



SCHOOLS, TEACHERS & STUDENTS

Diversity in young people

We are all different. Our family history, culture, language, sexual orientation, and gender identity all shape who we are. It therefore influences the way we perceive, treat and acknowledge mental health as well.

Complex mental health issues and diversity

It is important to consider the influence of diversity within the school and broader community and how this may be influencing the mental health of young people. This will facilitate a greater understanding of the needs of a young person with complex mental health issues. Framing conversations and interventions in a way that is culturally sensitive and recognises these differences can assist.

Who is at risk?

Although every student will have unique life experiences, there are particular groups that are at a significantly greater risk of experiencing mental health difficulties.

The Australian Aboriginal community:

- Are twice as likely to experience high or very high levels of distress
- Are three times more likely to be hospitalised for intentional self-harm
- Have a suicide rate which is twice as high than that of non-Indigenous people
- Community prevalence surveys have reported rates of between 4-16% for personality disorder in remote communities
- The British colonisation of Australia has had major impacts on both physical and mental health including: the introduction of new diseases, the removal of ancestral land, and loss of Indigenous culture
- The forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families and placement in institutions (Stolen Generation Policy) had devastating impacts on Indigenous culture and the mental health of not only the individuals directly involved, but the ongoing trauma experienced by their family and community
- The interconnected issues of cultural dislocation, personal trauma, grief, loss, and the ongoing stressors of disadvantage, racism, alienation and exclusion are acknowledged to contribute to the heightened risk of mental health problems, substance misuse and suicide for Indigenous people

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) young people:

- May experience significant barriers to accessing mental health services
- Adapting to a new culture can be highly stressful when there are broad difference in beliefs, language, values and customs
- Help-seeking patterns vary across cultures, with ethnic minorities often less likely to seek mental health treatment and more likely to present in crisis
- The impact of migration and resettlement leave young people vulnerable to higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and psychological disturbance due to the impact of pre-displacement and resettlement
- Many refugees have also experienced war and trauma, often resulting in the loss of family members
- This impact is also felt by second-generation CALD (i.e. young people born in Australia but their parents were not), who are likely to face specific issues to do with self-perception and being caught between their 'new' culture and that of their family

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA) community:

- 80% of the abuse (physical, threats, and other forms of homophobia) young people from this community face occurs in schools
- Are more than twice as likely to have anxiety disorders
- Have higher rates of depression and mood disorders
- Have a higher prevalence of suicidal thoughts, plans, and attempts
- Have a lifetime suicide attempt rate of 31%

Accepting and supporting diversity

If diversity is not acknowledged or respected, it can lead to a number of negative consequences. This includes: diminished trust, lack of understanding and empathy felt by the young person, and feeling others are imposing values and beliefs that are not held.

Despite the many disadvantages that these groups face, there are positive steps that can be taken to help breakdown the stigma:

- Be respectful of the young person's cultural background, beliefs and values: Getting to know the young person will ensure there are less chances of assumptions being made
- Display cultural relativism: An individual's beliefs and activities should be understood by others in terms of that person's own culture e.g. a young person may feel uncomfortable shaking hands or into a person's eyes when talking, but this may be accepted in their culture
- Learn about other cultures, particularly Aboriginal history, and how these unique cultural experiences may impact their mental health and help-seeking
- It is possible to work with someone of a different background as long as respect, understanding, and willingness to value the person's culture is at the forefront of communication
- Refer a young person to someone who is more appropriate if values or language become a barrier
- Encourage a positive environment by offering a range of opportunities that appreciate diversity in students and families

