YOUNG PEOPLE AND MENTAL HEALTH
A resource for youth ministry leaders
HOW DO I USE THIS RESOURCE?

This guide for youth group leaders provides a brief introduction to mental health, and suggestions for approaching possible mental health issues with young people in your youth group. It has been compiled by the Archdiocesan Office for Youth (AOY) in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. Contributions to this document have been made by the AOY, the Office of Professional Conduct and Ethics in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, youth ministers and independent counsellors.

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Need help asap?

Emergency services
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Kids Help Line
1800 55 1800

Lifeline Australia
13 11 14
WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Mental health refers to someone’s emotional and social wellbeing. With good mental health we can manage the normal ups and downs of life, but if our mental health declines it can affect our feelings, thoughts and actions. Mental health problems can be caused by biological factors, or by difficult life experiences. When mental health problems last for long periods and begin to significantly affect a person’s daily life, it is possible that a mental illness is developing.

Although mental illness can occur at any age, adolescence is the peak age of onset for mental illness. Anxiety and depression are the highest prevailing mental illnesses among young people. Other mental illnesses include:

- Eating disorders
- Self harm
- Alcohol and other drug issues
- Psychosis

THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR...

It can sometimes be difficult to distinguish the symptoms of mental health problems from normal adolescent behaviours and moods. As a youth group leader, you may become aware of changes in a young person’s usual behaviour and mood. These changes may include some of the following:

Behaviours
- frequently avoiding situations that are challenging
- fussiness
- withdrawal
- perfectionism
- poor concentration
- tiredness
- overactivity
- being easily distracted
- destructive behaviour
- noncompliance
- repetitive behaviours
- unusual and restricted interests

Learning issues
- lack of problem solving skills
- academic difficulties
- difficulties maintaining focus
- not hearing all of the instruction

Emotions
- nervous temperament
- fearfulness
- sadness
- persistent moodiness
- poor self-control
- difficult temperament
- excessive anger

Social issues
- severe shyness
- being isolated, rejected, bullied
- lack of perspective
- over-talkativeness
- poor social skills
- being argumentative
- aggression towards others
- communication difficulties
- problems in relating to others
WHAT DO I DO IF A YOUNG PERSON APPROACHES ME WITH A PROBLEM?

As a youth group leader, a young person may identify you as someone they can trust. Being a Christ-like presence to a young person may often mean simply listening to them without attempting to solve their problem or jumping to spiritual conclusions to explain their difficulties. You should be alert to situations where a young person may be in danger, or when problems seem to persist over time and significantly affect their feelings and actions. It is important to let the young person know that you may need to speak to others about the issue if you are concerned for their wellbeing.

Some practical tips:

- Maintain attentive body language: eye contact, leaning slightly forward, arms uncrossed.
- Allow the young person to lead the conversation for the first 5-10 minutes. As the young person shares their thoughts, use non-verbal communication like nodding, and eye contact.
- While the young person is speaking, you have the opportunity to process your own thoughts and discern and pray about how best to respond calmly and empathetically.
- Supportive listening means actively acknowledging what the young person is saying. This can be expressed by repeating what the young person is saying, and asking open-ended questions.
- Avoid leading questions which suggest information and ideas (put words in people's mouths). Leading questions can usually be answered by a ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Instead, use open questions which invite information and allow the young person to only say what they wish to say.
  Examples of open questions: ‘How does that make you feel?’ ‘How is this affecting you?’ ‘What might be making you feel this way?’
- Never promise that you will be able to keep what the young person has shared a secret.
- After listening to the young person, thank them for sharing with you, and affirm that they made a good decision in seeking help.

The situation described by the young person will guide you in how to best respond. It is not your role to investigate the problem or diagnose the young person, but you should be alert to potentially dangerous or criminal situations (see What do I do if a young person’s wellbeing is in danger? [page 5])

You should always inform your Youth Group Coordinator or Parish Priest when a young person has approached you with a problem. This helps you to draw on the wisdom of others as well ensure that you do not become too personally invested in the situation. Your Youth Group Coordinator and Parish Priest will help look out for your own well-being. It’s also a good idea to keep written notes of when the conversation took place, what was discussed, and what response was given.

Next steps → Who can I refer a young person to for support? (p 6) How do I encourage a young person to get help? (p 7)

WHAT DO I DO IF I SUSPECT THERE IS A PROBLEM?

If you are concerned about a young person, let your Youth Group Coordinator or Parish Priest know. They may be aware of particular difficulties the young person is experiencing and whether they are receiving support. If not, you can decide together how to initiate a conversation with the young person.

Practical tips for starting a conversation:

- Begin somewhere visible to others, such as a far corner of a hall. Always stay in full view, and try to stay within earshot of others.
- Ask the question: ‘Are you ok?’, and other open-ended questions. Maintain eye contact, and open and relaxed body language. A helpful start is to describe what you see.
  ‘You look sad today...’
  ‘What's been happening? How are you going?’
‘I’ve noticed that... What’s going on for you at the moment?’
‘You don’t seem like yourself and I’m wondering are you ok?’

- Listen without judgement: Guide the conversation with caring questions and allow the young person to reply. Don’t rush to solve problems for them or over-spiritualise their difficulties.
  ‘How has that made you feel?’
  ‘How long have you felt this way?’
  ‘What do you think caused this reaction?’

- Help the young person understand that help is available when they're ready to start exploring this.
- Encourage the young person to take one step, such as speaking with their parents, visiting their GP, or calling a helpline.
  ‘What do you think might help your situation?’
  ‘Have you considered talking to someone about this?’

- If the young person is open to seeking further help, give them a copy of services they can access in your area.

Next steps → What do I do if a young person’s wellbeing is in danger? (p 5) Who can I refer a young person to for support? (p 6) How do I encourage a young person to get help? (p 7)

WHAT DO I DO IF A YOUNG PERSON’S WELLBEING IS IN DANGER?

If a young person has spoken about suicide, self-harm, eating disorders, abuse, or is showing signs of persistently declining mental health, they should always be referred to professional support. In these situations, your Parish Priest must also be informed and an incident report created.

If a young person is under 16, parents and carers should also be notified, preferably by the Parish Priest. If you are in doubt about whether this is appropriate, discuss the situation with your Parish Priest. He will be the best person to discern when pastoral care is an appropriate response, or when professional assistance is required. Remember that it is not your role to diagnose a young person or counsel them.

If a situation is possibly criminal, the young person should be encouraged to make a report to police. Your Parish Priest should also be informed. If the young person is reluctant to file a report, your Parish Priest can determine whether a report needs to made to the police without divulging the victim’s name. If you are not satisfied with the response you have received from your Parish Priest, contact the Vicar General’s Office on (03) 9926 5677.

Disclosure occurs when a young person reveals they are in an abusive situation. The Archdiocese of Melbourne has guidelines for what to do if a disclosure is made to you or if you have formed an objectively reasonable belief that a child is at risk of being harmed or abused. These guidelines can be downloaded at www.cam.org.au/Portals/4/Code-of-Conduct-booklet.pdf.

In an emergency situation where a young person is in danger, or could be a danger to others around them, contact 000.

If a young person has reported an intention to take steps to end their life, they should not be left alone. Emergency help lines such as Lifeline on 13 11 14 and the Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467 are available for immediate advice and support.

If a situation involves sexual abuse within the church, it should be referred to the Independent Commissioner on (03) 9225 7979.

Next steps → Who can I refer a young person to for support? (p 6) How do I encourage a young person to get help? (p 7)

How should my youth group document issues? (p 7)
WHO CAN I REFER A YOUNG PERSON TO FOR SUPPORT?

There are a number of different services available for young people. Update the attached card template on page 12 with local information for your group, and have it on-hand whenever your youth group meets.

**Parish Priest**

Your priest is trained to support people when they are most vulnerable. As well as offering prayer, and the healing that comes through the sacraments, most priests are trained to deal with pastoral issues. You may want to encourage a young person to speak with their priest, particularly when they are using spiritual language to describe their problem. He should be able to discern when pastoral care is an appropriate response, or when further assistance is required.

**Local Doctor**

Your youth group should identify a local youth-friendly General Practitioner who you can feel comfortable referring young people to. A GP is able to provide a mental health assessment and mental health care plan for the young person. Make sure the doctor is someone you feel comfortable referring a young person to.

**Headspace Centres**

Headspace Centres provide support, information and advice to young people aged 12 to 25 on general health, mental health and counselling, education, employment and other services, and alcohol and other drug services. Headspace Centres are located all around Melbourne. See [www.headspace.org.au/headspace-centres](http://www.headspace.org.au/headspace-centres) for details on centres across Melbourne.

**Phone lines**

Phone lines can be a non-confronting way for young people to talk to trained counsellors:

- Lifeline - 13 11 14 (cost of a local call; 24 hours)
- Kids Help Line - 1800 55 1800 (free call from a land line; 24 hours)

**Websites**

There are many Australian-based websites which provide resources and advice for young people, including:

- ReachOut: [www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)
- Headspace: [www.eheadspace.org.au](http://www.eheadspace.org.au)
- Beyond Blue: [www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com)

**Youth Centres**

Youth centres often include a number of services in the one location, and usually do not require an appointment. They are staffed by people who relate well with young people. Local councils will have information about local youth services.

**School Counsellor**

Most schools will have a counsellor available on site. If many young people in your group come from a particular school in the area, it is a good idea to have the name and contact details of the school’s counsellor on hand.
HOW DO I ENCOURAGE A YOUNG PERSON TO GET HELP?

If you are concerned about a young person, express this in simple language and explain that you would like to help them by connecting them with the people who are best trained to assist them. A GP is the best person to refer a young person to as they can provide a mental health assessment and mental health care plan for the young person, but other options are also available. Where possible, invite your Youth Group Coordinator into the conversation.

- Empower the young person to begin making decisions during emotional times by giving them options on how to contact services. This could mean leaving contact information with the young person (see page 12 for a template).
- Encourage the young person to speak with their parents or carers. If you are concerned about a young person who is under 16 and they are reluctant to inform parents, tell the young person that you will need to speak with your Youth Group Coordinator or Parish Priest about making this decision for them. Your youth group Coordinator or Parish Priest should make direct contact with parents. Provide the young person with options on how they would like their parents to be informed of the situation. ‘I know this is difficult, so you can decide how your parents should be told. We can invite your mum to join us when she comes to pick you up, or Father can call her tomorrow.’
- If after a few weeks you feel the young person is not seeking the help they need, contact your Parish Priest for advice.

HOW CAN MY YOUTH GROUP PROVIDE ONGOING SUPPORT?

The welcome, familiarity and consistency of a youth group can be an important source of support for a young person going through a difficult time. If you are aware that a young person is experiencing a time of difficulty, here are some ways you can continue to support them:

- During youth group time, remain open for conversation, and ask how the young person is doing.
- If the young person didn’t find the support services accessed so far to be helpful, urge them to try a different professional. Encourage them that there will be someone out there who can help them. ‘How are things going? Did you speak with your school counsellor?’ ‘What did they suggest? What did you think of their advice?’
- Continue to invite and include the young person in regular youth group activities and outings. Make sure that not all your discussions with them are about their problems, but reflect the different interests and facets of their life.
- Pray for the young person.
WHAT DO I DO IF A YOUNG PERSON DENIES THERE IS A PROBLEM?

It can be overwhelming and scary for a young person to share their problems or seek help. If a young person denies there is a problem don’t try to force the issue or put pressure on them. Avoid a confrontation with the person unless it’s necessary to prevent them hurting themselves or others.

- If the young person denies there is a problem, don’t criticise them. Acknowledge they’re not ready to talk.
- Express that you are concerned about changes in their behaviour and you care about them.
  ‘It's ok that you don’t want to talk about it but please don’t hesitate to chat with us when you’re ready to discuss it.’
  ‘Is there someone else you’d rather discuss this with?’
- If you feel there is no change in their behaviour over the next few weeks, initiate a conversation again.
- If you remain concerned about a young person, contact your Parish Priest for advice.

HOW SHOULD MY YOUTH GROUP DOCUMENT ISSUES?

It’s a good idea to document discussions, and critical when a young person is in danger or their wellbeing is at risk. While your youth group should definitely document critical incidents where a young person has been hurt, it’s also worth keeping a record of any significant discussions. The incident report should document the following:

- Date of incident
- Incident (or discussion) description
- Advice given to the young person
- Action taken (including who the incident/conversation has been reported to)
- Response received from Youth Group Coordinator or Parish Priest.
- Date of file note being made and signed

For an incident report template see the appendix on page 11.

Ensure that reports are filed in a private and secure space, ideally within the parish office.

WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION?

The following websites have lots of useful Australian information and resources for supporting young people:

- **Headspace**: [www.headspace.org.au/](http://www.headspace.org.au/)
- **ReachOut**: [www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)
- **RU OK Resources**: [www.ruokday.com/resources-for-you/](http://www.ruokday.com/resources-for-you/)
- **Beyond Blue**: [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

The following books are available to borrow free of charge from the AOY Youth Ministry and are specifically related to the Catholic youth ministry context. To borrow them, visit [www.cam.org.au/youth/Resources/Youth-Ministry-Library](http://www.cam.org.au/youth/Resources/Youth-Ministry-Library)

**The Elephant in the Youth Room**
Jim Chesnes and Kevin Driscoll

*The Elephant in the Youth Room* helps youth ministry leaders understand pastoral care as a ministry of compassionate presence, and gives practical advice for responding to issues including mental illness, substance abuse, and grief.

**When a Teen Chooses You**
Joseph Moore

*When a Teen Chooses You* contains practical information for anyone offering spiritual guidance to a teenager. It helps adults develop skills to speak with young people about prayer, morality, sin and guilt, especially where a young person has sought them for advice.
APPENDIX

This resource draws on information from:

Websites:

Headspace: www.headspace.org.au
ReachOut: www.reachout.com
RU OK Resources: www.ruokday.com/resources-for-you

Articles:


Documents:


Youth Ministry and Pastoral Care. Catholic Youth and Young Adults Ministry, Diocese of Wilmington. Available from: http://policymanual.c dowcym.org/commentary/youth-ministry-and-pastoral-care
If I’m approached by a young person…

Listen, ask open questions.
See: What do I do if a young person approaches me with a problem? (p 4)

If I suspect a young person may be experiencing mental health issues…

Speak with your Youth group Coordinator or Parish Priest. See: What do I do if I suspect there is a problem? (p 4)

Is the young person already being looked after?

No

Yes

With another leader, initiate a conversation with the young person. Listen. Ask open questions.

Is the young person’s wellbeing in danger? Is the situation potentially criminal?

Yes

Seek assistance immediately, and contact your Youth Group Coordinator or Parish Priest.
See: What do I do if a young person’s wellbeing is in danger? (p 5)

Create an incident report. See: How should my youth group document issues? (p 8)

No

Does the young person need further support?

Yes

If in doubt, contact your Parish Priest.

Encourage the young person to connect with other services. See: How do I encourage a young person to get help? (p 7)

Who can I refer young people to for support? (p 6)

Continue to support the young person through prayer and friendship. See: How can my youth group provide ongoing support? (p 7)
INCIDENT REPORT FORM

All Critical incidents where a young person is in danger must be reported. Significant conversations may also be recorded.

Date/time of Incident: __________________________________________________________

Name/s of people involved: ______________________________________________________

Brief description of incident/conversation: _________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

Outcome of incident and follow up required: _________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

Parish priest notified? (Please circle)       Yes         No         Not required

Parents/Emergency Contact notified? (Please circle)        Yes         No         Not required

Name of Person reporting incident: ______________________________________________

Signature: ___________________________ Date: _________________________________

Name of Witness to the incident:

Signature: ___________________________ Date: _________________________________

Youth Group Coordinator’s Name: ______________________________________________

Signature: ___________________________ Date: _________________________________

Parish Priest’s Name: __________________________________________________________

Signature: ___________________________ Date: _________________________________
NEED A HAND? TRY CONTACTING
LOCAL GP:
NAME:
PHONE:
ADDRESS:

LOCAL HEADSPACE CENTRE:
PHONE:
ADDRESS:

KIDS HELP LINE: 1800 55 1800
(FREE CALL FROM A LAND LINE; 24 HOURS)

OR VISIT:
REACHOUT.COM
YOUTHBEYONDBLUE.COM
EHEADSPACE.ORG.AU

YOUTH GROUP:
CONTACT:

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NAME:
PHONE:
ADDRESS:
Inspiring and engaging young people in the life and mission of the Catholic Church

An agency of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne

Thomas Carr Centre
278 Victoria Parade
East Melbourne

t. +61 3 9412 3300
f. +61 3 9415 9867
e. aoy@cam.org.au
w. www.cam.org.au/youth