

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet:

Understanding the Problem : **Mental Illness**

At some stage in their life, around one in five Australians will experience mental health problems.¹ These illnesses may vary from mild to severe, and from temporary to long lasting. Most people will fully recover, but a small number may experience many years of difficulties and hardship.

Having a mental illness can be very distressing for the affected person and their family, friends and carers. It is not just the experience of the illness itself that is difficult. Community response and concern for people with a mental illness has not always been positive or helpful.

The good news is that things are changing. Mental health and wellbeing, particularly in relation to young people, has benefited from increased attention in recent years. This is due to a focus on important issues such as depression, substance use and suicide, and the recognition that these problems often begin around the time of adolescence.

Help and support, however, can still be very difficult to come by. This help sheet offers some information and ideas about mental illness, who can help and what to do.

What is a mental illness?

The term "mental illness" refers to a wide range of difficulties that may include problems coping with feelings, relationships and everyday activities and distorted thinking. A formal diagnosis by a medical practitioner, psychiatrist or psychologist is necessary to find out the specific mental illness or psychiatric disorder that a young person is experiencing.

When someone talks about having 'mental health problems' in a general way, this may mean that no formal psychiatric diagnosis has been made yet or that no specific diagnosis has been arrived at. It may be that the person is experiencing some mental health symptoms or difficulties, for example, some anxiety, depression, erratic or unpredictable behaviour. When no diagnosis is suitable, problems may be less severe and for more brief periods. Or the person may have a 'personality disorder' and limited treatment is available.

Most people will experience some mental health problem at some stage in their life. This may be due to common stressors or a significant event. This may be due to common stressors like relationship breakdown, job loss, post-natal depression, having a child with a disability or other significant changes. The mental health symptoms may vary in degree, duration and in how much they affect everyday functioning.

It is important to mention that intellectual disability is different to mental or psychiatric illnesses. An intellectual disability involves difficulties with a person's ability to

comprehend and learn. An intellectual disability may be present from birth or it may arise through damage to the brain. A person may have an intellectual disability and psychiatric disability or mental health difficulties. This is referred to as a 'dual-disability'.

What are the different types of mental illnesses?

Some mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder (previously called manic-depressive disorder), may involve a person experiencing psychosis. When someone is psychotic, they may have any of the following symptoms:

- trouble understanding things
- disturbed thinking, often with paranoid ideas
- seeing, hearing or feeling things that aren't actually there

There are other symptoms as well and the person may not be aware that they are having difficulties.

Other mental illnesses experienced by young people include eating disorders such as: anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, anxiety and depression and a small percentage of young people are diagnosed with personality disorders.

Young people aged between 18-24 years of age are most commonly diagnosed with substance use disorders (particularly males) and anxiety and depression (particularly females).²

1. National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (1997).

2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2003) Australia's Young People: Their Health and Wellbeing <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/health/ayp99/>



Tips from this Section

- The term “mental illness” refers to a wide range of difficulties that may include problems coping with feelings, relationships and everyday activities and distorted thinking.
- Most people will experience some mental health problem at some stage in their life. This may be due to common stressors or a significant event.
- Young people aged between 18-24 years of age are most commonly diagnosed with substance use disorders (particularly males) and anxiety and depression (particularly females).



Useful Resources

- www.sane.org
For information on mental illnesses, click on ‘Information’>‘Factsheets’
- www.mifellowship.org/understanding_facts.htm
A range of fact sheets on understanding different mental illnesses
- www.adavic.org.au
For information on anxiety (in particular go to ‘Health Tips’ and Info Sheets’).
- www.depressionet.com.au
www.beyondblue.org.au
For information on depression
- www.schizophrenia.com
For information on schizophrenia
- www.crisisline.org.au
For information about the crisis line service and on different topics

Suicidal Behaviour

What is suicidal behaviour?

“Suicidal behaviour” is a term used to describe any activities related to self-harm or suicide. These include suicidal thoughts, hurting one-self without intending to die, suicide attempts and death by suicide.

These behaviours occur in people with and without mental illnesses. There is strong evidence, however, that people with a mental illness are at a higher risk of suicide.¹

All threats and suicide attempts should be taken very seriously. Whether or not the young person actually intends to kill themselves can be very difficult to assess but the behaviours should be considered ‘a cry for help’ and responded to immediately and appropriately with care and concern. The young person may not see that they have options available to them to solve their difficulties. They need professional support to deal with the issues that are troubling them.

If a person needs support to deal with thoughts or feelings about suicide, they can:

- Call a telephone support line, available 24 hours per day: Life-Line (Ph: **131114**)
Crisis Line (Ph: **1800 019 116**).
- Talk to their doctor or another health professional.

If the threat is serious, and the person has a suicide “plan”, get help immediately. Call the Crisis Assessment and Treatment (CAT) team at your nearest hospital or the Police.

As a parent

Some of the ways in which you may be able to help your young person, in a non-crisis situation, are as follows:

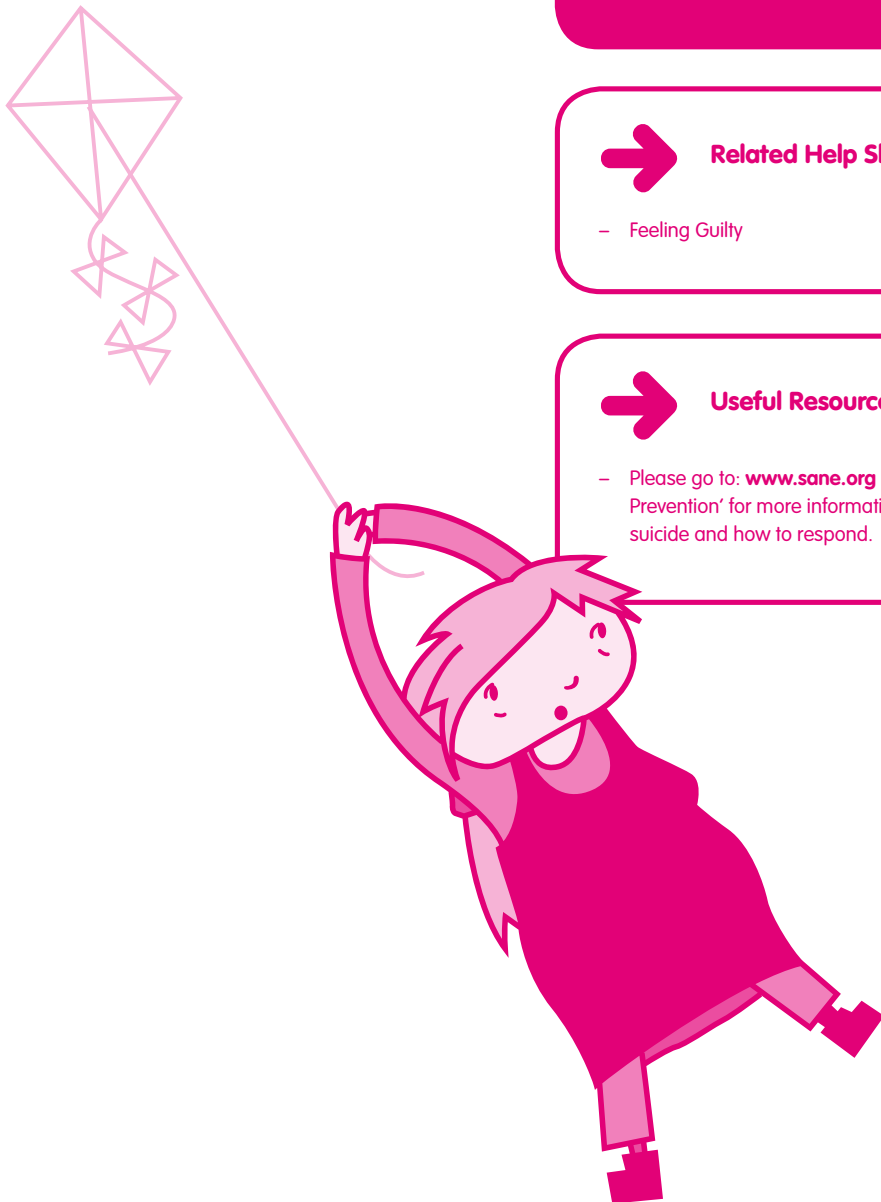
- You could explore their feelings and thoughts about what is going on for them, in a respectful, gentle and non-judgemental manner.
- Encourage them to get help, for example, by saying ‘I am worried about you and think it is important for you to speak to someone about how you are feeling’.
- You can offer to go with them to talk to someone more about their feelings.
- You can suggest they call one of the phone numbers above.
- Tell them you are concerned about their safety and that you will call the Crisis Assessment Team at your local hospital or the police if necessary. Let the young person know that you will need to involve someone other than yourself to ensure their safety. This takes the responsibility away from you and places it with the young person and with the help of a highly qualified crisis worker.

Are they just attention-seeking?

At times people's threats to hurt themselves may seem to be an attempt to get attention, to make someone feel guilty or to make someone else feel responsible for them. It can be hard to know if the threat is manipulation or a genuine threat. Therefore, all threats of suicide must always be taken seriously.

Once there is no imminent threat or crisis, it may help to gently and carefully:

- suggest some steps they could take that may help to make things better for themselves.
- speak to them about learning to take responsibility for their own feelings and what happens in their lives
- maintain your boundaries and explain why you need to.



Tips from this Section

- 'Suicidal behaviour' describes any activities related to self-harm or suicide.
- Threats, suicide attempts and suicidal behaviours should be considered a 'cry for help' and responded to immediately.
- If the threat is serious and immediate the Crisis Assessment Team or the police should be called immediately.
- As a parent you can assist your child in a non-crisis situation by exploring what is going on for them and encouraging them to seek professional help.



Related Help Sheet

- Feeling Guilty



Useful Resources

- Please go to: www.sane.org and click on 'Suicide Prevention' for more information on risk factors for suicide and how to respond.

What causes mental illness?

The underlying causes of mental illness are not well understood. Mental illness is unlikely to be caused by a single factor. It is more likely to be the outcome of a combination of factors over time.

Research shows that a person is slightly more at risk of developing a mental health problem, if someone else in their family has had a mental illness. There may be a genetic or hereditary predisposition involved in getting a mental illness in some cases.

Other factors that may trigger the development of symptoms of mental illness include: stressful events, substance abuse or traumatic early life experiences.

Dual-diagnosis – drug use and mental health problems

Some people with mental health difficulties and in particular young people, may use drugs to “self-medicate”. For example, some young people try to deal with their anxiety or depression by using illicit drugs. They may or may not be aware that they have underlying mental health issues. At other times, people who use drugs develop mental health difficulties triggered by their drug use.

Drug use can trigger psychosis in some people who are vulnerable, for example by smoking marijuana or using amphetamines (speed). Usually drug-induced psychosis is associated with the use of large quantities of a drug or drugs, over a long time.

Sometimes it is difficult to know whether the mental illness or drug use came first. Either way, both issues need to be addressed at the same time by treatment workers who specialise in treating both drug problems and mental health issues. (See below: Dual-Diagnosis Teams).

Is it their fault?

Mental illness should be thought of in a similar way to physical illness. It is often harder to understand or respond to mental illness, because you can’t “see” it. But this doesn’t mean that there is nothing wrong or that it is easily fixed. It is not the person’s fault that they are having difficulties and they need to be shown understanding rather than judgement or blame. They may need to be supported to gain suitable treatment and answers may not be straightforward.

Very often there is a stigma attached to people with mental illnesses, due to misunderstandings. People with a mental illness are often very concerned about what other people will think of them. They often have very low self-esteem, feel very different to others and alone. Family members and peers sometimes think that the person with the mental health problem should just “snap out of it”, which is neither realistic nor helpful.

It is good to try to get as much information as you can about what you or your family member may be experiencing. Please refer to the websites listed below or contact your local Community Health Service or local community mental health clinic.



Tips from this Section

- Mental illness is unlikely to be caused by a single factor. It is more likely to be the outcome of a combination of factors over time.
- Factors that may trigger the onset of symptoms of mental illness include stressful life events, substance use, traumatic early life experiences or a genetic or hereditary predisposition.
- Some people with a mental illness use drugs to self-medicate. Alternatively, some people who use drugs develop mental health symptoms as a result of their drug use.
- Often there is a stigma associated with having a mental illness and people who have mental health problems often feel isolated and have low self-esteem.
- Mental illness should be thought of in a similar way to physical illness. People with a mental illness should be shown understanding, rather than judgement and blame.



Related Help Sheet

- [Need a Helping Hand?](#)



Useful Resources

- www.sane.org
For information on mental illnesses, click on ‘Information’>‘Factsheets’
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A range of fact sheets on understanding different mental illnesses
- www.adavic.org.au
For information on anxiety (in particular go to ‘Health Tips’ and Info Sheets’).
- www.depressionet.com.au
www.beyondblue.org.au
For information on depression
- www.schizophrenia.com
For information on schizophrenia

How do I know if it's a mental illness?

'Normal' emotional times

All of us have strong feelings at different times that may be hard to cope with. Strong feelings of fear, sadness, grief and anger sometimes seem to consume us. Our moods can change quickly for different reasons such as: stress, illness, hormonal changes, change of seasons, a relationship breakdown, the death of someone close to us, unemployment, accidents, abuse, isolation or drug use. Sometimes it is a matter of coping as best we can, as we slowly recover.

Young people as they go through different developmental stages and hormone changes usually experience mood swings and fluctuating emotions.

If however you suspect that your child is experiencing more than the normal mood swings associated with adolescent development and that they may be experiencing symptoms of a mental illness, it is best to seek advice and support earlier rather than later.

- If you are concerned about your child's mental health, talk about the symptoms your young person is exhibiting with your doctor or another health professional and discuss whether your child needs a mental health assessment.
- Encourage your child to seek assistance or an assessment from a mental health professional eg: doctors, counsellors or other mental health services, if you feel this is necessary.
- Find out more information about mental illnesses and treatment approaches from websites, books and television programs.
- Seek support from family and friends

Mental Health Symptoms

When a mental illness or a psychiatric disorder is diagnosed, it means someone has the symptoms that "match" this particular disorder. Many people experience mental health symptoms or difficulties, such as anxiety or depression, without meeting all the criteria necessary for the diagnosis of a psychiatric disorder. Even though there has not been a formal diagnosis, coping with the symptoms may be very hard for everyone involved. If you are concerned, it is important to seek professional advice about the severity of the problem.

Assessment

Getting a psychiatric assessment completed can be very beneficial. It can help the young person and their family to understand the problem and lead to getting helpful treatment. An assessment does not necessarily lead to a diagnosis or label. It does not necessarily mean the person will be given medication.

Some people fear having a mental health assessment completed in case they are told they are "crazy" and then "locked up". But the days of putting young people who experience mental health symptoms into institutions are long gone. Responses to mental health issues have changed a lot in recent years. It is more likely that your young person and you will be given useful information and strategies will be suggested to relieve the symptoms they are experiencing. Medication may be recommended and if the condition is serious, this treatment may be monitored by a community mental health team.

When a young person has a mental health assessment, they will usually be asked numerous questions about their symptoms, their thoughts and feelings, their family history, their social life and their education and employment history.

The purpose of the assessment is to help the practitioner gain an understanding of the history, frequency and severity of the symptoms and also of factors that may be contributing to the illness. A diagnosis is then usually made and a treatment approach recommended.

If the young person does not understand what it all means, he or she needs to ask the professional to explain their diagnosis and recommendations carefully in simple language. It is important that they understand what is being said, so they can make informed choices with your help and support. Mental health professionals should always be prepared to explain their conclusions in language that young people can understand.



Tips from this Section

- Many young people experience mental health symptoms or difficulties without meeting all the criteria necessary for a formal diagnosis of mental illness.
- A young person who is experiencing mental health symptoms may benefit from a psychiatric assessment. An assessment can help the young person and their family to understand what is happening to them and may help them to get treatment.
- During the assessment, you and your young person will be asked questions about the history, frequency and severity of the symptoms and possible contributing factors.
- It is important that the diagnosis and treatment plan are explained in language that the young person understands, so they can make informed choices about managing their symptoms.



Related Help Sheet

- What are the Different types of Mental Illnesses?

Diagnosis and who can help?

If your young person is having trouble coping with everyday activities, for a significant period of time, or dealing with very difficult thoughts and emotions, it is always worth talking to a professional who specialises in mental health care such as: a doctor, a social worker employed in the mental health field, a psychologist or a psychiatrist.

At times it is clear that there is something seriously not right with how the person is thinking, coping or behaving. At other times you may just need reassurance that everything is ok.

Your Doctor

A doctor is often a good first point of call. They have some knowledge of mental health symptoms and illnesses, including the impact of drug use on a person's mental health. They may be able to make a diagnosis or they may refer the young person to a specialist mental health practitioner for a more thorough assessment.

Psychiatrists

Psychiatrists are trained to conduct mental health or psychiatric assessments and to identify whether or not there are signs or symptoms of mental illness. They will make a diagnosis of a mental illness or psychiatric disorder if appropriate.

Psychiatrists can prescribe medications and monitor treatment. They may also be trained in some form of psychotherapy ("talking treatments"), in order to deal with past experiences and thoughts and feelings. There are psychiatrists employed in government funded mental health clinics and public hospitals that are low cost. Private psychiatrists work in their own practice and generally charge higher fees (see below: Public versus Private).

Psychologists, social workers, and others in the health and welfare fields

These professionals also assist people with mental health difficulties. Most will have some knowledge and skills in dealing with mental health symptoms and illnesses and will know appropriate specialist mental health services to refer a young person to if necessary.

Psychologists

Psychologists are not medically trained and therefore do not prescribe medications. Most psychologists, however, do have good skills in working with people with mental health difficulties and in cases where the young person has been diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder. Psychologists tend to use strategies such as counselling or therapy to assist their clients to understand their problems in different ways and to cope better with them.

Clinical Psychologists

Clinical psychologists specialise in mental health issues, and are qualified to assess, diagnose and treat psychiatric disorders or serious psychological difficulties. They are likely

to work in conjunction with psychiatrists, who are able to prescribe medications where necessary.

Counselling/Psychological Work/Psychotherapy

There are different approaches or methods of psychological work including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Family Therapy and Psychodynamic therapy. The terms counselling and therapy may mean the same thing, although sometimes psychotherapy is used to refer to therapy which is deeper in nature, and aims to address more long-standing, childhood, and unconscious issues. For more information and contacts please refer to: **Need a Helping Hand? : Private Practitioners.**

Public versus Private Practitioners

Psychiatrists, Psychologists, Social Workers, Counsellors and other health professionals may work for an agency or organisation, for example, the government mental health (psychiatric) service. Alternatively, they may work in their own private practice.

There are usually no, or quite low, fees for services within the public health system, community health services or community counselling agencies. In some agencies fees are means-tested and you might be asked to pay some money depending on the level of your income. Fees for private practice may be quite high. Private health cover may cover some of the costs, depending on your level of cover. You may ask to negotiate the fee.

The quality of private or public services may or may not differ. Some benefits of seeing a private practitioner include: they may be able to work with you on a long-term basis and there may be less likelihood of a worker changing.

Your doctor may refer you to someone or you may see: **'Need a Helping Hand?'** to find out about services available.

Doctors or General Practitioners

General practitioners can prescribe some psychiatric medications but psychiatrists have completed both the qualification to be a doctor as well as specialised training in assessing and treating psychiatric illnesses and usually have more detailed knowledge and understanding of mental illnesses. Doctors can refer to psychiatrists and other professionals and services as needed.

A combination of services is most helpful

Often with a mental illness, medication, counselling and other support are all important to assist the person in recovery. Depending on the type and extent of an illness, some people may manage to get better on their own, often with the support of family and friends or other strategies they have found helpful. However if the illness is serious and severe, formal diagnosis and treatment is usually required.

Support Services Available

Along with the professionals described above, there are other support services available for people with mental illnesses and for those who are affected by someone with a mental illness such as family members, friends and carers.



Tips from this Section

- There are a range of health professionals who can assist a young person experiencing mental health symptoms. They include: doctors psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and mental health nurses.
- Mental health services may be accessed through the public or private health sectors.
- Accessing a combination of services such as counselling, medication and other support services is often beneficial for a person with a serious mental illness.
- Family, friends and carers can often provide invaluable support for a person with a mental illness.



Related Help Sheet

- **Need a Helping Hand? Support Services for young people with mental health difficulties**

Support Services for young people with mental health difficulties

Local Mental Health or Psychiatric Services

Services are often based at a hospital or local community health centre or a community mental health clinic. These services provide Psychiatric assessments, diagnosis and treatment. Treatment can include prescribed medication and the support of case-managers. A case-manager is usually a social worker or mental health nurse who works with patients to ensure that they are taking their medication and that the medication is helping them to stabilize or recover. They are there to assist patients in a crisis, to support them and to link them into additional services as required.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) exist for young people up to the age of 18 years. Adult Psychiatric Services are available for people over 18 years of age. In some cases the age criteria may vary slightly depending on the situation. These services have limited resources and demand for service is high.

CAMHS tend to assess children or young people only when there is the possibility of serious emotional/psychological problems. Once they have accepted a referral for a child or young person, CAMHS will usually involve the family in treatment.

Generally speaking, adult mental health services also only assess someone if there are serious problems involved, in particular psychosis. They tend to provide services for people with who are fairly unstable, have significant difficulty with daily functioning and who lack other supports. They may make exceptions if there are strong grounds, for example, repeated suicide attempts, and if there is support from other professionals. If they do not agree to undertake an assessment or case-management of a person, they may refer them elsewhere for assessment and treatment, for example, to a private psychiatrist or another support service.

To contact your local CAMHS or Adult Psychiatric Service for further information, try this website: www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/index.htm

Type in your suburb then click on the type of service you are after (Adult, Child, Aged or Disability) for contact details.

Crisis Assessment and Treatment Teams (CAT Teams)

CAT teams are also a part of local Psychiatric Services and are often hospital-based. These teams will visit someone when there is a mental health crisis. They will try to respond to requests for assistance in the following situations:

- if a person with a mental illness is posing a risk to themselves or to someone else via threats or attempts of suicide or violence.
- if a person is highly psychotic or out of touch with reality.
- if an immediate response needed.

These teams may be contacted by anyone, including the person themselves, family or friends, police, doctors or other professionals. The team will decide, based on the information provided, if they will respond or not. It can be difficult to get them to respond, due to their limited resources and tendency to see only the extreme cases, but it is definitely important to call if a young person is threatening suicide or self-harm.

Police are often a good first point of call if there is a crisis, and they will involve the CAT team as needed. They can take someone voluntarily or involuntarily to a hospital for psychiatric assessment. The CAT team often involve the police to maximise the safety of all.

CAT teams usually only stay involved for a short time. They may refer the patient to a private psychiatrist or other mental health service for ongoing monitoring. Alternatively, they may organise assessment and case management from Psychiatric Services for ongoing support. The involvement of the CAT team does not necessarily mean a person will be admitted to hospital for treatment, although it could lead to this.

If your child has both mental health and drug problems and you need to contact the CAT because your child is in crisis, it is important to make clear your concerns about your family member's mental health and their safety. This is to ensure that they are not excluded from receiving emergency services from the CAT team because their problems are solely attributed to drug use (please see Dual Diagnosis Teams below).

To contact your local CAT Team, you could try this website: www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/index.htm

Type in your suburb then click on the type of service you are after (Adult, Child, Aged or Disability), for contact details.

Or contact your local public hospital in the white telephone pages, or your local Community Health Service for information.

Adolescent Mobile Assessment and Treatment Teams

In recognition that young people may relate better to a more relaxed and less formal approach, these teams have been set up and can come out to visit the young person and provide a particularly youth-friendly service. These teams are available in most regions' CAMHS.

To contact your local CAMHS, you could try this website: www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/index.htm

Type in your suburb then click on the type of service you are after (Adult, Child, Aged or Disability) for contact details.

Psychiatric Wards in Hospitals

Psychiatric Wards are for people who are deemed to be at serious and immediate risk to themselves or others, due to their illness. People may be admitted voluntarily or involuntarily.

Hospital stays are usually short-term. Often families or the person with the serious mental health illness need 'time out' or 'intensive support' and a hospital stay may provide this respite and relief. Government funded in-patient services are very limited so only people considered as 'high risk' and 'high need' will be admitted. There are a few private in-patient psychiatric clinics in Victoria but you need private health insurance to cover the cost of treatment in these clinics.

For young people under the age of about 16 years, there are in-patient units available for CAMHS clients with serious mental health or behavioural issues. These units provide intensive care and treatment for children or young people in the short-term to enhance their functioning and wellbeing.

You could make contact with your local Psychiatric Service via this website: www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/index.htm

Type in your suburb then click on the type of service you are after (Adult, Child, Aged or Disability), for contact details.

Or contact your local hospital via your White pages telephone Directory, or www.whitepages.com.au.

Dual-Diagnosis Teams

Dual Diagnosis is when someone has a psychiatric or mental illness as well as an Alcohol or Other Drug (AOD) use problem.

Dual-Diagnosis teams have been established in all regions in Victoria and are often based at a hospital. The Dual-Diagnosis Teams work with professionals in both the Alcohol and Drug sector and the Psychiatric Services sector, to promote quality care for people with both drug and mental health difficulties. This is in recognition of the fact that people with both mental health and drug use difficulties generally have poorer outcomes than people with only one of these two difficulties.

The Dual Diagnosis teams usually provide advice to the workers already involved with a young person on how to deal with the young person's drug and mental health issues. In some cases they may assess and provide short-term treatment directly with the young person or adult with the difficulties but often their role is to provide advice to workers and staff training.

These teams are accessed through your local Psychiatric or AOD Service. You could try this website: www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/index.htm

Type in your suburb then click on the type of service you are after (Adult, Child, Aged or Disability), for contact details.

Primary Mental Health

Primary Mental Health Teams are available to provide advice and assistance to doctors who are treating patients with Anxiety or Depression issues. Doctors access their services for advice about medication, treatment strategies and support services.

Discuss their involvement with your doctor.

Other Support Services and Associations

There are organisations that specialise in offering support to people with specific mental health difficulties and to their families. For further information, you could try these websites:

www.sane.org

www.adavic.org.au
for anxiety

www.depressionnet.com.au
www.beyondblue.org.au
for depression

www.schizophrenia.com
for schizophrenia

www.arafemi.org.au
a service for carers. They can provide information and support for you and your family member.

www.spectrum-bpd.com
Spectrum is a limited service providing support and assistance to people with borderline personality disorder, including a residential program.

Other Support Services

Some community organisations offer day programs with various activities and groups for people with mental illnesses, as well as counselling or other supports. You can find out more from your local Psychiatric Service or local council or community health service.

Contact your local Psychiatric Services through this website: www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/index.htm

Type in your suburb then click on the type of service you are after (Adult, Child, Aged or Disability), for contact details.

Accommodation Services

Some services are funded to provide accommodation for people with mental illnesses. The accommodation may cater for independent living or offer support from professional staff.

For young people approximately 16 to 25 years, there are supported accommodation options. Staff are present during business hours or sometimes twenty-four hours. Some support and activities to assist with practical living are provided. There can be significant waiting lists for places but it is definitely worth exploring if your young person is in need of supported accommodation.

It can be highly beneficial for young people, when the time is right, to live independently from family. Living independently can help them take more responsibility for their own lives.

Contact your local Psychiatric Services: www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/index.htm

Type in your suburb then click on the type of service you are after (Adult, Child, Aged or Disability), for contact details.

Employment Assistance Services

Some agencies are funded to assist people with mental health difficulties to obtain suitable training or employment. These agencies may be accessed via a Centrelink Social Worker, or try this website: www.centrelink.gov.au for more information or call **132 717**.



Support Services for families

There are support services for parents and carers, and sometimes children or siblings, of people with mental health difficulties. See:

- Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria (previously the Schizophrenia Fellowship) provides support for people with mental health difficulties and their families. Website: www.mifellowship.org Ph: **848 64200**
- ARAFEMI also provides support for people with mental illnesses and their families and provides carer newsletters and groups. Website: www.arafemi.org.au Ph: **9810 9300**
- The Public Advocates Office can take responsibility for the legal, financial, guardianship and accommodation needs of people with disabilities when they are unable to care for themselves and their family are unable to take responsibility for them. This office may be of assistance if your family member is not functioning well enough to be able to take their medication as directed or to manage their lives including their money and health in a safe way. Website: www.statetrustees.com.au Ph: **9667 6444**

What else can you do?

As carer

As a parent or carer, it can be very difficult to support a child or young person with a mental illness, especially if the young person does not accept or understand that they have a problem, or won't accept assessment or treatment.

Inform yourself

It is important to learn as much as you can about mental illness, so that you know what you are dealing with and you are aware of the supports and services available to you and your family.

They need to manage their lives

Although this may be hard to accept, a young person's wellbeing is largely not within your control anymore. Even when it comes to managing their mental health, unless urgent intervention is required, they have to come to the realisation that they need to take responsibility for keeping themselves well.

For example, if your young person has asthma, you can't usually stop them from smoking cigarettes, which may jeopardise their health. You can't usually make them take Ventolin as a preventative measure, and you can't ensure that they have bought and carry it with them in case of emergency. You can try to tell them the benefits of these things, and encourage them to do them, but in the end, they are the ones who will make the choices in their lives.

This can be so hard for parents to accept, especially when you have done everything you could when they were growing up, to keep them healthy, seeking medical attention

when they needed it, etc. Now it is up to them and it can be very distressing to watch them neglect their health and wellbeing.

Change your expectations

A mental health issue will impact on your child's functioning, that is, how they think and what they are able to do. It may be important for you to consider changing your expectations. Things such as full-time work or study may be too hard and too demanding for them at the moment – perhaps a casual job or short course may be more realistic for them.

Grief

You may feel grief if your expectations and hopes for your child's life have had to change. The same is probably true for your child and their hopes for their own life. It may be particularly hard for them (and for you) if they see their school friends finish school, get a job, get into university or experience a relationship, if they feel they are a long way from being able to achieve that.

Support networks

It can be useful to try to encourage the young person to connect with other people, including friends, professionals and services. Others outside the immediate family may develop a relationship with your child whereby the child respects what they have to say and the person may encourage them to pay attention to their health and wellbeing. Sometimes young people respond better to someone other than their parents, when it comes to managing their health.

Good Parenting

Refer to the other help sheets available to help you with good parenting strategies, such as setting boundaries. These skills recommended in these sheets are relevant to parenting a young person with a mental illness.

Look after yourself

This may be a long-term difficulty, so it is important to look after yourself and take time to relax and manage the stress in your own life.

Encouragement

Your child will benefit from you encouraging them to take small steps towards their recovery and make small achievements. You can express hope for them, while at the same time helping them have realistic expectations that recovery may take time and there will be ups and downs along the way.



Tips from this Section

- Supporting a child with a mental illness can be very difficult. Accessing resources and information may assist you to understand the illness and to access the supports and treatment required.
- Mental illness affects functioning, therefore expectations and hopes for the future may have to change.
- It is useful to try to encourage your young person to connect with other people, including friends, professionals and services.
- It is important to look after yourself and to take time to relax. Carers need to prioritise some time for themselves.



Related Help Sheet

- [Setting Boundaries](#)
- [When your Life is on Hold](#)



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→ **Strong Bonds is a project of Jesuit Social Services.**

Jesuit Social Services work cooperatively with others to engage disadvantaged individuals, families and communities and the wider society to promote health and wellbeing and to address social exclusion.

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