Young people can go through many different changes as they grow up. Raising sensitive issues and working to resolve problems that arise along the way can be challenging. It can often be hard as a parent to know the difference between normal behaviour, such as moodiness, irritability and withdrawal and an emerging mental health problem.

If a young person develops a mental health problem it is important that they get help early.

The information in this factsheet is designed to help you better understand mental health and illness and what you can do to support young people who might be having a rough time.

**Difference between mental health and mental illness**

Mental health refers to a person’s emotional and social wellbeing. When someone’s mental health declines it can affect their feelings, thoughts and actions. This can then affect their day to day life and participation in activities such as school, work and relationships.

Mental health problems are common. Mental health problems are usually understandable reactions to personal and social issues. Mental health problems are usually not too severe or long lasting.

When mental health problems last for long periods of time and severely affect someone’s everyday life, it may be that the problem is becoming an illness. Mental illness refers to a range of issues which may affect someone’s thoughts, feelings, actions and/or memory. These issues are often longer lasting than mental health problems and cause more distress and disruption to life. Although mental illness can occur at any age, anxiety disorders and depression are quite common problems for young people.

A mental illness usually develops slowly over time. Most parents know when something is really different, but here are some signs that suggest a young person might be experiencing serious problems:

- New, noticeable and persistent changes that last at least a few weeks.
- Obvious and persistent changes in:

  - behaviour — for example, appetite, sleep, use of drugs or alcohol, avoiding school/work, poor motivation, withdrawal from people
  - Feelings — for example, unhappiness, depression, irritability, fear, anger, loss of pleasure
  - Thinking — for example, poor concentration, a drop in school performance, constant worrying, preoccupation with some thoughts, hearing or seeing things that are not there.
What affects a young person’s mental health?

The different factors that might impact on a young person’s mental health are:

- **Biological factors** – family history of mental health problems
- **Adverse early life experiences** – including abuse, neglect, death or significant loss/trauma
- **Individual psychological factors** – including self esteem, thinking style
- **Social issues** – including difficulties with friends or teachers at school, or conflict within the family at home.
- **Serious illness or physical injury**

Most mental illnesses don’t have a single ‘cause’. It’s much more common for a person to have some sort of vulnerability, and for a problem to be triggered when they meet stresses in their day-to-day life.

How to help the young person you are worried about

When someone in your family has mental health problems:

- Keep communication open and don’t rush into judgements
- Be available without being intrusive or ‘pushy’
- Spend time with the person. Take an interest in their activities, and encourage them to talk about what’s happening in their life
- Take the person’s feelings seriously
- Encourage and support friendships
- Encourage activities that promote mental health, such as exercise, good eating, regular sleep, and doing things the person enjoys
- Give positive feedback
- Let the person know that you love them. They may not always admit it, but this is likely to be very important to them

How to find help

If you are worried about the health and safety of a young person:

- Talk openly and honestly with them, and let them know that you are concerned
- Reassure them that you will be there for them, and ask what they need from you
- Let them know that there is lots of help available. They will be able to talk to health professionals in private if this is what they prefer
- Help find an appropriate service, such as a headspace centre (www.headspace.org.au), and support them in attending
- Ask direct questions if you are concerned about suicide. For example, have you been thinking about death? Have you thought about ending your life?
- Help the person build a support network
- Look after yourself as well. Get some support by talking to people, and seek professional help for yourself if you need it.

Some important things to remember about parenting young people

- Young people need a sense of belonging, connectedness to their family (whatever they say!), friends and community, and to make a meaningful contribution
- Firm and consistent limits are essential, but try to involve the young person in negotiating acceptable ‘rules’
- A balance between self-responsibility and support helps a ‘child’ grow to an ‘adult’
- Young people need to do things differently from their parents and become individuals in their own right
- Teenagers and young adults often question everything their families say and do. Try to stay confident in yourself, but also be open to learning
- Mistakes happen. Use mistakes – whether by you or the young person – to learn and keep moving forward.

For more information, and to find out how to get help, visit the headspace website: [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)