Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
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Factsheet

Supporting a young person's mental health (Simplified English)

Evidence ratings:

This resource has undergone expert review. See our Help/Q&A section for more details.

Year:

Targeted Drugs: Alcohol, Cannabis, Drugs (General), Emerging Drugs (“Legal Highs”), "Ice" (Methamphetamine), MDMA/Ecstasy, Prescription Medication, Tobacco

Tags: Simplified English, effective communication, motivational conversations, getting support, mental health

Origin: Australian

Cost:
Free

Introduction

Children go through many changes as they get older and become young adults. This is when symptoms of mental illness can start, along with exposure to alcohol and other drugs. Some times can be more stressful, such as natural disasters, exams, or friendship issues.

The link between mental illness and alcohol/drug use

Mental illness and drug use can occur together. Some young people use alcohol or other drugs to deal with low mood, or stress. Those with a mental illness are at increased risk of using alcohol or other drugs. This is important to remember when supporting a young person. Understanding why young people use alcohol and/or drugs can help you know other problems that they need help with. Mental illness and alcohol or other drugs use can make each other worse so, helping the young person to get help for both is important.

Symptoms of common mental illnesses

The table shows the most common symptoms of mental illnesses in young people. Many of them feel stressed, nervous, scared, or hopeless at some point in their lives. It is important to provide a safe space for them to talk about their worries and get help from a general practitioner (GP), or a mental health professional; especially when symptoms are severe, regular, or constant.

Mental illness	Common symptoms
Anxiety (e.g. generalised anxiety disorder, panic disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, social anxiety disorder)	- Feeling nervous, anxious, stressed, or scared. - Rapid heartbeat. - Difficulty concentrating. - Worrying excessively. - Restlessness. - Numbness or nausea. - Avoidance. Click here to learn more
Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)	- Difficulty concentrating or staying focused. - Fidgeting, restlessness and difficulty sitting still for long periods of time. - Self-focused behaviour including interrupting or trouble waiting their turn. - Acting without thinking. Click here to learn more
Depression	- Feelings of sadness, emptiness, or hopelessness. - Loss of interest in activities that used to be pleasurable. - Physically feeling tired all the time or sick and run down. Click here to learn more
Ongoing stress related to trauma experience/s (e.g. post-traumatic stress disorder, acute stress disorder, adjustment disorder)	- Intrusive/disturbing thoughts or memories of a traumatic/stressful event (e.g., flashbacks). - Nightmares and disturbed sleep. - Feelings of fear, numbness, or anxiety. - Headaches or stomach pains. Click here to learn more
Hazardous alcohol or other drug use	- Increased alcohol or other drug use over time. - Changes in peer group, drop in grades or increased rebelliousness. - Drinking to the point of blacking out. - Alcohol or drug use puts strain on home, work, school, or personal relationships. - Feeling unwell or moody when not using the substance. - Feeling a lack of control over alcohol or other drug use. Click here to learn more
Conduct or behavioural problems	- Aggression to people or animals. - Lying and stealing. - Deliberate destruction of property. - Disregard for rules. Click here to learn more

Encouraging someone to get help

Young people go to different people during hard times. Their three most common sources for support are parents, friends, and health professionals. Below are some tips if you are worried that a young person might have a mental illness and/or alcohol or other drug problems.

Find a good time to talk

- Find a place where the young person feels safe and comfortable.
- Try to pick a time when they are calm, open, and focused.

Mention specific things you are worried about

- “You seem quieter lately. How are you doing?”
- “I’ve been noticing that you are (sad/distant/not yourself). I am worried about you. Can we talk about what’s bothering you?"

Be kind and open-minded

Make sure you have time to listen.

- The young person will listen to you if you have a two-way conversation.
- Avoid negative or unhelpful language e.g. ‘what you’re doing is wrong’ or ‘other people have things much worse’.

Ask the young person how you can support them

- It is important to know what type of help a young person wants from you.
- Let them know change can happen, and help is there. Tell them that you will support them to find the right help.
- If they don’t feel like talking to you then you can help them to talk to another trusted adult.

Check later to see how they are

- Think of this as a starting point for ongoing talks about their mental health.
- Getting professional help or making changes can take time. A negative reaction does not mean the conversation was unsuccessful – it may take some time for them to understand what you said.
- It is important that they know that you are there to talk again. Ask “permission” to check with them again later to see how they are doing.

Encourage activities and behaviours to stay mentally healthy

- Activities can be spending time with family or friends, exercising, keeping a diary, and getting enough sleep.

Professional help

Depending on the severity of the illness, and the situation it might be important to encourage the young person to get professional help.

- Be positive about the help professionals can provide and suggest they speak with a school counsellor or a GP/doctor.
- It is important to let them know that their meetings with health professionals will be private.
- You can also help them to contact the following organisations, over the phone or internet, to get help and support:

National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline
1800 250 015

Transcultural Mental Health Centre
dhi.health.nsw.gov.au/transcultural-mental-health-centre

embrace
embracementalhealth.org.au

Kids Helpline
1800 55 1800
kidshelpline.com.au

Beyond Blue
1300 22 4636
Online Chat

For further information and resources, you can find a list services available to young people on our website where to get help and advice page.

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