

# My child won't wash or brush their teeth. What can I do?



Many parents worry about their child's hygiene and this is really normal. However, for young people who are struggling with a mental illness such as depression or anxiety, this is often worse. For young people who struggle with depression and anxiety it can often feel impossible, exhausting, overwhelming and even painful to take a shower or brush their teeth. For the purpose of exploring personal hygiene we encourage you to change your language and think of this as self-care.

## WHY CAN MENTAL ILLNESS CAUSE MY CHILD TO STRUGGLE TO TAKE CARE OF THEIR HYGIENE?

There are many reasons why young people struggle and each person's reasons and experience will be unique. Think of this as a spectrum. On one end there are young people who will want to wash 30 times a day and on the other end there are young people who struggle to brush their teeth even once a week.



## LET'S EXPLORE SOME REASONS AROUND THIS:

### Exhaustion

Depression and anxiety cause our bodies to work extremely hard to do the most basic things. This is because many of the thoughts and emotions associated with surviving a mental health struggle can take a huge amount of energy from the body. Often causing chronic fatigue or exhaustion. It can feel like climbing a mountain to make your way to the bathroom to take care of hygiene tasks.

### Sensory sensitivities

When we are dealing with anxiety and depression, our bodies sensory maps often change. We can become hypo-sensitive, hyper-sensitive or a mix of both. Hypo-sensitive means that we need a lot more stimulation to feel ok. You may notice that people start to bite their lips or bash their foot against the floor when watching tv. They are looking for more sensory stimulation. Hyper-sensitive means that our systems need less stimulation to feel ok and so we become more sensitive. Touch can be painful, including the feeling of a toothbrush or water on the skin. It can be confusing,



exhausting and difficult for young people to put this into words and they may not even realise what's happening to them.

### **Motivation/Routine**

Motivation is often the reason that we take care of our hygiene. We are motivated to want to look good, smell good and be healthy so that we can fit into our community. For many young people with anxiety or depression, motivation is a real issue because the struggle is to try and even survive getting out of bed in a day. The typical drivers for personal hygiene may not simple not be present.

### **Triggers**

For many young people who are struggling with a mental illness, self-care can be a trigger for anxiety. If low confidence around the body or how we

look is involved then taking the time to be alone with the body can be emotionally painful. Staying away from anything that highlights the body can be a protective action.

### **Not feeling worthy of self-care**

For some young people who are carrying shame and guilt, self-care can feel too uncomfortable. A feeling of not deserving to be clean or taken care of. This is especially common with trauma and abuse survivors.

### **Memory**

For many young people who struggle with hygiene it can be as simple as forgetting about the need to brush teeth or wash. Exhaustion causes chaos with our memories and they may need a simple and supportive reminder.

## **HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD?**

- ✔ Remove judgement and the pressure of not being able to prioritise hygiene.
- ✔ Know that for many young people this is temporary and will begin to change naturally as the right support is found for your child and they begin to become well.
- ✔ Talk about any struggles together with compassion and acceptance.
- ✔ Letting your child know that you care

about them and their health deeply.

- ✔ Explore different ways that you can help to make this easier.
- ✔ Involve your child in buying products and things that may help them. What smells to avoid? What products might feel best? An electric toothbrush may feel overwhelming or it may help. Test and try different things.



- ✓ Sensory issues. Note any sensory changes, like changes in smell sensitivity, pain sensitivity and or colour sensitivity. Make supportive adaptations.
- ✓ Simplify the process. Can you find ways to simplify the process? Maybe a basket next to the bed with a chewable toothbrush or skin wipes for cleaning. Maybe a reminder on the door as your child leaves the room?

- ✓ Psychoeducation  
Sometimes young people need a reminder of the importance of taking care of ourselves. There are many YouTube videos and websites with useful information. If your child shows an interest in learning more, take your time together to explore. A word of caution here – the key is knowing that your child is ready for this. You want to cause further anxiety, shame or guilt around not being able to self-care for the many reasons above. Be lead by them.

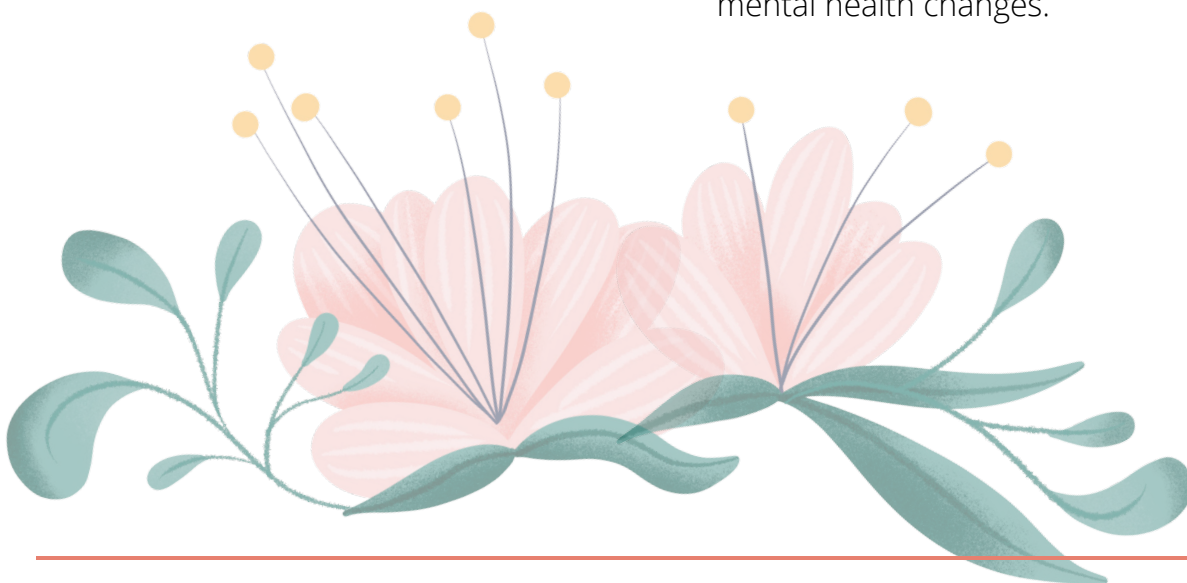
## WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW AS A PARENT?

Recognise your own fears and know that what you need for your child may not be what they need for themselves right now.

Manage your expectations of your child and recognise these are your expectations. Get to know what they can handle right now and work this this!

Expectations from family and friends can be hard to manage while taking care of a child with a mental illness. Recognise that you know best for your child.

You're not alone. Many of us have worried about our child's dental hygiene and lack of washing. It is likely to pass as their mental health changes.



[www.parentingmentalhealth.com](http://www.parentingmentalhealth.com) | [info@parentingmentalhealth.com](mailto:info@parentingmentalhealth.com)