5.2 Mental Health

5.2.1 Identifying and Managing Mental Health Issues Among Older Children and Adolescents

Background

Community health staff working in schools (especially secondary schools) often work with older children and adolescents who are experiencing mental health problems. Young people may consult with staff directly about their mental health issue, or may consult about other non-related issues which might mask an issue such as anxiety or depression. Some young people may not recognise that they have a mental health issue. Others may recognise a problem, but might be unable to adequately express their concerns, or may feel uncomfortable talking about them.

Community health staff in schools play a key role in early identification of mental health issues among the student population. A partnership approach involving school health services, school psychology services, student service team and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service teams is fundamental to successful management. This guideline provides a pathway for identification of mental health problems, and referral to other services for further assessment and intervention. It also assists in assessment of suicide risk and situations which might require urgent action.

General Principles

Adolescence is a period of rapid physical, cognitive, psychological, social and emotional development. During this time young people develop a sense of identity and growing independence from family. It is a phase often characterised by risk-taking behaviour linked to increasing autonomy and identity development, together with limited appreciation of consequences.

Many young people feel awkward and strange about themselves, their bodies, and relationships with others. Many feel some degree of confusion and stress about the changes in themselves. Typically adolescents are concerned about relationships, acceptance by peers, sexuality, and generally worry about being normal. They can be introspective and highly sensitive about health and other personal matters, therefore it is essential to gain the trust of the young person. While many of these concerns can be considered part of normal development, adolescence is a phase of life when mental illness can emerge. If conditions can be identified early and intervention is timely, it is possible to prevent long-term problems or decrease the impact of mental ill-health.
Some young people are more vulnerable than others, particularly those who have experienced abuse, have parents with a mental illness, are suffering from chronic disease or disability, have suffered grief or loss, have been bullied or experienced sustained difficulties with peer relationships or have experienced a traumatic event or family conflict. Conversely, a number of young people who present with mental health issues may indicate no particular risk factors. Occasionally, an entire school community may be vulnerable following local traumatic events.

Mental ill-health may manifest as anxiety, depression, attentional problems, self-harming behaviours, suicidal thoughts or attempts, eating disorders and relationship difficulties. For some students there may be frequent complaints about psycho-somatic conditions which may mask a mental health issue. Community health nurses in schools, and other student service personnel are well placed to identify mental health issues of concern.

Considerations when working with mental health issues in the school setting

The following points should be considered when working with students experiencing mental health issues:

**In general**

- Are you part of a student service team? Are you clear about your role and the role of others in the team?
- Has the school anticipated that mental health issues will arise in students and (proactively) planned responses? What is your role in the response?
- Do you have competence in dealing with mental health issues?
- Do you have competence in providing youth health care?
- Have you identified members of the school community who have competence and with whom you can collaborate?
- Have you considered the duty of care and duty of confidentiality you owe to students? Have you considered scenarios when the duties may conflict, and how you might deal with them?
- What happens when a situation arises outside of your scope of practice? Do you have access to clinical supervision in relation to mental health issues?

**Note:** If you have answered ‘no’ to any of the questions above, discuss with your line manager.

**When working with individual students**

- Have you ensured that the student is safe and supported?
- Have you ensured that you are safe and supported?
- In the best interests of the student, who else should be involved in care?
• Do you need to collaborate with other members of the student services team?

• Do you need to inform parents? If yes, when?

• Have you obtained consent to share personal health information with other members of the student services team? (Note, in emergencies, specific information can be shared without consent.)

• If there has been an incident of concern, have you reported it to your manager and the school administration as appropriate?

• Have you maintained good documentation in relation to the student and the care provided?

• Have you ‘debriefed’ and reviewed the process of care?
Youth with an issue

1. Contact with school nurse
   (Service entry point)

2. Nurse conducts general lifestyle assessment to gain picture of the young person’s circumstances.
   HEADSS assessment

3. Mental health concern suspected.
   Check involvement with other health professionals and liaise.
   OR
   Behaviour indicates need for referral without further assessment
   OR
   Further assessment is required. Options:
   - Member of student service team conduct SDQ*
   - Nurse conducts SDQ, now or at another appointment
   - Student unable to do SDQ, refer as appropriate.

4. Support required
   - Work collaboratively with school psychologist and student services team as appropriate
   - Refer to CAMHS if required
   - Refer to other services as required and available.

5. Monitoring and ongoing support
   - Liaise with school psychologist and student services team as appropriate.

* SDQ - Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
Associated tools and procedures

- HEADSS Psychosocial assessment tool
- SDQ Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
- Suicide risk assessment materials (Gatekeepers)

Recommended professional development

- Gatekeepers Suicide Prevention training and materials presented by the Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention [http://www.mcsp.org.au]
- Self harm training - YouthLink
- Mental Health First Aid
- Fundamental counselling skills including motivational interviewing and understanding the principles of cognitive behaviour therapy.

Useful resources

- Mindmatters High Needs Students (formerly MindMatters Plus): Enhancing the capacity of secondary schools to support students who have high needs in the area of mental health and well-being.

- Seasons for Growth, [http://www.goodgrief.org.au]: Supporting students to cope with change, grief and loss.

- There are two very good websites that have lots of information for use by community health nurses and young people themselves. These websites have fact sheets that are downloadable:
  - [http://www.livingisforeveryone.com.au]: Go to Factsheets, then Young People/Children.
  - [http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk]: Go to Mental Health information, and then select a topic.


- Somazone Help & Support Services Database allows young people using the site to search for services and support groups in all states, territories and regions of Australia. Somazone aims to improve young people’s awareness of and access to youth-friendly health services and to reduce the stigma of help-seeking behaviours. For further information visit: [http://www.somazone.com.au]
Supporting and/or related policies

- Operational Circular - OP 2050/06 Confidentiality and Divulging Patient Information to Third Parties, Department of Health WA.

- Operational Circular - OP 1548/02 New Western Australian Public Sector Code of Ethics, Department of Health WA.

- WA School Health Service Policy Set, 2006 - 2008, Department of Health WA.

- Scope of Nursing Practice - Decision Making Framework, Nurse and Midwives Board of Western Australia.

- Code of Ethics, Department of Health WA.

- Working with Youth - A legal resource for community based health workers, Department of Health WA.