

Fact sheet

For non-clinical professionals
who work with young people

Understanding Mental Health

From mental wellbeing to mental health problems

Adolescence and young adulthood is a period of great change, personal growth and an important time for a young person in terms of how they see and understand themselves, others and their place in the world. The challenges that come along with this life stage are significant — 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. Given these demands on young people, it can be difficult for professionals who work with young people to tell what is a “normal” part of growing up and what is a sign of a mental health problem.

What is mental health?

In general, good mental health and wellbeing is a state of mind that helps all of us to be able to cope with the ups and downs of life. For a young person, this may include being able to manage the demands of education and work, making and keeping meaningful relationships with others, and being able to live life in a satisfying way.

Sadness, anger, stress, irritability and anxiety are all normal parts of the human experience, however if these symptoms persist for long periods of time or have a big impact on someone’s daily life, it may be a sign of a mental health problem. As adolescence and young adulthood is often when mental health problems first appear (1), those working with young people have 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.

Mental health problems in young people

In any given year, one in four young Australians experience at least one mental disorder (2). The most commonly reported disorders are anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, and mood disorders, such as depression. Other disorders, such as psychotic disorders and eating disorders, are less common but nonetheless have a powerful and disruptive impact on the lives of young people and their families. It is important to be alert to warning signs and significant changes in young people’s mood and behaviour that may indicate they are experiencing mental health concerns.

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Warning signs

Given the broad range of mental health problems that may occur in young people, there is also a variety of warning signs that may appear. 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. These include:

- Changes in mood or personality, including persistent irritability, sadness, anger or worry
- Low self-esteem or having a poor view of themselves and their future
- Less interest or pleasure in things they usually enjoy
- Changes in appetite and weight, including weight loss or gain
- Appearing sleepy or reporting not getting enough sleep or sleeping too much
- A drop in performance at school or work, including difficulties with concentration
- Withdrawing from others, not going out as much, or not going to school or work
- Trouble connecting with others of their own age
- Looking unkempt — for example, poor hygiene or wearing dirty clothes
- Reporting unusual or distressing thoughts that are impacting on their life
- Any physical signs of harm, either by themselves or others, including cuts and bruises
- Expressing feelings of hopelessness, or even expressing that life isn't worth living

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.

Talking to a young person about their mental health

If you are concerned about the mental health of a young person you know, 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, encourage them to talk to someone they trust about how they are feeling, for example a friend, parent, school counsellor, teacher, or sporting coach. Also encourage them to continue doing the things that they enjoy, stay social, keep active, eat well, and avoid using alcohol and drugs.

Treatment most commonly involves seeing a psychologist for a talking therapy like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Seeking professional help

With some young people, informal encouragement and support is not enough. If you feel that their mental health concerns are having a significant impact on how well they function in daily life — for example in school, work, or with friends — you should encourage them to seek professional support. Treatment most commonly involves seeing a psychologist for a talking therapy like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), 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 support is available and refer them to an appropriate service if required. Young people can also self-refer to a service such as headspace, the national youth mental health service (see website listed below for more information).

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When a young person is at risk

If you are worried about a young person particularly feeling 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 a difficult conversation to initiate, 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. You may also be concerned that a young person is at risk of harm from others, or may be experiencing abuse or neglect in their family or relationships. **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

As a person who is working with young people as part of your professional role, it is important that you remember to also look after yourself, especially when supporting a young person with a mental health concern. Supporting someone through a tough time can be stressful, so remember to use the supports available to you at work, and continue to do 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 youth mental health and mental health

www.orygen.org.au
www.headspace.org.au
www.eheadspace.org.au
www.reachout.com
<http://au.professionals.reachout.com>
www.mhfa.com.au
www.youthbeyondblue.com
www.beyondblue.org.au
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
www.sane.org
www.healthdirect.gov.au

References

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2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011. Young Australians: their health and wellbeing 2011. Cat. no. PHE 140 Canberra: AIHW.
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.

Disclaimer

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.