Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
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Factsheet

Supporting a young person's mental health



Evidence ratings:

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

Year: Year 5–6, Year 7–8, Year 9–10, Year 11–12

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

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

Origin: Australian

Cost:
Free

Introduction

Adolescence is a stage of life characterised by a wide range of social, physical, cognitive, emotional, and psychological changes. It is also a time when symptoms of mental illness can begin to emerge, along with exposure to situations involving alcohol or other drugs. In Australia, about 1 in 7 young people aged 4-17 years have experienced a mental illness in the past year. Of those experiencing a mental illness, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (7%) and anxiety disorders (7%) were the most common among youth, followed by major depressive disorder (3%), and conduct disorder (2%). When it comes to hazardous drinking, 6% of Australian 14-17 year-olds have consumed more than four standard drinks on a single occasion.

Challenging times, such as natural disasters, exams, family conflict, or friendship breakdowns, can heighten stress. For some people, certain times of year are more stressful, such as the summer holidays.

The link between mental illness and alcohol/drug use

Mental illness and alcohol/drug use can often occur together. Some young people use alcohol or other drugs in an attempt to reduce or cope with low mood, anxiety or stress. Young people who experience mental illness have a higher risk of experimenting with alcohol and drugs and developing risky patterns of use. Understanding that mental illness and alcohol/drug use often go together is important when considering the best ways to support a young person. Exploring the reasons behind alcohol and drug use can help you identify other issues or concerns that the young person may need support with. As mental illness and alcohol or other drug use can make each other worse, helping the young person access effective support for both issues is important to break the cycle.

Symptoms of common mental illnesses

The table below lists the most common symptoms of mental illnesses that may be experienced by young people. Many young people feel stressed, worried, panicky, hopeless, or distressed at some point in their lives. It is important to provide a safe space for young people to talk about these concerns and seek further assistance from a general practitioner (GP), counsellor, or psychologist; particularly if the symptoms are severe, frequent, or persistent.

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 differ in who they turn to during difficult times. The three most common sources for support are parents, friends, and health professionals. Below are some tips and strategies you can use if you are worried that a young person you know might be experiencing mental illness and/or alcohol or other drug problems.

Find an appropriate time to talk

- Pick a space where the young person feels safe in a comfortable and familiar environment.
- Try to pick a time when they are likely to be calm, receptive, and not distracted by other things.

Mention specific things that you are concerned about

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

Be empathetic and non-judgemental

Make sure you have the time to listen to the young person.

- You are more likely to get through to the young person if you have a two-way conversation.
- Avoid using judgemental 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

- Understanding the type of support a young person wants from you is an important step.
- **Communicate that change is possible, and effective help is available.** Tell them that you will support them to find the right help when they are ready.
- If they don't feel like talking to you then you can encourage them to talk to another trusted adult instead.

Follow up at a later date and check in to see how they are doing

- Think of this conversation as a starting point for ongoing conversations about the young person's mental health.
- Be aware that the decision to seek professional support or make changes can take time. A negative reaction does not mean the conversation was futile – it may take some time for them to process what has been said.
- It is important that the young person knows that you are available to talk again. Ask "permission" to check in with the person again in a week, or a fortnight, etc., to see how they are going.

Encourage activities and behaviours to stay mentally healthy

- Activities might include scheduling time for fun with family and friends, getting active, keeping a thoughts and feelings diary, and getting a good night's sleep.

Professional help

Depending on the severity and situation it might be important to encourage the young person to seek professional help.

- Be positive about the help professionals can provide and suggest they speak with a school counsellor or a GP.
- You can also encourage 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

Kids Helpline
1800 55 1800
kidshelpline.com.au

Beyond Blue
1300 22 4636
Online Chat

Headspace
Online and phone support

13YARN
13 92 76
13yarn.org.au

QLife
1800 184 527
qlife.org.au/

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

You can also find more tips in our starting the conversation when you are concerned about drug and alcohol use factsheet or Beyond Blue's how to talk to someone you're worried about factsheet.

Evidence Base

This factsheet was developed following expert review by researchers at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use at the University of Sydney. A full list of sources which informed this factsheet can be seen below.

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