
SECTION SEVEN

Working with Young People with Mental Health Issues

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Introduction

This section focuses on young people who have mental health issues or problems. It presents demographics in relation to mental health, explains the varying needs and issues that young people may face and it offers practical advice on working with young people who have mental health issues. It concludes with a list of resources that will help you in your work.



Stigma

Due to the history of how we treated people who had poor mental health or those who were branded as outsiders in our society, services and supports for mental health have become stigmatised in Ireland. Traditionally in Ireland mental health was a topic that was not openly discussed and issues relating to a person's mental health were treated as taboo within families and society. Today, when discussing issues pertaining to mental health and wellbeing, people generally think of it in the context of mental illness, particularly adults.

However, the recent work of Headstrong and other organisations working with young

people, together with the work of Dáil na nÓg that has addressed the theme of mental health shows that young people are keen to explore how to improve mental health services and supports. The work of these, and other organisations, will hopefully work towards reducing the stigma surrounding mental health, thus leading to more openness in seeking help or discussing mental health issues.

Terminology

Good mental health is about having the skills to deal with everyday life – with relationships, with responsibilities and also with relaxing. When we feel confident, capable and able to cope in these situations we feel that we can live our life to the full and take on the challenges that we face on a regular basis. From time to time events in our life will cause us stress which may result in us feeling down. This is a natural reaction to difficult experiences such as the loss of someone close, being bullied or experiencing a setback in some part of our life. However if we have developed the skills and strategies to get us through these tough times we can learn from these experiences rather than allowing them completely overwhelm us.



Mental illness is a clinical term for a diagnosed mental health issue such as depression, an eating disorder or schizophrenia.

A **mental health problem/issue**ⁱ interferes with a person's cognitive, emotional and/or social abilities, but to a lesser extent than a mental illness. Mental health problems are more common and less severe than mental illnesses, and generally of shorter duration.

Demographics

The best estimates we have, suggest that in Ireland, at any given time, one in five young people are experiencing serious emotional distress. Of these, only a small minority are in contact with anyone from a helping agency.

Headstrong's pilot of 'It's My World' survey (in 2008) which asked a series of questions relating to young people's mental health and wellbeing, indicated that one in five young people have no-one to talk to about their problems and only 40% felt that they could cope

ⁱ'Working with Young People with Mental Health Issues' was developed by Nuala Smith (Headstrong: The National Centre for Youth Mental Health).

well with their problems.

In 2007 the Republic of Ireland had the 5th highest rate of youth suicide (15-24 yrs) in the EU. Almost half of all presentations in Irish hospitals resulting from deliberate self-harm in 2005 were by people under 20 years of age.

Needs and Issues for Young People with Mental Health Problems

Adolescence is a critical time of development in terms of social and emotional well-being. Youth is not just a passing phase where young people learn to be adults. Young people have to negotiate this time to explore who they are and also develop the skills and knowledge which will support them in adulthood. Challenges in developing a sense of identity during this period can pose particular questions for young people which impact on their mental health.

It is also during this phase of development, particularly mid-teens to early twenties, that any underlying mental health issues are likely to emerge for the first time. An Australian study revealed that mental health is in fact the primary health issue for young people between the ages of 10 and 30 with mental health concerns peaking at age 20.

- In 2008 the Republic of Ireland had the fourth highest rate of youth suicide in the EU; behind Lithuania, Finland and Estonia.ⁱⁱ
- The highest rates for suicides reported in the Republic of Ireland are for those aged between 20 and 24 years. However, for males, the highest rates for suicide are among those aged between 20 and 24 years while for females it was women in their 50s.
- In a study carried out in 2007, by the National Registry of Deliberate Self Harm (NRDSH), of the data indicated that the majority of people presenting with self harm injuries to A&E units across the Republic of Ireland were young people. The peak age range for females was between 15 and 19 years and the peak age range for males was between 20 and 24 years of age. In the 15 to 19 age range for females the rate of presentation for deliberate self harm was 602 per 100,000 females of the population as a whole, while for young men at the peak

age range it was 392 per 100,000. The rate for young women age 15 to 19 is over double the standardised rate of 198 per 100,000 for the population as a whole.

If young people are not supported these issues can snowball leading to poor transition into adulthood, education and employment and affecting the ability to develop and maintain relationships.

Although many young people may experience mental health difficulties, early intervention can help them overcome these problems and build resilience; thus supporting them to develop problem solving skills that will help them face future challenges.

Young people facing mental health challenges may also need support in other areas of their life; in their relationships, family life, education, employment and accommodation.

Young people living with a family member with a mental health issue may also need additional supports as they can often assume the role of carer, particularly in instances of parental mental illness.

Mental Health Services

The current system of mental health services and supports for young people in the Republic of Ireland is fragmented, difficult to negotiate and emphasises a medical model of treatment for mental health issues. In 2008, 247 children under 18 years of age were admitted to adult psychiatric wards due to lack of age appropriate services for young people. According to the 2008 CAMH's (Child and Adolescent Mental Health) first Annual Report there are currently 49 teams in place, staffed at 66.2% of the recommended level



for these teams, to work with young people up to the age of 16ⁱⁱⁱ. Between the ages of 16 and 18 young people fall between CAMH's and adult services thereby making it extremely difficult to access support unless individual health teams make an exception.

In describing what they would like from services young people have said that they would like:

- ⇒ service providers to treat them with respect and understanding
- ⇒ services provided in a welcoming and relaxed environment designed with young people in mind
- ⇒ services that are non stigmatised and that their attendance at them will not lead to them being labelled
- ⇒ services that are available when they need them
- ⇒ services that are easy to access both logistically and in making an appointment
- ⇒ services that are confidential and affordable (preferably free of charge)

In many cases young people may confide in a youth worker with whom they have developed a trusting relationship with. Youth workers can then assist young people to seek appropriate care and support from qualified health professionals, if required.

Help seeking behaviour

Many young people are reluctant to seek help for mental health issues. Young people may not want to admit that something is wrong, they may be fearful of the unknown, they may not understand the nature of mental illness or they fear being labelled. These pressures mean that young people generally do not seek help early and their issues may only come to light as a result of a crisis.

Not knowing what services are available, barriers to accessing supports or services and concerns for confidentiality can also impact on a young person's help seeking behaviour. Many young people have reported that they felt they had no one and nowhere to turn for support when an emerging mental health issue arose. Some also reported having negative experiences in seeking support for the first time which made them reluctant to seek help again. It is important to keep in mind that the first time a young person seeks support may be the last if they find the service is not responsive to their needs.

Barriers in accessing Services^{iv}

- ⇒ Young people may experience barriers in accessing services if they are put on a waiting list or asked to make an appointment several weeks in advance
- ⇒ As a result of the symptoms associated with mental health issues young people may feel hopeless and helpless and this can reduce their chances of attending appointments and participating in assessment procedures
- ⇒ Young people with mental health issues often experience severe crisis, transition and upheaval in their life in addition to usual challenges of adolescence

Youth workers can support young people to access services by providing practical support, such as helping them plan how they will get to their appointments or attending services with a young person if they do not feel confident enough to go on their own.

Young people may also face barriers in accessing services if their behaviour is disruptive. A young person displaying challenging behaviours may be turned away from services without due consideration being given to their circumstances or alternatives for support. While this is true of most disadvantaged young people it is particularly pertinent for those young people with a mental health issue.



Service entry points

Young people with a mental health issue may come into contact with a range of services and supports, including community based supports and specialist services. If a young person is seeking help with a mental health issue they will more than likely approach someone who they have a trusting relationship with, however this person may not have specialist mental health training.^v These people and community organisations may include:

- ⇒ Youth and community workers, advocates, training centre/youth workers or tutors, support staff in community and youth services such as receptionist or caretaker, sports coaches, community drugs workers, volunteers, outreach workers, peer mentors and justice workers
- ⇒ Family, peers and employers, teachers or other staff in school settings
- ⇒ Primary health care providers including local health nurse, GP's and care/social workers

Some of these people may be able to provide immediate specialist mental health support to young people experiencing a mental health issue by offering temporary support, referring them on to mental health specialists - including counsellors or psychologists - or by referring them on for a further assessment.

Other people and organisations on this list can play a more preventative role. Being able to recognise early signs of mental distress among young people puts these individuals/organisations in a unique position to offer early interventions, such as informal support, activities to help build confidence or programmes offering personal development opportunities.

This level of support is often enough to help a young person develop the resilience to get them through tough times, however roughly 2% of the population may need highly specialised support delivered by a multi-disciplinary team and in acute cases, hospitalisation.

One of the key points to remember is that for many young people, this may be the first time they have opened up to anyone about issues they



might be dealing with. In this instance, listening is one of the most critical skills a worker can possess. Young people do not necessarily want solutions but rather an opportunity to express to someone what they are currently experiencing.

Referral Pathways

The typical pathway into mental health services is either through the young person's GP or through Accident and Emergency services if it is a crisis. Traditionally, there has not been a strong relationship between mental health professionals and youth workers therefore youth workers may find it difficult to make a referral. However, they should support the young person and their family to access these services.

Making yourself aware of the services in your area, including locally provided services (and also those provided by voluntary organisations) is an important task for any youth worker. This includes becoming aware of any programmes/counselling services or support groups available, finding out how to refer a young person to services and supports and how to assist them in accessing them. These services may also be interested to know how to refer young people to your project.

Practical Tips for Working with Young People with Mental Health Issues

As it is likely that young people will first approach an adult that they have a trusting relationship with, youth workers may find themselves in a position of supporting a young person going through a tough time or a crisis.

The following are some practical tips which can be adopted within your service to make it a more supportive environment. It will also help you deal better with the concerns you may have for the mental health of the young people using your service.



Be Approachable

- ⇒ It's a cliché but first impressions last, so try and make it as easy as possible for a young person to make first contact with your organisation. Whether that be online, over the phone or the first time they call in. Talk to young people already using your service about how you could make it a more relaxed and welcoming environment for all young people
- ⇒ Train all staff, including office support and caretaking staff, in how to listen to young people
- ⇒ Consider how flexible your service is to the needs of young people, how easy it is for them to make an appointment with you or to talk to someone when they need to

Staff Training

There are several skills that workers can develop through training, which will help them in their supportive relationships with young people going through emotionally distressing times. Skills in listening, identifying and understanding mental health issues, solution focused therapies and anger management are all examples of skills that youth workers find useful. There are many two day training courses available which will provide a basic introduction/proficiency in these skills including training provided through NYCI's Youth Health Programme. Assist training, which supports people to make an intervention with people who are suicidal, is also available free of charge through the HSE and Aware.



Policy

One of the key concerns for young people in discussing a mental health issue is confidentiality. Having a clear policy which is explained to young people when they first access your service is the best way to make them aware of your responsibilities in relation to their welfare and safety. Other areas for consideration include your referral policy, out of hour's supports, staff training and peer support to staff.

Follow Up

Sometimes young people with mental health issues can find it difficult to consistently engage with a service. Allowing them some flexibility to re-engage and following up with them after a period of absence can help keep a thread of support available for the young person involved.

Include the Family

Young people have many strengths which build their resilience and support them through tough times. Included in these strengths are young people's pre-existing relationships with their friends and family. Helping a young person identify others they have a positive or supportive relationship with, is a key task in supporting them through a difficult time. They may be reluctant to tell others what they are going through but having the support of others outside of the project will be important in the long run. You may have to provide some information to the family to help them understand how to best help the young person.

Promote Positive Mental Health Messages

Promoting positive mental health within your project, club or service can be done in many and creative ways in conjunction with the young people who access your organisation. Many of the activities provided to young people through youth work promote youth mental health indirectly. Providing a safe space for young people to hang out, activities that develop their inter and intra-personal skills and the opportunity to develop a trusting relationship with adult youth workers, helps develop 'preventative' or 'protective' assets in young people.

You can also be more proactive in promoting positive mental health by:

- ⇒ **Speaking openly about mental health issues in a way that is non stigmatising**
- ⇒ **Running programmes with a positive mental health theme**
- ⇒ **Encouraging help seeking behaviour**
- ⇒ **Making information on help lines and mental health websites available**
- ⇒ **Having positive mental health literature available**
- ⇒ **Inviting speakers in to discuss various aspects of youth mental health**

Network

Find out about local services or supports for young people or their families. Developing a relationship with existing services, either statutory or voluntary, will make it easier to find the appropriate supports for young people going through a difficult time. In developing a good rapport with these services/supports some of the opportunities you could explore together are:

- ⇒ Developing a referral system between your organisation and an external partner
- ⇒ Having a skills swap or sharing the cost of training between organisations
- ⇒ Better co-ordination of services
- ⇒ Exploring opportunities for outreach

Responding to Early Warning Signs^{vi}

Early warning signs of a more serious mental illness often appear during adolescence. In your work with young people you may notice some of these early warning signs. Diagnosis and treatment can only be carried out by a qualified health professional so it is important that you encourage the young person to see a doctor or mental health service as soon as possible. Be aware that due to waiting lists you may need to support the young person for a time before they can access a service. Therefore, you may need to look to some of the resources listed in this section for information in how to best help the young person while they are waiting for their appointment.

Early intervention in mental health issues is extremely important. Early intervention is likely to result in more effective treatments, less trauma for the young person and a reduction in the severity of the mental health issue.



Common Warning Signs...^{vii}

...for Depression

- ⇒ Persistent feelings of sadness
- ⇒ Losing interest in activities previously enjoyed
- ⇒ Losing appetite
- ⇒ Difficulties sleeping or staying in bed for a long time
- ⇒ Feeling tired, lacking energy or motivation, or alternatively feeling anxious
- ⇒ Feeling bad, worthless or self critical
- ⇒ Negative pessimistic or gloomy thoughts

... for Bi-Polar Disorder

People with bi-polar disorder experience extreme mood swings. At the low end of the mood scale they may experience:

- ⇒ Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- ⇒ Loss of interest in things they usually enjoy
- ⇒ Sleep problems

At the high end they may:

- ⇒ Talk very fast about ideas which they do not follow through
- ⇒ Feel little need for sleep
- ⇒ Have an inflated sense of power or confidence
- ⇒ Behave in a reckless manner

...Schizophrenia

- ⇒ Withdrawing from family and friends
- ⇒ Not sleeping well
- ⇒ Neglecting appearance or hygiene
- ⇒ Deteriorating performance at school or work
- ⇒ Difficulty concentrating, following conversations or remembering
- ⇒ Talking or writing about things that don't make sense
- ⇒ Being extremely anxious, panicky or depressed
- ⇒ Reacting inappropriately
- ⇒ Fearing, without reason, that others are monitoring or watching them or planning them harm

...Anxiety Disorders

- ⇒ Persistent worry and fear, out of proportion with the situation
- ⇒ Social isolation
- ⇒ Poor sleep
- ⇒ Inability to relax
- ⇒ Avoidance of feared situations

...Eating Disorders

- ⇒ Preoccupation with body weight and control over weight and food
- ⇒ For anorexia: preoccupation with controlling the amount of food eaten
- ⇒ For bulimia: feeling out of control with the amount of food eaten

...Self Harm

- ⇒ Deliberately hurting body, e.g. punching a brick wall
- ⇒ Self-cutting, e.g. cutting upper arms or wrists
- ⇒ Overdosing on prescribed or illegal drugs
- ⇒ Self-burning with cigarettes or lighters

...Suicide

People who are considering suicide may:

- ⇒ **Feel hopeless**
- ⇒ **Write or talk about suicide**
- ⇒ **Have an overwhelming sense of guilt, shame or reflection**
- ⇒ **Lack interest in the future**
- ⇒ **Give away their possessions or put their affairs in order**
- ⇒ **Self-harm**

If you notice some of these early warning signs and feel concerned for a young person, approach them sensitively and calmly. Remember they might not be able to articulate what is going on for them or might not have noticed these changes themselves. You can further inform yourself through some of the resources included in the resource section of this section.

If you have networked successfully with other services they may be able to offer you further supports.

If you choose to act on a concern you will have to engage the young person's family as their doctor will have to refer them onto statutory services. However, in some communities there may be counselling or other supports available through voluntary organisations which will not require a referral from a GP.

If you feel the young person is facing a crisis they can enter the service through the Accident and Emergency unit in your local hospital.

With all of these options young people or their families may still need support in accessing these services or keeping appointments.

Checklist 7 - How Accessible is your Organisation to Young People with Mental Health Issues?

This checklist can help you to identify how you can improve your service for young people with mental health issues.

Public image

How we present our service to our community

- Our service actively considers its youth 'friendliness'

 Yes

 Partly

 No

Programme planning and delivery

Our programmes are designed and delivered to include the diverse needs and identities of young people with a mental health issue

- Our service is flexible to accommodate the needs of young people with mental health issues

 Yes

 Partly

 No

Promotion :

- Our service has youth mental health promotion material available and on display in our project

 Yes

 Partly

 No

- Our service has identified local mental health services and supports and developed links with them

 Yes

 Partly

 No

Connecting young people to services:

- Our service has developed an understanding of the referral process into statutory service

 Yes

 Partly

 No

- Our service has identified local mental health services and supports and developed links with them

Yes

Partly

No

Professional development

Our staff and volunteers are trained and supported to deliver an inclusive youth service

- Staff and volunteers have an understanding of mental health issues
- Staff and volunteers know about the early warning signs of mental illness
- Staff and volunteers have effective skills in engaging young people
- Staff and volunteers speak openly about mental health topics
- Staff and volunteers promote positive messages about help seeking behaviour
- Staff and volunteers receive training in managing challenging behaviours

Yes

Partly

No

Policies and procedures

We have a written commitment to deliver an equal and inclusive service

- Our service has a critical incident plan

Yes

Partly

No

Participation

We make sure we include the voices of young people at all levels of our youth service

- Our service consults with young people about how mental health issues can affect their engagement with youth services and on how youth services can support young people with mental health issues

Yes

Partly

No



Useful Contacts

Mental Health

Aware

Phone: 1890 303302

Website: www.aware.ie

Aware Supports those who are directly affected by depression and operates a helpline from 10am to 10pm Monday to Wednesday and 10am to 1am Thursday to Sunday. The Aware helpline is a non-directive listening service for people affected by depression, either as sufferers or as family and friends. The helpline offers a non-judgmental listening ear to people who may be distressed or worried, or just need someone to talk to. You can also call the helpline if you are worried about someone who may be depressed or for information about depression or Aware services.

Bodywhys

(The Eating Disorder Association of Ireland)

Phone: 1890 200 444

Website: www.bodywhys.ie

Bodywhys core services centre on providing confidential, non-judgmental support for people affected by eating disorders. The helpline is open for two hours each weekday. Callers can access names of local health professionals, details of all Bodywhys support services and other voluntary organisations where appropriate. Bodywhys also offers support groups, including an online support group and email support.

Childline

Phone: 1800 66 66 66

Website: www.childline.ie

Childline is 24-hour service for children and young people up to 18 years of age. Childline is open 365 days a year (even Christmas Day!). It offers support to young people through the Childline listening service over the phone. You can call Childline for a chat or to talk about any problems you might have. Calls to Childline are confidential and they don't have caller ID or trace any calls. It won't cost you anything to call Childline and their number won't show up on the phone bill.

Teen-Line Ireland**Freephone:** 1800 833 634**Website:** www.teenline.ie

Teenline Ireland is a national helpline for teenagers. Teen-Line provides a listening and support service 7 days a week. They also provide talks to schools and youth groups.

Helpline is open:

Mondays 8pm - 11pm

Tuesdays 8pm - 11pm

Wednesdays 3pm - 6pm

Thursdays 9pm - 12 midnight

Fridays 9pm - 12 midnight

Saturdays 8pm - 12 midnight

Sundays 8pm - 11pm

Samaritans**Phone:** 1850 609090**Website:** www.samaritans.org

Samaritans is a confidential emotional support service for anyone. The service is available 24 hours a day for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including those which may lead to suicide.

Shine Ireland**Phone:** 1890 621631**Website:** www.shineonline.ie

Shine Ireland is the national organisation dedicated to upholding the rights and addressing the needs of all those affected by enduring mental illness including, but not exclusively, schizophrenia, schizo-affective disorder and bi-polar disorder. The helpline is open 9am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Shine Ireland runs support groups, provides counselling and has a resource centre in Dublin.

GROW**Phone:** 1890 474 474**Website:** www.grow.ie

GROW is a mental health organisation which helps people who live with or are recovering from mental health problems. GROW has a national network of more than 130 groups throughout the country. Members attend a weekly meeting lasting about two hours. Members provide mutual support in undertaking certain tasks that encourage a healthy change in thinking, behaviour and/or relationships. Each group is supported by a fieldworker, many of whom have experienced GROW first hand.

Irish Advocacy Network**Phone:** (047) 38918**Website:**www.irishadvocacynetwork.com

IAN is a growing network providing support and advocacy to those using mental health services.

Let Someone Know**Website:**www.letsomeoneknow.ie

'Let Someone Know' is an interactive website designed to support and give information directly to young people on issues relating to mental health. It is a HSE supported initiative.

Information

Spunout**Website:** www.spunout.ie

Spunout provides information, support and advocacy opportunities to young people throughout Ireland. Their website provides hundreds of fact sheets on all aspects of youth health and culture including mental health, suicide and sexual health as well as a searchable database of help contacts, moderated discussion forums and an advocacy platform for young people to be heard.

Reachout**Website:** www.reachout.com

Reachout is a new web-based mental health information service in Ireland. It provides information on a broad range of issues relating to mental health.

Headstrong**Phone:** (01) 6607343**Website:** www.headstrong.ie

Headstrong is a youth mental health charity seeking to change how Ireland thinks about youth mental health. They work with communities and other community and statutory organisations to develop youth friendly mental health supports. They do not provide direct services to young people. They can provide advice and information to those seeking to establish youth mental health initiatives either locally or nationally.

Suicide and Bereavement

Console

Freephone: 1800 201 890

Website: www.console.ie

Console supports and helps people bereaved through suicide. The national freephone helpline provides a confidential listening service for people bereaved through suicide. This service provides callers with the space and safety to speak about their loss. Callers are given the opportunity to express how they are feeling and coping, or not coping, as can sometimes be the reality. Callers will be offered contact details of counselling services and support groups as near as possible to the location of the caller.



References

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- ii. National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP) Annual Report 2008. HSE
- iii. Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMH) Teams Annual Report (2008). HSE
- iv. YAPA and the Nepean Access Project Reference Group for the Nepean Better Futures Strategy (2006) Opening Doors “A Do It Yourself “ Access and Equity Manual For Working With Young People. NSW Department of Community Services.
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