

# Young people's mental health

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The 2004 National Mental Health Strategy Discussion Paper, *Responding to the Mental Health Needs of Young People in Australia*, provides an overview of youth mental health issues. The paper notes that while young people have much in common with other age groups, they also have their own particular mental health needs, characteristics, challenges and problems.

The years of adolescence and young adulthood are a critical development period, as young people move towards independence and autonomy. While most young people move positively through this stage, vulnerability to mental illness is heightened at times of major life change including during the transition to adulthood:

- mental disorders are most prevalent during adolescence and young adulthood, and account for 55 per cent of the disease burden of those aged 15 to 24 years.
- only 25 per cent of young people aged 13 to 17 with mental health problems used one or more services.

Evidence from the 1997 ABS National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing found that rates of mental disorder peak at age 18 to 24 years, with more than one in every four young adults having one or more mental disorders. The prevalence rate of anxiety disorders for young people aged 18 to 24 was 11 per cent, 7 per cent for affective disorders, such as depression, and 16 per cent for substance use disorders. Substance use disorders were most common in young males and depressive disorders were most common in young females.

Rates of suicide for young people are high, particularly among young men, and young people's rates of self harm are substantially higher than those of older adults:

- suicide accounted for 22.5 per cent of all deaths for young people, second only to motor vehicle accidents; and
- 42 per cent of adolescents experiencing very high levels of mental health problems had seriously considered suicide and one in four had made a serious attempt in the last 12 months.

The suicide rate for young people reached a peak in 1997, with a rate of 15.2 deaths per 100,000 young people. From 1997, however, the death rate from suicide decreased to 10.1 deaths per 100,000 young people in 2001. The issue remains of significant concern.

The *Responding to the Mental Health Needs of Young People* Discussion Paper also notes that there are particular issues relating to young people from different backgrounds and circumstances, for example:

- culturally and linguistically diverse young people's voluntary use of mental health services is lower than that of other communities;
- higher suicide rates for Indigenous young people aged 15 to 24 than for other young people in this age group;
- homeless young people are at increased risk of stress, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, self harm and suicide; and
- young people who have been in the criminal justice system can have continuing mental health problems and experience considerable social dysfunction after being released from custody.

Young people with emerging mental health problems or disorders often have multiple difficulties that make diagnosis difficult and may mean the young people do not clearly fit into specific programs or criteria. The report, *Barriers to Service Provision For Young People With Presenting Substance Misuse And Mental Health Problems*, published in 2004 by the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, found that a lack of holistic professional expertise covering both mental health and substance misuse issues was one of the key barriers to services for young people with dual diagnosis.