

Mental Health is defined in the *National Mental Health Plan 2003 – 2008* as:

*A state of emotional and social wellbeing in which the individual can cope with the normal stresses of life and achieve his or her potential. It is not simply the absence of mental illness.*<sup>1</sup>

Mental health issues are likely to be significant in many young people's lives with 25% experiencing a mental health issue<sup>2</sup> at some point; and the median age of onset being under the age of 24<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the issues associated with mental health affect Australian society as a whole with mental health issues accounting for 13.3% of the total burden of disease and injury, the with the majority of these being related to anxiety and depression, alcohol abuse and personality disorders<sup>4</sup>.

Anxiety and depression are the leading causes of the burden of disease and injury in young people<sup>5</sup>. While rates of suicide for young people have declined in the past decade, the Youth Coalition notes that they are still high, with suicide accounting for 20% of all deaths in young people<sup>6</sup>.

Research indicates that young people most frequently access the family doctor or school-based counsellor for mental health support<sup>7</sup>. Only 28.6% of young people experiencing mental health issues access support services. Few young people who self-harm access services with 90% of young people who have self harmed reporting to have not have sought help prior to self-harming<sup>8</sup>. This is the lowest access rate among all age groups<sup>9</sup>.

Mental health issues can also affect young people disproportionately. Youth services report that young people experiencing homelessness, alcohol and other drug issues, multicultural young people, young carers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are often affected in higher proportion. It is important to note the cyclic impact these co-occurring issues have upon a young person.

The symptoms, effects and types of mental health issues can also vary between young males and females. For example, almost 90% of eating disorders occur in women<sup>10</sup>. The burden of anxiety and depression in women is almost twice as high as in men<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand, young males are nearly 3 times more likely to commit suicide than young females<sup>12</sup>. Young males are less likely to access services, highlighting the need for specific strategies to engage young men in mental health services.

Through the establishment of community based services, and a commitment by the ACT Government to develop a mental health inpatient unit for young people, the Youth Coalition believes the establishment of these services are, and will, begin to meet some of the existing service system gaps for young people with mental health issues.

The effectiveness of promotion, prevention and early intervention has been highlighted through research and evaluation in addition to the cost effective nature of these programs. However, given that only 28.6% of young people experiencing mental health issues access support services<sup>13</sup>, more frequently accessing the family doctor or school-based counsellor<sup>14</sup>, the Youth Coalition highlights the importance of implementing promotion, prevention and early intervention mechanisms within other services, and in particular, schools.

The Youth Coalition has been calling for funding for a Youth Health Network, which would seek to support existing health service providers to coordinate health services and support to young people in the ACT. The establishment of this Network, particularly in light of the increase in youth mental health services, would support the youth mental health sector to map treatment and support for young people, and identify opportunities and gaps to provide a comprehensive continuum of care.

Commitments:

1. Advocating for the establishment of a Youth Health Network to:
  - Facilitate linkages between mental health services and the youth sector to improve co-ordination, collaboration and advocacy on youth issues and ensure integrated health service provision
  - Provide networking and information sharing opportunities for workers and services in the youth mental health sector
  - Facilitate linkages and partnerships between NGO and Government mental health agencies
2. Advocating for increasing the capacity of schools, youth services, and other health services, to be able to identify mental health issues, respond in an effective and efficient manner, and make appropriate referrals to specialist services where needed, as well as provide mental health promotion and prevention activities.
3. Advocating for the active involvement of young people in designing, planning and evaluating youth mental health policy and service delivery frameworks, and participating in individual care planning;
4. Advocating for programs that are targeted at young people who have unique needs and are at an increased risk of experiencing a mental health issues.
5. Advocating for the provision of dedicated and holistic treatment options for young people with eating disorders.
6. Advocating for the development of a targeted evaluation plan against which to measure progress in the ACT.
7. Supporting community-based mental health services for young people.
8. Supporting young people with mental health issues to participate in education, employment and the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Government (2003) National Mental Health Plan 2003 – 2008, National Mental Health Strategy, Canberra.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (March 2009) Australian Social Trends: Mental Health, Australian Government, Canberra

<sup>3</sup> Kessler et al, cited in: McGorry P, et al (2006) Youth Mental Health Services, Department of Psychiatry, University of Melbourne and ORYGEN Research Centre

<sup>4</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2007) The Burden of Disease and Injury in Australia: p59

<sup>5</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2007) Young Australians: Their Health and Wellbeing 2007, Australian Government, Canberra

<sup>6</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (May 2008) Injury among Young Australians, Bulletin 60, Australian Government, Canberra.

<sup>7</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) National Survey of National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results

<sup>8</sup> ACT Government (2005) Suicide Prevention: Managing the Risk of Suicide in the ACT 2005 - 2008

<sup>9</sup> Above n2.

<sup>10</sup> Above n7.

<sup>11</sup> Above n4.

<sup>12</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2009) Causes of Death, Australia, 2007. ABS Catalogue Number 3303.0.

<sup>13</sup> Above n8.

<sup>14</sup> Above n2.