

## Assessing mental health problems

**T**eenagers can have mental health problems that may affect relationships with family and friends and also lead to troubles at school or at work.

The teenager or people around them may notice changes in their behaviour, such as becoming withdrawn, arguing, yelling and crying.

They may feel their emotions are on a roller coaster, and mixed up – angry, sad, worried or scared. They may get stressed out by minor things.

Some teenagers may feel odd or strange things are happening around them, such as hearing sounds or seeing things.

Sometimes teenagers use alcohol, pills or other drugs to cope with what is happening.

## Why have an assessment?

**P**eople may be worried about the changes they notice in the teenager. Parents or caregivers, teachers, school counselors or social workers may ask for an assessment. The young person themselves may be the first to ask for help. An assessment aims to sort out what is happening for the teenager, and if there are mental health problems. Sometimes the teenager may be stressed for other reasons such as family or relationship problems, bullying, or exposure to violence or abuse.

Having an assessment does not mean the teenager is “crazy” or “psycho”. It is also important to remember that one in five people have mental health problems some time in their lives, and people are able to recover, especially with help.



A Guide for  
Young People

Mental Health  
Assessment



## What is a mental health service?

**S**ome people chose to see a psychologist or psychiatrist for an assessment in private practice, which they pay for. For less complex problems, other counseling agencies can help. An assessment can be done at a mental health service, which is a free service and part of the public health system. A range of different mental health professionals (clinicians) may work at the service, including:

- Maori cultural support workers
- Psychologists
- Mental health nurses
- Occupational therapists
- Social workers
- Paediatricians (Doctor)
- Psychiatrists (Doctor)
- Psychotherapists
- Administration staff

## What happens?

**A**n appointment can usually be made for an urgent assessment within days. Otherwise, there may be several weeks wait for a non-urgent appointment.

Two staff members will usually meet to talk with the teenager and their parents/carers. They usually also see the teenager and parents separately. There are some issues that are more easily discussed separately. People may say they want the things talked about kept private from other family members. This is usually OK unless there are concerns that someone may not be safe (e.g. maybe going to hurt themselves, hurt others, or get hurt).

Maori and Pacific Island families may have support at the assessment from a cultural worker, to help everyone communicate and feel more comfortable. For teenagers and families of any culture who have trouble speaking or understanding English, an interpreter would be organized.

There is usually a lot of talking done during an assessment. The staff will ask questions about the worries and problems. They will try to make sense of what has been happening in the teenager's life, at school, work and home. They will also ask about the teenager's childhood, and what it was like growing up.

The staff will then give a summary to the teenager and their family/whanau about what they think is going on, and ideas about what may help. Sometimes, it takes a few meetings to gather all the information that is needed to understand the problems.

## What next?

**S**ome teenagers do not need to go back after the assessment. Talking about the concerns may have given everyone ideas about how to deal with the problems. The teenager and family/whanau may be able to manage with some help from other family members, friends or school staff.

- ⦿ Sometimes counseling at a community agency may be recommended. These agencies may provide help with family (or individual) counseling, trauma counseling or help for alcohol or drug problems.
- ⦿ Some teenagers continue to have help at the mental health service, for problems such as depression, anxiety, or psychosis. A range of treatments are available; therapy and counselling, learning problem-solving skills and medications. Treatment options are discussed with the teenager.

This series of mental health information sheets has been written for children, young people and their families/whanau. They were written by mental health professionals from around New Zealand who have particular expertise and experience in the issues described. All information has been reviewed by our editorial panel, which is comprised of clinical and cultural advisers as well as young people who have themselves faced mental health difficulties.

The information contained in this series is not intended to replace qualified medical or professional advice. For further information about a condition or the treatments mentioned, please consult your health care provider.

The Werry Centre hopes to regularly review information contained in the sheets. Any feedback would be welcome.

**Other useful sites are:**

**For young people:**

[www.trippin.co.nz](http://www.trippin.co.nz)

**For carers:**

[www.mentalhealth.org.nz](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz)

Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand

PO Box 10051

Dominion Road

Auckland

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Written by: Dr. Margaret Mitchell-Lowe  
Project Manager: Rose Silvester



[www.werrycentre.org.nz](http://www.werrycentre.org.nz)