

Clinical Toolkit

Clinical Tips: Engaging a Young Person

Why is engagement important?

The primary goal of the initial assessment is to engage, assess risk and the need for care rather than make a definitive diagnosis. Engagement is a critical precursor to assessment. If a young person is not engaged, the utility of any assessment is questionable as the information gathered is not reliable.

Young people often present with evolving, unclear or mixed sub-syndromal symptoms (i.e. symptoms that don't quite meet the diagnostic criteria in terms of number or intensity, and do not fit neatly into any one diagnosis). While they may not meet diagnostic criteria for any specific disorder, these symptoms can be associated with significant distress, decrease in functioning and they are a risk factor for later illness development. For example, bipolar disorder can initially present with non-specific psychopathology, including depression. Therefore, it is important to intervene, even if symptoms are subthreshold.

Early intervention includes assessment of the need for care, and assessing the level of need (low, moderate or high intensity) to match this with an appropriately intense treatment option. Applying a low threshold for care can reduce the risk of developing a mental illness and prevent further deterioration in functioning.

Tips for Engaging a Young Person

Ensure enough time to develop trust

This may mean that assessment continues over a number of sessions to get a full picture of the presentation and if it is changing over time. This also supports successful engagement, which can assist young people to feel less distressed.

Normalise questions

Let young people know that you always ask these questions. It provides context and highlights that you commonly see people with similar thoughts or feelings.

For example, if a young person discloses that they feel sad, you could follow on with:

'Sometimes when young people feel sad, they might have thoughts about harming themselves or thoughts about dying or suicide. Have you had any thoughts about harming yourself or about suicide?'

Involve family and friends

Recognise that family and friends are a key source of support for young people. They may have better knowledge of the young person's developmental history as well as the family history of mental health and other illnesses. They also play a vital role in supporting a young person's recovery, including adherence to treatment and reducing relapse and are likely to themselves feel an impact of the young person's illness. Find out more about [engaging family and friends in a young person's care](#).

Consider cultural factors

It is important to consider how a young person's symptoms are understood in their culture and provide culturally sensitive assessment. This includes considering if using screening tools is appropriate, if using Westernised terms to describe their experiences is helpful, and if more time needs to be spent engaging the young person and providing a supported referral. It is generally not recommended to use screening tools or Westernised language about mental illness when working with young people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, rather, the concept of [Social and Emotional Wellbeing](#) should be used.