

After the quiz, you may wish to challenge an older group to think up their own myths they've heard about mental health. Generate a conversation about where we hear these myths, and if we can trust them. Remind them that what we read online or in the news isn't always reliable or may only be one side of the story. If they read something they are unsure about, encourage them to talk to a trusted adult and collect their thoughts.



## Secondary school activities

# Mythbusting mental health quiz

Suitable for years 6-9

### Part 2 - Mental health statements

(with key messages to share after each one)

#### 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 in 2023, one in five children aged 8 to 16 years had a probable mental disorder.

## 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 3 – Discussion

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+

**Divide the students into small groups. Assign each group one of the mental health influencers, which can be found in the resources below. Tell them they will be taking part in a debate to find the most influential mental health influencer.**

They will have 10 minutes to discuss in their teams why their influencer has contributed the most to mental health and raising awareness.

One by one, each team will have three minutes to pitch their argument to the other groups.

Let them know that when they have 30 seconds left of their pitch, you will raise your hand to warn them.

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.

Count the votes and announce who was voted the most influential mental health influencer.

Open up the discussion about why it is important that we still educate and raise awareness about mental health.

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.

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.”

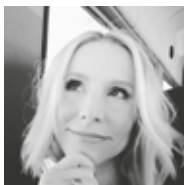


### Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson

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.”



### 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.”



### 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+

Show the group the different newspaper headlines which are reporting about mental health, in the resources below.

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.

### Part 1

Help students think about the impact of the news on our mental health, particularly how headlines may not always represent the full story, and the importance of reading the story and seeking other perspectives too. If they're unsure about the content of a news article or a post on social media, encourage them to reach out to a trusted adult to talk it through.

- 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?

Once the headlines have been discussed, share with the group what the story actually is. It might not be what we thought.

Acknowledge that headlines can be misleading, especially if we only see headlines and don't read the full articles. Remind the group of the importance of reading the story and seeking other perspectives too. If they're unsure about the content of a news article or a post on social media, encourage them to reach out to a trusted adult to talk it through.

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?

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

Ask each pupil or group of pupils to create their own media headline.

The headline could reflect something about young people's mental health which they think the general public should know.

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**

[mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/kylie-minogue-opens-up-keeping-30898203](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**

[eu.usatoday.com/story/life/health-wellness/2023/03/03/selena-gomez-billie-eilish-celebrities-taking-social-media-breaks/11389639002/](https://eu.usatoday.com/story/life/health-wellness/2023/03/03/selena-gomez-billie-eilish-celebrities-taking-social-media-breaks/11389639002/)

### **'Self doubt is always lurking': Prince William talks mental health with Harry Kane**

[independent.co.uk/life-style/royal-family/prince-william-mental-health-harry-kane-b2219216.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/royal-family/prince-william-mental-health-harry-kane-b2219216.html)

### **It's time to divorce your children from their phones**

[www.gulftoday.ae/opinion/2024/11/15/its-time-to-divorce-your-children-from-their-phones](https://www.gulftoday.ae/opinion/2024/11/15/its-time-to-divorce-your-children-from-their-phones)

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

[cbsnews.com/news/celebrities-health-visibility-stigma/](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/celebrities-health-visibility-stigma/)

# University Students

We've worked closely with the University Jewish Chaplaincy and Union of Jewish Students to produce these resources for university students for Jami Mental Health Shabbat. We hope you will use these activities to raise awareness and engage in conversations about mental health, and use the signposting to seek help if you are someone else you know is struggling.





## Student activities

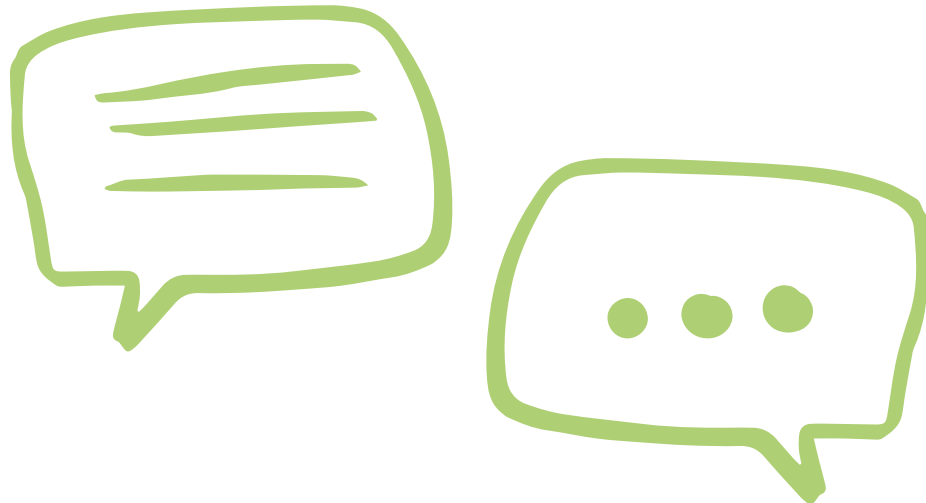
# Conversation starters

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. Would you know where to signpost a peer/friend who was finding it difficult to manage their mental health?
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?



# Signposting at university

- Have a look at the university website for any welfare services. These sometimes sit with the Student Union, so it's worth enquiring with them as well. The various services which are available on campus will be different.
- Speak to a personal tutor or named welfare person for your course or your area of study. Ask them about options for support on campus.
- Nightline is a dedicated helpline run by student volunteers, for students offering emotional support. You can find out more here: [Nightline Association - We'll Listen, Not Lecture](#)
- Some campuses have a mental health society or similar. They will have more information about support options on campus.
- Student Minds is the UK's student mental health charity. They share lots of resources for students on their website, covering the breadth of experience students find at university. They also raise awareness of student mental health and lobby for change. They coordinate the University Mental Health Charter Program, awarding and recognising the work of universities to support student mental health. Check out if your university has won an award.
- Start the conversation by asking how they are. You can contextualise by asking about their day or weekend. If there's something specific concerning you, use "I" statements to share them and explain that you're mentioning them because you care and are worried about them e.g. "I noticed you weren't at JSoc the past few weeks. I'm worried about you and wanted to check everything is OK."
- We usually can't fix someone else's problem, and it's not our job to do so. But we can listen with empathy and non-judgement. Think about support, not solutions. Being understood when someone listens is incredibly valuable.
- If you have ideas about something that might help, or you think they might need further support, ask to share some ideas or resources with them.
- Sometimes people don't want to speak. We may not be the right person or it might not be the right time. It's important to respect this. We can accept this and encourage them to speak to someone else, either in their personal network or by sharing some signposting to other organisations.

## Top tips for supporting a friend

- If you have concerns about a friend, find a time where you won't be interrupted and you have the time to check in with them. If talking directly feels uncomfortable, invite them for a walk or suggest doing something creative or playing a game while you chat.
- ### Finding time for self care
- Think about self-care as not me first, but me too. It's important we find time in our busy lives to meet our own needs. Book time for self-care into your diary. Consider it as important as a meeting with a professor, a friend or going to the dentist or doctor.
  - Finding what works for you is vital – from which self-care activities really give you a boost, to the best times to do them. If we

can embed them into our routine, we're more likely to do them.

- Get friends on board with self-care and hold each other accountable. Perhaps engage in self-care together, for example, booking an exercise class or going for a walk together, or share your self-care goal with each other and check in to see how you get on.
- Commit to self-care every day or week. Our brains are neuroplastic. The more we do something, the easier it becomes to do. By committing to self-care and embedding it into our routine, it will become second nature. It will no longer be something to find time for, but something we do naturally.
- Pick a few different forms of self-care to engage in throughout the week. Self-care encompasses everything from ensuring we stay hydrated, eat well and get enough sleep to engaging in pursuits to fuel our creativity, spending time with people we care about, doing activities we enjoy, participating in exercise, having opportunities to be mindful and stay in the present, and finding time to talk when we need to share with someone we trust.

### Preparing for and after university

- Think about mental health support options at universities before you apply and especially before you arrive on campus. It's important to know what there is, should you ever need it.
- UCAS has guidance about sharing any mental ill health with universities before arriving on campus. This can help universities put a plan in place for you if you do have any additional needs or adjustments which would be helpful to you.
- Think about what forms of self-care you enjoy and how you might be able to make time or enjoy these as a student. There are plenty of opportunities to engage in self-care on campus – from sports and societies to volunteering.
- Think about the relationships which are important to you. How will you keep in contact with these people, especially if they're moving away from home and living on different campuses or in different cities? You may wish to discuss how often you will be in contact with parents or carers, so there's an agreed expectation.
- Having a plan after leaving university can be helpful. We won't all have a job or another opportunity, but having a routine or rhythm to your day can be helpful to your mental health.
- Think about the friends and connections you've made on campus. How will you stay in touch with these people? It may be good to have at least one catch up arranged.
- University life has lots of opportunities for excitement and to try new things. Think about what else life outside university has to offer and plan what you might like to try next.
- Consider how you've looked after your mental health as a student. Will you be able to continue this after university? Think about whether you may need to sign up to a new gym, find a class elsewhere, or look for alternative opportunities to do the things you love.
- If you're heading home after living with friends, have a conversation with your parent/carers. Being an adult in your childhood home can be difficult. You've had life experiences and had independence on a whole new level. Open up discussion about expectations around any curfews, attendance at mealtimes, household chores, finances etc.

# 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

# Wellbeing balloon debate

Suggested activity for university students

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?

# Young professionals

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 professionals

## Wellbeing balloon debate

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# GOT WHAT IT TAKES TO BE AN AMBASSADOR

**for mental health  
awareness?**

**Could you:**

- get involved with our annual Jami Mental Health Shabbat?
- encourage your community to volunteer and fundraise for Jami?
- support and signpost services to community members?

**If so, we'll provide continuous training and support.**

**Email**

**[education@jamiuk.org](mailto:education@jamiuk.org)**

**Learn more**

**[jamiuk.org/get-involved/ambassador](https://jamiuk.org/get-involved/ambassador)**

**[jamiuk.org](https://jamiuk.org)**

 JamiPeople |  JAMIMentalHealth

 @jami\_uk |  Jami UK

# Sermons

We are delighted to share contributions from various synagogue communities who have kindly shared inspirational insights about Parashat Bo and its links to mental health.

# Sermon

## Parashat Bo: Seeing our way out of darkness, together

### Rachel Sklan, Masorti Judaism Chief Executive

Parashat Bo tells the dramatic final stages of the Exodus story, culminating in the Israelites' liberation from slavery by Pharaoh in Egypt. One of the most poignant images in this parashat is the plague of darkness. The Torah describes it as a tangible gloom where no one could see or move for three days (Exodus 10:23). Today we could call this darkness a form of depression. Depression is a plague of darkness where people might not be able to see their way forward and they may not be able to see their connections to others, to nature, to community, to family and friends. The result is a profound feeling of hopelessness and isolation. Yet, the text notes "All the Israelites had light in their dwellings." This contrast highlights the importance of inclusive community in providing a trusted space of warmth, connection and hope.

The inclusion of every Israelite in the Passover communal rituals further underscores the importance of belonging. The Torah says all Israelites must mark their doorposts and all Israelites must eat the Passover meal in family groups. No one in the tribe is left out of these mitzvot. However, it's not just Israelites included in the journey to freedom. Inclusion also appears in the Torah's emphasis on the "mixed multitude who went up with them".

They too left Egypt with the Israelites as described in Exodus 12:38. The Exodus narrative embraces diversity, demonstrating that all who flee slavery and who choose to join in are welcomed to take part in the Israelites' journey. From the beginning of our redemption, this has been a group project of communities within communities.

Thriving communities are those where everyone can bring their full selves, at all stages in their journey through life. People in our Masorti Judaism synagogues and communities bring their unique passions, interests, talents, memories and traditions, as well as their curiosity to learn and grow. We show up for each other, however we can. Whether it's helping out on the kiddish rota, organising committees, helping out with security, learning to leyn, or just being a friendly greeter, everybody can get involved. Little by little, as familiarity grows, bonds are strengthened.

Ultimately, Parashat Bo teaches that liberation, whether from external oppression or internal struggle, is not an individual journey but a communal one. Together, through mutual support and inclusion, we hope our communities are places where people find the comfort of shared meaning, together.

# Sermon

## Together we rise: Mental health and the power of community in times of crises

### Rabbi Elchonon Feldman, Bushey United Synagogue

This week's Torah portion, Bo, transports us to a defining moment in our history. Pharaoh, under pressure, confronts Moses and Aaron with the question: 'Who are the ones to go?' (Exodus 10:8). Moses responds unequivocally: 'We will all go – with our young and our old, with our sons and daughters, with our flocks and herds.' (Exodus 10:9). His answer is a profound declaration: every individual matters, and only together can we move forward.

This year's Jami Mental Health Shabbat invites us to reflect on this message in the context of our contemporary challenges, particularly considering the growing concerns of antisemitism across the world and the uncertainty here in the UK following the events of 7 October. The mental health toll of these pressures is significant, touching every segment of our community – children, teenagers, parents, and elders; those deeply engaged in Jewish practice and those on the periphery.

#### **The mental health impact of antisemitism**

Antisemitism is not new, but its recent resurgence – amplified by social media, global conflicts, and public discourse – has deepened feelings of anxiety, alienation and vulnerability among Jews worldwide. For many, Jew hatred is no longer an abstract fear but an emerging (or reemerging) reality that shapes identity and wellbeing.

Young people may question how openly they can express their Jewish identity. Parents may wrestle with how to shield their children from prejudice while instilling pride. Our seniors, with memories of past persecutions, may feel a painful sense of history repeating

itself. This shared burden weighs heavily on the mental health of individuals and families alike and I am sure that many of your Friday night dinner tables have been the setting for pondering these very thoughts. Perhaps, in fact, this week as you sit down to dinner this Shabbat, this subject of uncertainty permeates your Jami Shabbat experience.

Israel's precarious circumstances post 7 October further compounds this. The sense of safety we once took for granted feels fragile. Questions abound: How can we navigate a world where hostility towards Israel spills over into hostility towards Jews? How do we balance vigilance with hope?

#### **The role of community**

In times of fear and uncertainty, it is tempting to retreat inward. Yet, as Moses teaches us in Bo, salvation and hope lie in togetherness. Pharaoh's query – 'Who are the ones to go?' – reflects his misunderstanding of what it means to be a people. Moses's reply is clear: no one will be left behind.

Today, our communities hold the same potential for resilience and healing. Mental health professionals often emphasise the importance of supportive networks, and Jewish tradition reinforces this wisdom. A synagogue, a Shabbat table, a Jami support group – these spaces remind us that we are never alone.

In the face of antisemitism and uncertainty, we can draw strength from gathering as a community. Together, we validate each other's fears, share strategies for coping, and inspire one another to transform anxiety

into action. Just as our people emerged from the darkness of Egypt united, we, too, can find our way forward by leaning into our collective strength.

### **From fear to pride**

However, there is a cautionary note we must heed. Fear can be a powerful motivator, but it is not a sustainable foundation for identity. If our connection to Judaism or Israel is defined solely by the threats we face, we risk a fragile and reactive identity which can have long-term mental health implications.

Instead, we must cultivate pride. Just as Moses insisted that everyone – young and old, men and women – participate in celebrating G-d's festival, we must foster a Judaism that celebrates life, values, and connection. This means teaching ourselves and loved ones not only to stand against hatred but also to stand for the beauty and richness of their heritage. It means creating spaces where people can find joy, meaning and purpose in their Jewish lives.

### **Moving forward together**

The passage from Bo offers us a roadmap:

- **Inclusivity:** Like Moses, we must ensure that everyone feels they belong. Whether through community support networks, Jami's mental health initiatives or synagogue programming, let us create spaces where people feel seen, heard and valued.

- **Solidarity:** We must stand together, offering support and compassion to those grappling with anxiety or uncertainty. Every Shabbat service, community event, or outreach effort is an opportunity to strengthen the bonds that hold us together.

- **Hope and pride:** Let us move beyond fear to embrace pride in our Jewish identity. By celebrating our traditions, supporting Israel and fostering meaningful connections, we can inspire resilience and joy in the face of adversity.

As we reflect on the challenges of our time, let us remember Moses's vision: a people united, moving forward together, leaving no one behind. In the face of this crises and mental health struggles, let us rise to the occasion – not just as individuals, but as a community bound by faith, compassion and hope.

Shabbat Shalom.

# Sermon

## From darkness to (festival) light(s)

### Rabbi Miriam Berger, Rabbi Emerita at Finchley Reform Synagogue and Founder Director of Wellspring

Biblical Egypt had a lot to grapple with: civil unrest, water pollution, environmental disasters and outbreaks of health epidemics, including boils and lice. The list was seemingly endless until society was plunged into darkness. This biblical narrative explains the uprising of the lower classes as being down to a charismatic leader who promised them a future free from oppression and explains the “natural disasters” as plagues cast onto the masses to further the cause of the slaves’ uprising. But if we put ourselves in their primeval shoes, would the people of Ancient Egypt have felt any differently from those experiencing financial hardships, floods, war and prejudice today?

It seems, since Eden, that the world around us is, and always has been, a hard place to exist. It is hard to rationalise, to understand why we have to endure such trying realities.

The Midrash teaches us about the fear and loneliness that Adam grappled with in the Garden of Eden, assuming the darkness of night was a punishment for his offensive behaviour and his response was to stop eating and to weep (Avodah Zarah 8a). The Torah itself alludes to the perception of injustice that caused Cain distress and his violent behaviour (Genesis 4:5).

In every generation since the beginning of time, we have had to deal with a world that is hard to live in and behaviours (either our own or others) that can feel inexplicably hard to understand. Although it doesn’t make it any easier for us to live with mental health conditions, simply knowing that their existence is as old as time itself does make it a bit more bearable. We are also one of the first

generations to experience living with mental health conditions in a society that is so much better equipped to help and support us. And this is because we now have a language to explain our experiences and our behaviours, and the pathways to access support.

Yet, the challenges of the world have also become harder to shelter ourselves from, ever present, moment by moment, as they play out on our doorsteps or thousands of miles away. The perception of other people’s lives being better or easier than ours can also taunt us, however we allow that perception to manifest itself.

The world, especially at this difficult time in the UK, feels like we have been plunged into darkness. It is at its hardest to navigate for so many and it isn’t surprising that the rate of us struggling with our mental health is at a record high. The British Psychological Society quotes figures published by the NHS, revealing that 1.75 million people were in contact with mental health services at the end of June 2023. The majority of these (1,136,347) were in contact with adult services, with 431,855 people in contact with children and young people’s mental health services at this time. During June, mental health services received 424,645 new referrals. If all of these were people actually seeking help, imagine the true extent of need when you include all those who struggle under the radar without seeking the support they need. It means that those of us who struggle should know we aren’t alone.

We should no longer see mental health issues as a shameful taboo. But where do we take this knowledge? If Torah paints the

picture of a world where people have always struggled, and where darkness has always been a reality for people since Eden, in Egypt and still in our world today, does it also give us a solution?

I certainly think it alludes to one – one that has for millennia tried to hold and contain us, and that we can all continue to turn to today. The Parasha explains it in three ways.

First, the plague of darkness is described as a time when “people could not see one another” (Exodus 10:23). When people are struggling with their mental health, this is when they feel most invisible, most unseen. Being part of a community can make a difference. When we create spaces for others, at times when they are most likely to feel invisible, we are better equipped to see their needs more acutely and ensure that they are brought into the community’s heart and supported. Whether these spaces are created through synagogue communities or by Jami at its Head Room café, they ensure that at our darkest times, we can find places where we will be seen.

Secondly, the plague of darkness leads to a conversation around the use of livestock for worship – the need for the Israelites to take their cattle with them for sacrificial purposes. In doing so, The Torah is reminding us that even in our darkest times, we need to find the resources to remember there will be things to be grateful for as well. The blessings may not seem visible to us at every moment, but

the goodness will emerge and we need to have the resources to express that gratitude. We always have the ability to dig deep and find the glimmers of things that we are truly thankful for. In our darkest moments, can we see the blessings in our lives?

Finally, the narrative of the plagues suddenly breaks between the darkness and the final plague. We step out of the present and into the future, describing how every year, for evermore, we will tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt, alluding to our sederim and some of the Pesach practices of today. This not only reminds us that however bad things feel, we are living through just one moment in a continuum during which we will experience both our best and our worst experiences. It also frames the darkness in the rituals which come around routinely. They root us. They mark time. They allow us to see where we have come from and to think about where we want to aim for. Whether it is the need for a daily minyan (to pray in a group of at least 10 people), the weekly act of lighting Shabbat candles or the annual Pesach seder, these all give us a structure to remind ourselves that we are part of a community, part of something that can hold and see us, and a place where we will be able to experience blessings and feel gratitude soon. If we frame our lives with rituals, we will have the structures to support and hold us if we allow ourselves to keep looking forward with them.

Find your minyan of support and bring light into the darkness with them.



# Sermon

## From darkness to light: The healing power of Parashat Bo and Shabbat

**Ilana Greenblatt, Jewish Culture and Faith Manager, Jewish Care**

בא Parashat Bo, the Torah portion recounting the final three plagues and the Jewish people's liberation from Egypt, offers profound lessons that resonate deeply with themes of mental health, resilience, and the sanctity of Shabbat. Through the lens of Jewish spirituality, this parashat illuminates the journey from darkness to light – both literally, as with the plague of darkness, and metaphorically, in the sense of emotional and spiritual liberation.

At the heart of בא is the notion of transformation. The Jewish people, after generations of oppression and dehumanisation, stand at the threshold of freedom. Yet, the journey from slavery to redemption is not merely physical; it is an internal process of healing and reclamation of their identity. In mental health terms, this mirrors the struggle many individuals face when confronting personal challenges – whether trauma, anxiety, or depression. Just as the Jewish people had to overcome fear and uncertainty to step into the unknown of the Exodus, those people on the journey towards good mental health need to have courage, trust and faith too.

The plague of darkness (שמות י"ג: כ"ג) is particularly striking. The Torah describes it as a palpable darkness that enveloped Egypt, one so thick that “no one could see his brother, nor could anyone rise from his place for three days” (בּוֹתֵם וְלֹכַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָיָה אוֹר) (במוש). This darkness can be understood as more than a physical phenomenon – it is the emotional and psychological isolation that many experience during periods of mental

distress. Depression, anxiety, and other mental health struggles can often feel like a darkness that obscures connection and hope. Yet, even in the midst of this darkness, the Torah tells us, “But all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings” בא. This juxtaposition serves as a reminder that even in our darkest moments, there is always the potential for light, for connection, and for the possibility of healing.

The Exodus narrative, particularly in שבט, also speaks to the importance of community in healing. The Jewish people did not leave Egypt alone; they left as a collective, supporting one another in their shared journey towards freedom. This speaks to the vital role of community – particularly within Jewish life – in fostering mental health. Jewish tradition places great emphasis on the power of communal support, whether through acts of kindness שבט, shared prayer, or simply being present for one another. For individuals facing mental health challenges, this sense of belonging can provide a lifeline, reminding them that they are not alone in their struggles.

שבט, which is introduced as a central theme in the Torah shortly after the Exodus, serves as a spiritual and psychological anchor in this journey toward wholeness. As the Jewish people leave behind the oppressive labour of Egypt, they are given the gift of בא – a time of rest, reflection, and renewal. For those grappling with mental health issues, בא can be a time to disconnect from the pressures of the world and reconnect with oneself and G-d. It is a sacred pause that

allows for the restoration of body, mind and spirit.

In Jewish communities, inclusivity and mental health awareness have become increasingly recognised as integral to communal wellbeing. As we reflect on שבט, we are reminded that just as the Jewish people's liberation required both Divine intervention and human action, good mental health requires a balance of spiritual support and practical, therapeutic care too. It is a shared journey, rooted in the wisdom of our tradition, supported by our community, and sustained by the light that we each carry within us.

Ultimately, פרשת בא calls us to see beyond the immediate darkness and to hold fast to the hope of redemption, both collective and personal. It challenges us to nurture spaces of light and support, where every individual is seen, valued and uplifted in their unique journey towards freedom – whether from

external or internal bondage. In doing so, we honour the essence of our shared humanity and the sanctity of שבט – a time that calls us to rest, to heal and to affirm the dignity of every soul.

As we approach this Shabbat, let us embrace it as a moment of profound healing and renewal. Just as the Jewish people emerged from the darkness of Egypt into the light of freedom, so too can we allow the gift of שבט to lift us from our own struggles, offering us space to breathe, reflect and connect. May this Shabbat be a time where we find peace within ourselves, draw strength from our community, and rediscover the light that always dwells within, no matter how deep the darkness may seem. Let us enter Shabbat with joy, knowing that each moment of rest and reflection brings us closer to wholeness.

Shabbat Shalom!

**Save  
the date**

**for the next  
Jami Mental  
Health Shabbat  
23-24 Jan 2026**



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