



Lowering the barriers: Youthwatch's top tips for mental health support young people can access



Youthwatch Leeds is a self-led group of Healthwatch Leeds volunteers, aged 13 to 25. We make sure that young people's voices are heard by health and care services.

Too many young people face barriers when trying to access mental health support. These barriers can make reaching out feel difficult, overwhelming, or impossible.

We want mental health support to be easier to reach and more welcoming for young people.

To develop these tips, we visited spaces where young people receive mental health support and listened closely to what helps and what gets in the way. The following 11 tips are based on young people's experiences and set out practical ways services can reduce barriers and improve access.



1) FRIENDLY SUPPORTIVE STAFF

The right staff makes all the difference. Having friendly, non-judgmental staff was voted as the most important factor in deciding whether young people would access a service.

TOP TIP: add a 'meet the team' section to your social media or website!

4) LOCATION-ACCESSIBLE AND SAFE SPACES

Spaces should be easy to find, well connected by public transport, and in areas that are well-lit. Avoid locations down alleys, and use bright signage visible from the street to clearly show where the service is.

TOP TIP: think about what locations look like after dark.

2) CREATING A WELCOMING SPACE

Think carefully about the space you are creating. Make it calm, colourful, and non-clinical. Use warm, low lighting (lamps and fairy lights), comfortable seating, calming background music, and interesting posters and artwork.

TOP TIP: display artwork created by staff and service users to make it personal.

5) MAKE ARRIVING, WAITING, AND SETTLING IN EASY

Provide low-pressure, comfortable spaces that young people can arrive and settle in nicely. Have a staff member greet arrivals, offer teas and snacks, and provide activities or games to reduce the focus on waiting.

TOP TIP: ensure games and activities are easily reachable so young people can use them without needing to ask.

3) PRIVATE SPACES

Privacy is key for young people sharing sensitive information. Offer private spaces proactively, so they don't ask for them.

TOP TIP: Private spaces can double up as a quiet room for people that need a low-sensory environment.

6) BUILD ACCESSIBILITY IN FROM THE START

Accessibility matters in terms of physical access, sensory needs, language, and information formats. Make sure accessibility features (like interpreters, step free access and more) are visible and offered to everyone from the very beginning.

TOP TIP: accessibility helps everyone feel welcome.

7) BE FLEXIBLE IN HOW SUPPORT IS OFFERED

Value and protect informal, relationship-based support that can adapt to different needs.

Flexibility around activities, spaces, and session formats help build trust and makes young people feel comfortable.

TOP TIP: outdoor spaces can help with regulation and create a low-pressure environment.

8) CREATE A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Being in spaces with other young people and fostering a sense of shared community can help reduce isolation and add energy to the space. Community-based settings with visible youth-presence makes services feel more approachable and less clinical.

TOP TIPS: encourage informal activities to help young people connect and feel part of the space.

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9) CLEAR INFORMATION BEFORE ATTENDING

Provide information through social media, your website, or flyers so young people know what to expect before their first visit. Include FAQ's, directions from the nearest bus stop or landmark, visual walk-throughs of space, a step-by-step guide to appointments, and details of accessibility features. This helps reduce anxiety about attending for the first time.

TOP TIP: Offer phone, text, or email contact so young people can ask questions before attending.

10) MAKE FIRST CONTACT SIMPLE, CLEAR, AND RESPECTFUL OF PRIVACY

Sign-up forms should be short and easy to complete. Be mindful that questions about which school the young person attends, or parents/carers (if not handled carefully) can make young people feel their privacy isn't respected.

TOP TIP: only ask for essential information and explain how it will be used.

11) USE YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOICES TO SHAPE AND IMPROVE THE SERVICE

Keep youth voice at the centre of service design to ensure the support reflects what actually matters to the young people using it.

TOP TIP: involve young people in feedback sessions, co-design activities, or advisory groups so their perspectives influence how the service works.



I pledge to **youthwatch** Leeds

- ☐ 1. We will provide friendly, supportive staff
- ☐ 2. We will create welcoming, non-clinical spaces
- ☐ 3. We will offer private spaces without being asked
- ☐ 4. We will choose locations that feel safe and accessible
- ☐ 5. We will give clear information before a first visit
- ☐ 6. We will build accessibility in from the start
- ☐ 7. We will make arriving and waiting easy
- ☐ 8. We will be flexible in how we offer support
- ☐ 9. We will create a sense of community
- ☐ 10. We will keep first contact simple and respect privacy
- ☐ 11. We will involve young people in shaping our service