

Queensland Health Fact sheet 7

Child and youth

Mental health concerns in children and young people

Definitions as used in this fact sheet

The Child and Youth Mental Health Service

(CYMHS – pronounced KIMS) provides free specialist mental health services for children and young people under 18 years of age, and their families. CYMHS offers treatment for depression, anxiety, eating disorders, suicidal or self-harming behaviours, psychosis, trauma and severe family relationship difficulties.

Referral to CYMHS may be made by a young person or their family, their general practitioner (GP), a youth worker, school guidance officer, Child Safety officers or other service providers. A GP may also refer the child to another health professional such as a clinical psychologist with experience in the particular issue, or a psychiatrist.

A **consumer** is a person who is accessing or has accessed a mental health service. Within the CYMHS context, both the parents and the child or young person may be described as consumers.

A **mental health carer** is a person who voluntarily provides ongoing care or assistance to another person who, because of mental health issues or psychiatric disability, requires assistance. Carers include parents, partners, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, guardians, siblings and/or friends.

Early intervention

Many people do not understand how a mental health issue may start, or what impact it may have. This means that mental illness is less likely to be openly discussed amongst parents and school communities. However, as with physical illness, early intervention is the key and the sooner the problem is addressed by a health professional, as well as the child, their carer and family and, if appropriate, their school, the better the outcome.

Early warning signs

Many parents instinctively recognise when something is not quite right with their child. Although it is tempting to hope that their emotional or behavioural problems will resolve themselves, it is wise to seek advice or assistance if a child has exhibited unusual behaviour for more than a few weeks.

Warning signs include unexplained or new changes in behaviour, feeling or thinking:

- Behavioural signs may include sleeping too much or too little; eating more or less; repetitive behaviour such as constant hand-washing; withdrawal from usual activities or friends; refusal to cooperate; aggression or bullying; and self-harming behaviour such as cutting or burning.
- Emotional (feeling) signs may include persistent sadness or depression; uncommon anxiety lasting more than a few weeks; reluctance to attend school; phobias (irrational or overwhelming fear such as a fear of spiders); and increased irritability or anger.
- Cognitive (thinking) signs may include a marked decline in school results; illogical or irrational thinking; delusions (an unshakeable belief in something that is not true); and visual or auditory hallucinations (seeing or hearing non-existent objects or voices).

Suicidal thinking, including talking about suicide, should always be taken seriously. It is advisable to consult your GP or mental health service urgently and it is also important to learn how you and other family members can help the child or young person through this challenging time.

Remember, each child is an individual. If you are at all concerned about their behaviour, talk to a GP or mental health professional.

Communicating with staff

Many families find working in partnership with the treating team is an effective way to see improvement. As a carer, you may be asked to attend regular meetings with the treating team. Your feedback and input are valued, since carers are in a good position to say how the child has been going between sessions. You may be asked for updates on their behaviour or mood and whether you have noticed any improvement from the specific therapies or medication. Any medication side effects should also be noted.

It is essential for you to be well informed and up to date. Over a period of time the child may have treatment from several mental health services and, since medical staff may also change within a health service, many carers find it helpful to keep their own accurate record of the consumer's medication, doses and side effects, which they update as changes occur.

Coping strategies for the family

Having a child diagnosed with a mental health problem is a highly emotional experience for most families. Many carers feel guilty, even though they are not to blame. Learning more about the illness, developing a good working relationship with the treating team, seeking support and focusing on your own needs as a carer can help you cope with the challenges you may face.

As a carer, you will still need to take some time out for your own rest, exercise, hobbies and friendships. It is vital to maintain the balance in your own life if you wish to provide effective, ongoing support to the consumer, without neglecting either the needs of other family members or the more common everyday issues.

Carer support groups are an important way to connect with other carers, who understand what you are experiencing. They can offer relevant, practical advice and can suggest useful and effective coping strategies. Other carers can also share their insights on how to explain the illness to other family members, siblings and friends, and can help you identify how you and other family members can support the consumer towards recovery, while also supporting one another.

Information

Call 1300 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) for the nearest CYMHS clinic or look in the White Pages under Queensland Health - Mental Health - Child and Youth Mental Health. Dial 000 in an emergency.

Information is available through CYMHS, your GP and your local library. The following websites may also be a helpful source of further information:

- Mental Health Carers ARAFMI Queensland Inc (ARAFMI) www.arafmiqld.org 1800 351 881 (24)
- Carers Queensland www.carersqld.asn.au or 1800 242 636
- Mental Illness Fellowship of Queensland www.mifa.org.au/mifq
- Royal Childrens Hospital CYMHS (07) 3310 9444 or www.health.qld.gov.au/rch/families/cymhs.asp
- Mater Childrens Hospital www.kidsinmind.org.au
- Parentline 1300 30 1300
- Children of parents with mental illness www.copmi.net.au
- Beyond Blue www.beyondblue.org.au and www.ybblue.com.au Phone 1300 22 4636
- Reach Out www.reachout.com.au
- Mental Health Council of Australia online carer forum www.mhca.org.au/consumers-carers
- Queensland Transcultural Mental Health Centre <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/pahospital/qtmhc/default.asp>
- Queensland Civil and Administration Tribunal and Guardianship and Administration Act 2000 www.qcat.qld.gov.au or 1300 753 228
- Commission for Children and Young people and Child Guardian www.ccydpcg.qld.gov.au/ 07 3211 6700 or 1800 688 275
- Commonwealth Respite and Carelink Centre 1800 052 222 or <http://www9.health.gov.au/ccsd/>

Additional information for carers can be found on the Queensland Health Carers Matter website at www.health.qld.gov.au/mhcarer

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