Tips for Parents about Mental Health

Adolescence is a time of change and it can be hard to tell the difference between ‘normal teenage behaviour’ and what might indicate a problem with their mental health. While the majority of adolescents do not have problems with their mental health, some of the statistics below highlight the need for us to be aware of the potential for such difficulties.

- In Australia, 160,000 young people (16-24 years) live with depression and around one in six young people have anxiety.
- Mental disorders are the leading factor to the total burden of disease among young Australians.
- Adolescents with mental health problems report a high rate of suicidal thoughts and other health-risk behaviour, such as smoking, drinking and drug use.
- Only one out of every four young persons with mental health problems receive professional health care.

If your son or daughter shows any warning signs of problems with their mental health, getting help early can improve their wellbeing. It can also help to stop the problems happening again when they become adults.

Warning signs of depression and anxiety

Depression doesn’t just cause sadness or feeling blue, and anxiety doesn’t just make people worry. Young people can express depression and anxiety in many different ways. They might:

- have trouble falling or staying asleep, or spend much of the day in bed
- be tired, grumpy, irritable, tearful or upset most of the time
- feel restless, keyed up or on edge
- lose interest in things they used to enjoy, and have trouble starting and completing assignments or work
- lose concentration and be forgetful and easily distracted
- become withdrawn and lose friends
- be worried and panicky about doing anything out of the ordinary
- either refuse to eat or eat a lot
- complain of feeling physically awful, with unexplained aches and pains, and not want to go to school

Offering support

If your son or daughter shows some of the warning signs described above, you could start by trying to get them to talk about their feelings.

Your son or daughter may find it awkward discussing their thoughts and emotions openly with you. They may get angry when you ask if they’re okay. Try to stay calm, be firm, fair and consistent and don’t lose control. If you are wrong about something, admit it.

As well as offering your support and showing that you understand and care, it’s a good idea to encourage your son or daughter to eat healthily, be active, and get enough sleep. While we would all like to see our young people do well at school, try to avoid putting pressure on them to get top marks as this will only increase their stress levels.

If a young person does not appear comfortable talking about these issues with you, you could suggest they approach someone from the School Wellbeing Team. You may also like to contact the school yourself to discuss your concerns.

Encouraging your son or daughter to see a General Practitioner (GP) is another option. The GP will want to talk to you about your view of the problem, but should speak to your teenager alone as well – he or she may then feel more able to open up about things like social drug use and sexual history.

Teenagers who resist seeing someone may prefer to ring Lifeline or Kids Help Line, as this is anonymous and can be less confronting.

You may find some of the following websites / contacts helpful.

- Mental Health Triage Service – 5022 3500
- Kids Helpline – 1800 551 800
- Lifeline – 13 11 14
- www.ybblue.com.au
- www.headspace.org.au
- www.reachout.com.au

If you are concerned about your teenager, don’t give up trying to access assistance and support for them.