

**How to**  
stay safe online



how to



stay safe online

## **How to stay safe online**

This booklet explains how to keep yourself safe and look after your wellbeing when you use the internet for information or support for your mental health. It covers information on protecting your privacy, how to take relationships offline safely and how to address online bullying and abuse.

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### Overview

Using online resources can be a great way to support your mental health. For example, you might want to:

- find information about mental health topics
- research different options for treatment and support
- learn about other people's experiences of mental health problems, and share your own
- connect with new people and build your support network of friends

However, while the internet can be useful, it also has its dangers. Whatever you're using the internet for, it's important to think about how best to look after your mental health online, and how to keep yourself safe.

#### Please note

This booklet focuses on staying safe online with regard to managing a mental health problem. For more general guidance on web safety and security, specialist websites like Know the net or Get safe online contain lots of useful information. If you're under 18, the Safer Internet website may be helpful too. See 'useful contacts' for more details.

💬💬 *[Online is the] only place I can really make friends, so that helps obviously. For people who cannot get out to socialise, the internet is a link to the outside world. It IS a social life of sorts.* 💬💬

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## What information can I trust?

### How do I find reliable health information online?

Not everything you read about mental health on the internet will be reliable. Anyone can post content online, so it's important to think about where it's coming from. Some useful questions to ask yourself when you read online content are:

- Is this factual information or is it someone's personal experience or opinion?
- Who has written it? Are they a reliable source?
- Is it up to date? When was it written?
- Is it relevant to my situation?

If you're looking for information about mental health online, it's a good idea to use well-known sources like Mind or NHS Choices, which are certified by the Information Standard.

### What is the information standard?

The Information Standard is an independent quality mark of good practice in health information. When you see the Information Standard logo, it means that the organisation displaying it has been certified as trustworthy and reliable. It looks like this:



### How do I find reliable health care online?

You might want to use the internet to search for professional treatment and support, such as talking treatments or psychiatric medication. It's

your choice how you seek treatment, but when searching for professional help online it's important to bear the following points in mind.

- **GP appointments** – if you want professional treatment for a mental health problem, the best place to start is usually by talking to your GP. The NHS provides an online tool for finding NHS GP practices near you, which you can access through their website here.
- **Talking treatments** – there are some people online who call themselves therapists, but who do not have any qualifications or training. If you're looking for a therapist online it's a good idea to:
  - search through a professional website such as the BACP, rather than through a general search engine such as Google.
  - ask them about their professional qualifications and training before receiving any treatment; you can check these with their professional body. (See our online information on on accessing private sector care for more information.)
- **Medication** – you should only ever buy medication online from a registered pharmacy; do not trust any website that sells prescription drugs without a legitimate prescription. (See our online information on buying medication online for more guidance.)

## Can I trust other people's advice?

You might find it useful to use the internet to learn about other people's experiences of something you're also going through, or to seek advice from peers. It can help you:

- discover coping strategies
- become part of a community
- feel comforted or less alone.

 *It was good to share experiences and find that many other people are in the same boat.* 

However, when making decisions about what's right for you, it's important to keep the following in mind:

- **What's true for someone else might not be true for you.** For example, you might read that someone else found a particular talking treatment or medication helpful in managing their mental health condition, or that they experienced a particular side effect. But everyone is different; the same treatment might not work the same way for you, or at all – even if you have the same diagnosis.
- **When someone states something as a fact, it might just be their opinion.** It's up to you to judge how reliable their opinion is, and how relevant it is to your situation.
- **Reading other people's comments might sometimes make you feel worse.** For example, you might come across blogs expressing opinions which you find upsetting or with content that you find triggering, or you might be given advice which isn't actually suitable for you. See 'looking after my wellbeing' for suggestions on how you might manage this.

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## How can I find support?

There are a lot of ways to get support for your mental health online. Even if you don't go online to actively get support for your mental health problem, you might find that you get more support than you realise from the social interactions and friendships you build. If you find that a particular online community or group isn't helpful for you at all, that doesn't necessarily mean that you can't find support anywhere online – you might just need to try a few different things.

### Social media

Social media sites can be quite different from each other – they might attract different groups of people and feel like very different online environments.

### What are the benefits?

- Lots of people use this type of community so it might be a good place to stay in touch with friends and family.
- Social networks let you set your own privacy settings, so you have more control over who you interact with.
- There are often ways of meeting or interacting with new people (e.g. hashtags or groups).

### What should I be aware of?

- They have a low level of moderation, and the people who run the site might not be easy to get in touch with if you have a question or problem.
- You might sometimes find seeing so many people's updates overwhelming or upsetting, especially if you're not feeling very well.

 *[For me] Facebook is brutal. People only present perfect versions of themselves. Makes you think you're the only one struggling, but Tumblr has been a lifeline for me. People who have similar experiences and talk to me with no agenda other than to help.* 

## Blogs and vlogs

Blogs and vlogs (video blogs) are channels which individuals, groups and organisations use to publish articles they've written or videos they've created. They're usually centred around a particular topic or theme. We have our own Mind blog; see 'useful contacts' for details.

### What are the benefits?

- Communities can develop around a particular person or organisation's blog – for example, in the comments section.
- Talking to people you meet in this way can mean you share an interest.

### What should I be aware of?

- Comments sections might sometimes be unmoderated so may be less safe to use.
- All your posts will be public so you may need to be careful about what you post.
- It's possible that an individual could decide to stop blogging.

👏👏 *I find writing a blog can really help, and it helps others to understand what you're going through.* 🧡🧡

### Online community forums

There are lots of different forms online that can be general or based around a specific topic, for example a band or local area. There are also mental health specific forums and communities like Elefriends, Big White Wall and Black Dog Tribe. This is sometimes called online peer support.

### What are the benefits?

- Mental health specific forums might have a higher level of moderation when it comes to triggering content or disagreements, which means you might feel safer.
- Members of these communities will usually have experience of mental health problems, so you can talk to people who might be more likely to understand what you're going through.
- Posts are normally saved, so you can look at previous posts if you want to.
- Your posts can be any length you like.

### What should I be aware of?

- There is usually a sign up process, so you will need an email address.
- Your comments or posts might be removed by the moderators if they're deemed inappropriate or potentially triggering to other people.
- Conversations often happen over days or weeks as people return to a topic.

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- People using these kinds of forums will often be struggling with their mental health themselves. This means updates and conversations can be around difficult issues or can be upsetting or triggering. See 'looking after my wellbeing' for ways you might manage this.

👤👤 *In the end I've had to avoid all the [mental health] message boards. The content can be really triggering and the paranoia ... was too much emotional risk.* 👤👤

## Chat rooms

There are lots of different chat rooms available online, hosted by lots of different organisations.

### What are the benefits?

- There is usually not a sign up process and it is therefore quick and easy to use.
- They're usually completely anonymous, which you might find makes it easier for you to talk to people.

### What should I be aware of?

- They're not usually moderated.
- There's a high risk of some people posting irresponsible or inappropriate content in chat rooms, because they're anonymous and unmoderated.
- Posts are not usually saved so you can't look back at previous conversations. Interactions move very quickly, so they may not be suitable if you want to build lasting friendships or have a conversation over time.

## Private messaging

Private messaging can feel similar to text messaging someone or calling them up on your phone, but it's usually conducted online using apps.

### What are the benefits?

- You can stay in contact with people you know without the costs associated with texts or phone calls.
- Some apps let you communicate in fun or innovative ways.

### What should I be aware of?

- With some apps, you can only communicate with someone if you have their phone number. If you don't know the other person well, you might not feel comfortable with this. (See 'protecting my privacy' for information about keeping your personal details safe.)
- You might feel like you should always be available via private messaging, or that you always have to respond to messages right away, which can feel overwhelming.

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## How can I look after my wellbeing?

### Dealing with upsetting content

It's possible that you might come across some articles, videos or images online that you could find distressing, or that might trigger negative feelings or behaviour – even if you're on a site you usually find helpful. For example, a blog that talks explicitly about self-harm may make you feel the urge to harm yourself, or a post on a social network about someone else's experience of depression may make you feel low yourself.

Remember:

- Avoid sites and feeds you know you might find triggering.
- Try to be aware of how you're feeling when you're online. For example, if you're not feeling well, you might be more vulnerable to things you'd normally be able to deal with.
- If you do see something that upsets you, close the window or scroll quickly past it. You might even want to turn off your computer and take a break.
- Consider whether your posts could be triggering for other people, and

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think about using trigger warnings so that they can decide whether or not they want to view them. Try and be specific about why the content might be triggering, so that they have all the information they need to make a decision. If it's very likely to be triggering, you may want to consider not posting it at all.

### What's a trigger warning?

You might come across trigger warnings online (sometimes shortened to 'TW' or 'tw'). This is a way of warning others that a post or page is going to contain some content that could be upsetting or triggering. The purpose of using trigger warnings is to help everyone keep themselves safe online. For example:

**TW:** This blog contains information about suicidal feelings that some people may find triggering.

If you see a trigger warning, think carefully about whether you still want to read the content.

### Managing online relationships

Sometimes when we're online, we can forget we're actually talking to real people. Although it's possible to make great friendships online, not every person you meet will be someone you get on with – just like in offline life.

Remember:

- **Don't say anything online that you wouldn't say to someone face-to-face.** It might feel easy to say whatever you want from behind a screen but try to think about how your words could affect people, as you'd want them to do for you.
- **Try not to read too much into things.** Misunderstandings can happen easily online because the signs we use during face-to-face conversation, such as tone of voice or body language, aren't available online. It's easy for someone to hit 'send' before thinking how what they've written may come across to you.

- **Try to give other people the benefit of the doubt.** If you're not sure about what someone means by what they've written, ask them to clarify.
- **Be respectful of other people's views and opinions** – even if you don't share them.
- **You can't always expect an immediate response.** People may not be online all the time, so they may not be able to respond straight away.
- **Be careful about how much you share** with people you don't know well (see 'protecting my privacy' for more information).
- **You don't have to tolerate online abuse or bullying.**

💬💬 *We allow ourselves and we allow other people to say things [online] we would never normally do 'in real life'.* 💬💬

### Noticing when your online activity isn't helpful

While it can be a huge comfort to talk to people experiencing the same sorts of issues as you, sometimes this kind of interaction can stop being helpful for you.

Take a moment to ask yourself:

- **Do the people you connect with online share the same motivation as you,** or do they have different goals? For example, if you have an eating problem and are looking online for positive ways to challenge those thoughts and feelings, connecting with people who aren't ready to seek support for their own problems might not help.
- **How much time are you spending giving support** to other people online, and how is this impacting your own wellbeing? Being a friend to other people can feel great, but caring for someone who's going through a difficult time can also be very stressful, and could affect your own wellbeing. (See our booklets on managing stress and coping as a carer for tips.)
- **How long have you been using a particular kind of online support,** and has it made you feel better or worse overall? It's

important to put your own safety and wellbeing first. If you notice that a certain online environment has stopped being a positive thing in your life, you might want to think about taking a break from it.

👉👉 *When it is too much or an online relationship is getting overwhelming [I think] it is important to take care of [myself]; to have the courage to be honest and gently tell the person/people the truth.* 👉👉

## Maintaining your online-offline balance

Sometimes getting support online isn't always the best way to look after yourself, especially if the amount of time you're spending online is starting to have a negative impact on your offline relationships and responsibilities. It's important to try to find a balance.

Try using these tips:

- **Try switching off your phone, computer and any other mobile devices**, so you aren't tempted to check in online. You could start by giving yourself small timed breaks, such as 10 minutes at a time, and build up to taking longer breaks away from your screen.
- **Set aside some time each day to do something else**, like reading a book, doing some physical exercise or trying out a relaxation technique.
- **Protect time in your day to eat healthily and get good sleep** (see our online information on food and mood and coping with sleep problems for more information about how these things can affect your mental health).
- **Think about taking a longer break from online activity**, especially if you're going through a difficult time with your mental health.

👉👉 *... if I'm feeling unwell or something worries/upsets me ...I turn off the laptop for the day.* 👉👉

### Getting further support

Sometimes online support can't realistically give us all the help we want. If you find that things are becoming too much for you to cope with, or are worried about the way you are feeling or behaving, you may want to get additional support offline. You can:

- Talk to a close friend or family member in person about how you're feeling.
- Make an appointment to talk to your GP about your mental health (see our booklet on seeking support for a mental health problem for more guidance).
- Contact your local Mind to see what support they might be able to offer.
- Make sure you know how to get help in a crisis. (See our online information on crisis services for tips.)

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## How can I protect my privacy?

As we share more and more of our lives online, it's important to make sure we protect our privacy and prevent people from accessing private information about ourselves.

### What is private information?

Private information is anything you might not want other people to see. That might include:

- **Personal details** like where you live, work or study.
- **Financial details**, like your bank account or credit card details.
- **Personal photos**, including pictures of your friends, family, or sexually explicit photos.
- **Sensitive information**, for example about your health, sexual orientation or religious beliefs.

- **Confidential information**, for example information from your workplace.
- **Your personal opinion**, which could be anything from political comments to jokes or complaints.

### Check your privacy settings

Make sure you are aware of how private a site or community is. Just because a site requires you to log in doesn't mean your profile is private – always check what's shown publicly. You can:

- Read the website's privacy policy to know how your information will and won't be used.
- Control the level of privacy you have on some sites, so you can decide who can see what you post.

 *My [Facebook] profile is set to friends only. I don't accept friend requests from strangers on Facebook, only people who I've been talking to on support groups for a long time.* 

### Use secure passwords

It's important to have a secure password whatever kind of site you're using. It's a good idea to:

- change your password regularly
- always log out when you're away from your computer, tablet or phone
- change your password immediately if you think someone has accessed your account without your permission.

Websites like Get Safe Online and Know the Net can tell you more about how to choose a secure password.

## Protect your personal details

What you share online can affect both your privacy and the privacy of others, so it's important to think carefully about what you post.

- Don't post personal details (such as your phone number, address or bank details) anywhere public, for example on Facebook or Twitter.
- Be careful when sending someone your bank details, using online banking or online shopping. If you think someone has used information you have shared to do things like open bank accounts or obtain documents you should report it as soon as you can to Action Fraud.

## Think about who will see your post

Sharing things like jokey photos or personal opinions can seem harmless at the time, but sometimes we end up regretting it in the future. You might want to think about:

- Would you want your friends, family, or employer seeing it? Very few sites are 100% private, and information is often shared online.
- Can you see yourself regretting it in future? Will you still want people to see it in five, 10 or 20 years' time? It's very difficult to remove something from the internet permanently.

👏👏 *I have a list of things not to do when I'm really low: don't drink, don't make any life changing decisions and never ever post how you feel online, because once it's out you can't take it back.* 🗨️🗨️

## Be extra careful with sexually explicit content

If you send someone a sexually explicit image, it's possible that they could use it to try to harm you in the future, such as by sharing it with someone

else, or threatening to post it publicly. Your photo or video could also be accidentally shared beyond you and the person you sent it to. Although this does not happen often, it is something to keep in mind before you share sexually explicit content with anyone – even privately.

Remember:

- Even if the other person is someone you feel you know and trust, relationships can change.
- No one has the right to share your personal information without your consent, including images.
- Even if you consented to having the picture taken, or took it yourself, if you have not consented to being shared you can report it to the police.

The Get Safe Online website provides more information on how you can manage this sort of situation.

## Don't break the law

Sharing content or information you don't own, or that is either confidential or untrue, can have serious consequences in some circumstances.

You must not:

- **upload any content you don't own the copyright for**, such as films, music or books. This is illegal unless you have permission from the copyright holder.
- **publicly post other people's personal information** – even pictures – without their permission. This could be upsetting for them, and could be a criminal offence.
- **publicly post false or confidential information about organisations**. In serious cases this might result in you being sued for libel (damaging an organisation's reputation in print), or disciplined for misconduct if you are an employee of the organisation – you could lose your job.

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### What is online bullying and abuse?

Just like in offline life, you might encounter people who upset you or behave in ways that cause you serious problems. This might be behaving in a threatening way; emotional abuse or manipulation; verbal harassment or intimidation; or sexual harassment

Unfortunately, the internet provides an opportunity for people to carry out bullying and abuse of people in different ways too, such as:

- posting private pictures or information about you
- hacking your account (accessing it without your permission)
- using your identity without your permission (identity fraud)

It can be horrible to experience bullying or abuse online, but remember: **you don't have to put up with it.**

### What can I do about it?

If you experience bullying or abuse, there are some things you can do immediately:

- Don't respond – it can encourage further unwanted communication.
- Block or delete the person – this means they won't be able to contact you and you can't see what they write.

 *It's easy to delete and block people; [...] don't worry about hurting their feelings. Look after yourself.* 

If you're worried for your safety or the safety of others, you might need to take more serious steps:

- **Keep a record of any posts or messages that you've received**, for example, take a screenshot or save messages to an offline file. This can help if you need to provide evidence to the site moderators or the police.

- **Talk to a trusted friend or family member** – they may be able to offer help and support.
- **Report them to the site moderators.** Most websites will have a policy for reporting bad behaviour, so make sure you read this before you start. The Know the Net website has information on how to report people on some of popular websites.
- **Contact the police** if you are being threatened or abused online and you feel in danger.

It's important to remember to take care of yourself when you're handling a difficult situation like this. See 'looking after my wellbeing' and our booklet on managing stress for more information.

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## How can I take relationships offline safely?

The internet can be a great place to make connections with new people. If you have made a good online friendship with someone, you may decide to take it offline. This might mean talking over the phone or arranging to meet face-to-face.

Many people have established long-lasting and supportive friendships this way, but it's also important to keep yourself safe.

 *I have met up with many people from the internet and have has some really amazing experiences.* 

## What should I think about when planning to meet someone?

You might want to ask yourself these questions:

- **How much do I know about this person?** Try and think about what they've told you about themselves. How long have you been talking to them? Do you have any mutual friends?

- **Are they definitely who they say they are?** While most people are honest, not everyone represents themselves accurately online.
- **Do I feel pressured into meeting up?** You don't have to do anything you don't feel comfortable with. It's ok to tell someone you're not ready to meet offline just yet, or that you'd rather keep your relationship online-only.
- **Do we want the same thing from an offline relationship?** It's important to be clear beforehand about why you want to meet, to make sure that your motivations and expectations are the same. For example, you might just want to continue an existing friendship, but the other person might assume that you want to develop your relationship further.

### What can I do to keep myself safe?

When meeting up with someone for the first time, it's a good idea to be keep these suggestions in mind:

- Don't give out your phone number or address until you're confident that you know who you are talking to.
- Always make sure you meet in a public place, during the daytime, when other people will be around.
- Let a friend or family member know where you are, who you are with and when you expect to be back.
- Keep in touch with your friend or family member while you're out – you might want to make sure you've charged your phone fully before leaving the house.
- Ask someone else to come with you. If you're both part of an online community, perhaps ask other people in the group to come too

## Useful contacts

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### Mind

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393  
 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm)  
 email: [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)  
 text: 86463  
 web: [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk)  
 Details of local Minds, other local services and Mind's Legal Line. Language Line is available for languages other than English.

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### Action Fraud

helpline: 0300 123 2040  
 web: [actionfraud.police.uk](http://actionfraud.police.uk)

Reporting service for online fraud.

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### Big White Wall

web: [bigwhitewall.com](http://bigwhitewall.com)

Online community for adults experiencing emotional or psychological distress. You need a subscription or NHS referral to join, although it is free for people living in some areas.

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### Elefriends

web: [elefriends.org.uk](http://elefriends.org.uk)

A safe, supportive online community where you can listen, be heard and

share your experiences with others.

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### Get safe online

web: [getsafeonline.org](http://getsafeonline.org)

Information and advice on online safety.

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### Information Standard

web: [england.nhs.uk/tis](http://england.nhs.uk/tis)

Explains what the Information Standard is.

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### Know the Net

web: [knowthenet.org.uk](http://knowthenet.org.uk)

Information and advice on online safety.

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### Samaritans

24-hour helpline: 08457 90 90 90  
 email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)  
 web: [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)  
 Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK  
 Chris, PO Box 90 90  
 Stirling, FK8 2SA

24-hour emotional support for anyone feeling down, experiencing distress or struggling to cope.

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### **Sane: Online support forum**

web: [sane.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/  
support/supportforum](http://sane.org.uk/what_we_do/support/supportforum)

Mental health forum for discussion and mutual support.

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### **Time to change**

web: [time-to-change.org.uk](http://time-to-change.org.uk)

Blogs about issues relating to mental health, and guidance about how to write safe online content about self-harm, suicide and eating disorders.

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### **UK Safer Internet Centre**

web: [saferinternet.org.uk](http://saferinternet.org.uk)

Tips advice and resources to help children and young people stay safe on the internet.

## Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk) or contact Mind Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit [mind.org.uk/shop](http://mind.org.uk/shop) or phone 0844 448 4448 or email [publications@mind.org.uk](mailto:publications@mind.org.uk)

This information was written by Eleanor Bowes

Published by Mind 2015 © 2015  
To be revised 2018

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References available on request  
Mind is a registered charity No. 219830

## Support Mind

Providing information costs money. We really value donations, which enable us to get our information to more people who need it.

Just £5 could help another 15 people in need receive essential practical information.

If you would like to support our work with a donation, please contact us on:  
tel: 020 8215 2243  
email: [dons@mind.org.uk](mailto:dons@mind.org.uk)  
web: [mind.org.uk/donate](http://mind.org.uk/donate)

Mind  
(National Association for Mental Health)  
15-19 Broadway  
London E15 4BQ  
tel: 020 8519 2122  
fax: 020 8522 1725  
web: [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk)

# Mind

We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales. We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We're here for you. Today. Now. We're on your doorstep, on the end of a phone or online. Whether you're stressed, depressed or in crisis. We'll listen, give you advice, support and fight your corner. And we'll push for a better deal and respect for everyone experiencing a mental health problem.

**Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393 / Text: 86463**  
**info@mind.org.uk**  
**mind.org.uk**

