

### Fact sheet

For non-clinical professionals  
who work with young people

## Beyond Sad

### Recognising depression and supporting young people

Adolescence and young adulthood is a period of great change and personal growth. There are a number of challenges that come along with this life stage — school and work stress, increasing independence, growing social demands and relationship break-ups are just some of the things a young person may grapple with as they move into adulthood. It is therefore unsurprising that, like all of us, young people can have the occasional mood swing, feel irritable or feel sad. However, sometimes these feelings persist and develop into something more severe, like clinical depression. Perhaps given the increased demands of adolescence, young people are at also an increased risk for developing depression.

### What is depression?

Depression is one of the most common mental health concerns in young Australians (1). Depression in young people is characterised by a significant, noticeable negative change in mood, thoughts, and behaviour that interferes with a young person's usual functioning, such as in the areas of school, work, or with friends. This includes losing interest in things that they previously

enjoyed or having a low or irritable mood, for most days, most of the time for at least two weeks. This is accompanied by a number of other symptoms, which may be easy or difficult to spot in a young person experiencing depression (see "Warning Signs" below). Depression can have a significant impact on a young person's relationships with family and friends, their concentration and memory, their school performance, and increases the risk of drug and alcohol misuse.

Adolescence and young adulthood is often when depression first appears (2). Given the considerable impact of depression on daily functioning, a depressive episode can have an impact on a young person's life for many years. The earlier a young person experiencing depression is identified, the more likely it is that they can receive timely treatment, recover and stay well.

Therefore, those who interact with young people on a regular basis (eg. school staff, sports coaches, youth workers) are in a key position to notice these changes and play a vital part in encouraging young people to get the support they need as early as possible, so they can enjoy optimal mental health well into adulthood.

### Warning signs

Given the broad range of presentations of depression across young people, there is also a variety of warning signs that may be present. If you notice any of these changes and they have lasted at least two weeks and are impacting on the young person's daily life, they could indicate that the young person is in need of support for depression. Changes you might notice include:

- Coming across as grouchy, irritable or angry
- Coming across as sad, tearful, or expressing a sense of emptiness
- Showing less interest or enjoyment in things they once enjoyed (eg. a drop in social and extra-curricular activities)
- Changes in appetite and weight, including weight loss (even though they are not actively dieting) or gain

- Appearing sleepy or reporting not getting enough sleep or sleeping too much
- A drop in performance at school or work (eg. not meeting deadlines or not participating in meetings or discussions)
- Showing poor concentration or memory, or indecisiveness (eg. missing appointments, or taking a long time to make simple decisions)
- A decrease in motivation (eg. coming in late as they have difficulties getting out of bed in the morning, or skipping school/work completely)
- Withdrawing from others (eg. isolating themselves from peers during breaks)
- Moving noticeably slowly, or conversely, fidgeting and appearing restless
- Having low self-esteem or having a poor view of themselves, others and their future
- Expressing feelings of hopelessness or guilt, or expressing that life isn't worth living
- Having or expressing thoughts of death, or even thinking of hurting themselves

If you notice a change or something out of the ordinary in a young person that is not mentioned above, it may still be a sign of a mental health concern. If in doubt, talk to the young person about how they are coping and let them know that you are there to support them. Even if the young person does not want to talk to you, it does not hurt to get a second opinion about the young person's behaviour. Reach out to a colleague, parent, or even a mental health professional to discuss what you've noticed, as appropriate.

**If you suspect that they may be experiencing depression, it is important that they are seen by a professional**

## Talking to a Young Person

If you are concerned about a young person's mental health, it is important that you talk with them about your concerns. This can help you get a better idea of how they are coping, and what support they may need. In talking to the young person remember to be open and non-judgmental, take their feelings seriously, and gently discuss concerns without being overly intrusive.

If you believe the young person is struggling with low mood or irritability, encourage them to talk to someone they trust about how they are feeling, for example a friend, parent, school counsellor, or teacher. Also encourage them to continue doing the things that they enjoy, stay social, keep active and eat well, as there is evidence that simple lifestyle factors like these can have a positive impact on wellbeing. Some young people might use alcohol or drugs to help them cope with their difficulties and it is useful to explain to the young person that while these behaviours might make them feel better in the short term, they will exacerbate and complicate their current symptoms over time (eg. by acting as a depressant, increasing impulsivity and impairing judgment, or creating dependency). If you suspect that they may be experiencing depression, it is important that they are seen by a professional.

## Seeking Professional Help

If you are worried that a young person may be experiencing depression, you should encourage them to seek mental health assessment and treatment. Treatment most commonly involves seeing a psychologist for a talking therapy like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) or Interpersonal Therapy (IPT), but can also include family therapy, mindfulness therapy, and a number of other treatments. Where appropriate, medication may also be helpful, especially when combined with psychological therapies. There are effective therapies for the range of mental health concerns that young people experience, and the sooner they get help, the better their chances of recovery.

A good place for a young person to begin seeking help is their family doctor or General Practitioner (GP). They will be able to provide them more information on what's going on, what supports are available and refer them to an appropriate service if required. Some GPs prefer having a longer appointment slot to discuss mental health concerns and it is a good idea to specify at the time of making the appointment that the reason for the visit is to discuss a GP Mental Health Treatment Plan.

## Working with Young People Experiencing Depression

It may be that you are already working with a young person who is seeking, or has sought professional help for depression. It is important to keep in mind that depression can have a big impact on energy levels, motivation, concentration and memory. You may find that you can offer practical suggestions to help them cope with their symptoms, for example, writing things down or repeating information to help their memory, or giving them more time to complete tasks, as appropriate.

Importantly, although there are effective treatments, depression can ebb and flow over time. Having a previous period of depression is a key risk factor for further depressive episodes. Even if a young person you work with has already had treatment and reached recovery, it is useful to keep the warning signs in mind in case the depression returns.

## When a Young Person is at Risk

Depression is linked to a higher risk of suicide and self-harm in young people. If you are worried about a young person feeling particularly low and hopeless, it is important to ask them directly whether they have ever had thoughts that life is not worth living, or if they have had thoughts of hurting themselves. While it may be difficult, it is very important to raise this with them, as directly asking a young person if they are thinking of taking their own life is the only way to assess suicide risk (3). There is also no evidence to indicate that talking to a young person about suicidal thoughts is harmful (4).

While the majority of young people who have suicidal thoughts do not go on to end their lives, reports of suicidal ideation should be taken seriously as a sign of a mental health problem that warrants professional assessment. **If you believe a young person is in need of immediate support, contact emergency services by calling 000 or taking them to an emergency department.** Otherwise, refer or encourage them to seek professional support as above.

## Taking Care of Yourself

It is important for those working with young people to remember to also look after themselves, especially when supporting a young person with a mental health concern like depression. Supporting someone through a tough time can be stressful, so remember to look use the supports available to you at work, and continue to engage in activities that lower your stress, keep you energised, and maintain your wellbeing. If you feel like you are in need of professional help, your GP can provide support.

### For further information regarding mental health

[www.orygen.org.au](http://www.orygen.org.au)  
[www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)  
[www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)  
<http://au.professionals.reachout.com>  
<https://mhfa.com.au/resources/mental-health-first-aid-guidelines>  
[www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com)  
[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)  
[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)  
[www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)  
[www.healthdirect.gov.au](http://www.healthdirect.gov.au)  
[www.oyh.org.au](http://www.oyh.org.au)

### References

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011. Young Australians: their health and wellbeing 2011. Cat. no. PHE 140 Canberra: AIHW.
2. Kessler, R. C., Amminger, G. P., Aguilar-Gaxiola, S., Alonso, J., Lee, S., & Ustun, T. B. (2007). Age of onset of mental disorders: A review of recent literature. *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*, 20(4), 359-364. <http://doi.org/10.1097/YCO.0b013e32816ebc8c>
3. Morris R. & Gask L. (2006) Assessment and immediate management of people at risk of harming themselves. *Psychiatry* 5(8)
4. Mann J.J, Apter A., Bertolote J., et al. (2005). Suicide Prevention Strategies: A Systematic Review. *JAMA*; 294(16): 2064.

This information is not medical advice. It is generic and does not take into account your personal circumstances, physical wellbeing, mental status or mental requirements. Do not use this information to treat or diagnose your own or another person's medical condition and never ignore medical advice or delay seeking it because of something in this information. Any medical questions should be referred to a qualified healthcare professional. If in doubt, please always seek medical advice.