



**headspace**

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# Position Paper – young people’s mental health

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# Young people's mental health

## the issue

Mental health is the number one health issue facing young Australians aged 12 to 25 and contributes to almost half the burden of disease in this age group.

The current mental health system is not well designed or resourced for young people with emerging mental ill health. This means they often do not obtain timely treatment and have difficulty finding a service responsive to their needs. Many young people are not aware of the signs and symptoms of mental illness and do not have the skills to help themselves or their friends. The stigma attached to both mental illness and suicide is highly prevalent and a further barrier to effective service use.

Innovative approaches are needed to reduce the burden associated with young people's mental health problems. Access to timely, appropriate and affordable treatment that is youth friendly and holistic is imperative, alongside programs to support recovery. Early intervention models such as **headspace**, which focus on identifying and responding to the early signs and symptoms, need continued and increased investment so that all young Australians have access to appropriate care.

## evidence

- Mental ill health is the number one health issue facing young Australians. Mental disorders are more prevalent for young people aged 16-24 than any other age group, and affect 26 per cent of young Australians in any year [1].
- Anxiety and depression are the most common mental health problems [2]. For example, anxiety disorders are estimated to affect about one in every 10 young people aged 18-24 years [3].
- Mental ill health contributes to nearly half of the burden of disease in young people and 75 per cent of mental health problems occur before the age of 25 [4, 5]. More severe disorders are typically preceded by less severe disorders that are rarely brought to clinical attention. By age 21, just over half of young people will have experienced a diagnosable psychiatric disorder.
- Suicide accounts for 17.8 per cent of deaths in the 15-19 year age group and nearly a quarter of all deaths in the 20-24 year age group [6]. Suicide rates in Indigenous young men are nearly four times higher than those who are non-Indigenous [7].
- The 2007 Australian National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing found that although young people have higher rates of mental disorder they are less likely than other age groups to seek professional help; only 31 per cent of young women and 13 per cent of young men with mental health problems had sought any professional help [1].
- A recent longitudinal study has shown that mental health problems that commence in young adulthood have important long-term vocational consequences, including reduced workforce participation, lower income and lower economic living standards at age 30 [8].
- Treating mental health problems during their early stage leads to improved treatment outcomes and prevention of future mental health problems [9].
- Young people are most likely to talk to friends or family members as the first step in seeking support, although these informal supports may be unsure of the best help options [10]. Studies of the health care needs and help-seeking behaviour of young people have identified multiple barriers to accessing health care. These include: transport, cost, negative attitudes of staff towards young people, lack of knowledge about services, concerns about confidentiality and trust, a belief that family and friends could help more than the health service, inadequately trained staff, previous negative experiences of health services, fears regarding confidentiality, the environment of the health service, and anxiety and embarrassment about disclosing issues [10, 11].
- Components of good practice in delivering health services to young people have been identified and include: being able to access services without appointments, assurance of confidentiality, promotion of health literacy to increase access, participant clarification of what the service does and what to expect from it as well as what is expected from the young person, monitoring young people's views of the service, and appropriate and smooth referrals [12, 13].

## position statements

- Mental health is as important as physical health and should receive comparable support and funding.
- Treating mental health problems at their early stages leads to improved treatment outcomes and prevention of future mental health problems and associated disabilities. Further investment in early intervention models, such as **headspace**, is required.
- The stigma attached to mental illness can act as a barrier to young people accessing help and must be reduced to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young Australians.
- Providing appropriate, youth friendly, holistic and easily accessible services will encourage young people to get help and all young Australians should have access to such services. Currently 85 percent of young Australians do not have access to a **headspace** centre, which is not acceptable.
- Health services need to change the way that they offer and deliver health care and involve young people in the planning, if they are to address the health needs of young people.
- Mental health literacy needs to be addressed to improve help-seeking behaviour. Early recognition and timely and appropriate help-seeking will only occur if young people and their family and friends know about the signs and symptoms of mental illness, what services are available and how to access these services, and have a positive orientation to seeking help.
- A range of services are required to improve the mental health of young people including on-line and reach-out services.

## headspace recommends

- A substantial investment in mental health that reflects the disease burden for young people and is at least commensurate with the current investment in physical health.
- Reform in youth mental health services to provide holistic, integrated, youth friendly services that are accessible for all young Australians aged 12 to 25.
- Investment in early intervention models, like **headspace**, and an increase in the number of **headspace** centres—to at least 200 across Australia.
- The removal of barriers for young people accessing mental health and wellbeing services.
- The involvement for young people in the design and delivery of services for young people.
- More public awareness campaigns to increase understanding of and reduce stigma surrounding mental health.
- Improving help-seeking behaviour through mental health literacy programs, community awareness campaigns and further investment in gatekeeper training to improve the knowledge and skills of frontline workers.
- Federal and state and territory government investment in increasing expertise in youth mental health, including workforce strategies to ensure that there is a pool of suitably qualified professionals to provide services to young people.
- Greater incentives to encourage frontline workers such as GPs and psychologists to work with young people, including setting Medicare items for providing mental health services to young people at a higher level.

## headspace will

continue to advocate for improvements in the delivery of mental health services for young people.

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