

A glimpse at the mental health of young people

Mental health disorders affect one in five of us at any point in time, and more than half of us across the whole life span. Crucially, these disorders cluster in young people from 15 – 25 years, when they usually occur for the first time and are *the* major health issue.

In summary:

- Mental health problems already account for 27% of all disability costs in Australia (Mathers et al. 1999). Only 30% of those on disability support for psychological problems participate in the workforce, compared with 50-70% in other countries (Trewin, 2003).
- 75% of all mental health problems commence before age 25 years. 60 – 70% of all disability costs in 15-24 year olds are due to mental health problems (Mathers et al. 1999). This 15 – 24 year age group is the peak age group for mental disorders across the whole life span. 27% will suffer from a mental disorder during a single year (Andrews et al. 1999).
- Typically, serious mental health problems like depression, anxiety and psychotic disorders commence in the teenage or early adult years, and when not treated lead directly to lifelong alcohol and other substance abuse, educational failure, youth unemployment, youth offending, accidental injury, self-harm and suicide (Kessler et al. 1994; Kessler et al. 1997; Patton, 1998; Arseneault et al. 2002; Patton et al. 2002; New national comorbidity studies).
- 50% of teenage onset alcohol and drug problems in the population can be attributed directly to untreated depression, anxiety and other mental health problems (Sawyer et al. 2000).
- Youth mental health and resultant alcohol and drug problems also underpin many of the major physical health challenges in this age group including cigarette smoking, accidents and injury, obesity, low levels of physical exercise, sexually transmitted diseases and hepatitis C (Sawyer et al. 2000; Goodman & Whitaker, 2002; Shrier et al. 2002; Borowsky & Ireland, 2004).

Currently our young people are very poorly served by the health care system as it is currently structured. Failure to intervene early and provide effective treatments means that young people with mental health problems don't return to education and training and often go onto a lifetime on the disability support pension.

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