



Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences

# Accessing mental health services for people with an intellectual disability

Centre for Developmental Disability Health Victoria

## Fact Sheet

# Accessing mental health services for people with an intellectual disability

## Guiding principles

1. Mental health disorders are health conditions characterised by alterations in thinking/perception, feelings/mood and/or behaviour associated with distress and/or impaired functioning.
2. Mental health disorders are much more common in people with intellectual disabilities for a range of biological, psychological, social and developmental reasons.
3. A person with an intellectual disability has the same right to access mainstream community and specialist public Mental Health Services as anyone else in the community.

For more information see:

Disability Discrimination Act 1992:  
[www.humanrights.gov.au/disability\\_rights/dda\\_guide/dda\\_guide.htm](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/disability_rights/dda_guide/dda_guide.htm)

Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities:  
[www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au](http://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au)

## Identifying that someone has a mental illness

A diagnosis of a mental illness is made when an individual shows a group or 'cluster' of **characteristic features and behaviours** that are markedly different from their usual behaviour or demeanour. These may begin slowly from a very mild change and worsen gradually, or may occur suddenly in a dramatic change in behaviour. When the individual has a cognitive and/or communication impairment the identification of the mental illness relies on the observation and interpretation of these features and/or behaviours by others.

### Someone who is depressed will show changes in their:

- **thoughts** – think they are bad or worthless. They may think about being dead, dying and/or killing themselves.
- **feelings** – feel sad or down. Little or nothing gives them pleasure.
- **behaviour** – may cry, be withdrawn, quiet or irritable and have a 'short fuse'.
- **physical wellbeing** – may sleep more (or less), may sleep at unusual times – eg sleep during the day but be disturbed at night. May eat less (not interested in food) or more (as a comfort).

### Someone who is manic will show changes in their:

- **thoughts** – they may think they are someone very well known and important (eg a film star, a religious leader, a staff member). They may think they have a lot of money or power. They have 'flight of ideas' – flitting from one thought to another in a way that is hard for others to follow.
- **feelings** – may feel happy or 'up', but as the disorder develops they become 'driven', stressed, irritable and have 'a short fuse'.
- **behaviour** – at first they may laugh, giggle, sing, whistle, speak more, speak loudly, yell, be abusive, scream, be very active, be very creative, always be 'on the go', be aggressive towards others, be destructive of property. They may behave in uncharacteristic ways – perhaps being sexually provocative or sexually driven. They may dress in an unusual (for them) or outrageous way.
- **physical wellbeing** – they sleep less and may go many days without any sleep at all, they may be disinterested in food and lose weight or be insatiable, eating and/or drinking constantly.

### Someone who is psychotic will show changes in their:

- **thoughts/perception** – they may be paranoid – believe that people are going to hurt or kill them. They may interpret things they hear or see or smell as threatening or frightening. They may hear or see things that are not there. For instance they may hear a voice or voices telling them that they are bad, or telling them to do things – this may include hurting themselves or (rarely) hurting others. They may see people or creatures around them.
- **feelings** – their feelings will reflect their reality. If they believe someone is going to hurt them or those they care about then they may be frightened or defensive or angry. If they believe they have superhuman powers they may put themselves at risk.
- **behaviour** – Their behaviour will reflect their reality. They may hide from perceived danger, or talk to perceived voices or people, or shrink in fear from threatening visions. They may be fearful of certain people or places, or may 'target' particular people thinking they are a threat in some way.
- **physical wellbeing** – they may become fearful of food or sleep or take refuge in sleep.

## When to access specialist public Mental Health Services

The specialist public Mental Health Service system sits within the general healthcare system, and has particular responsibility for the care of people with severe mental illness.

For most people with a mental illness, including those with an intellectual disability, assessment and care is most appropriately provided within the community by their primary health practitioner (usually their General Practitioner, Community Health Service) or private psychiatrist or psychologist.

Access to specialist public Mental Health Services may be sought if the mental health issue is severe and/or the mental illness continues despite the intervention of primary care services and/or private mental health providers.

**Mental Health Advice line: 1300 280 737**

## Understanding the Mental Health Service system

### Area Mental Health Services (AMHS)

Specialist clinical Mental Health Services in Victoria are provided on an area basis – Area Mental Health Services (AMHS).

They include:

- Child And Adolescent Mental Health Services (age 0–18)
- Adult Mental Health Services (16–64)
- Aged Persons Mental Health Services (65+)

Each of these service categories provides inpatient psychiatric services, in addition to a range of residential and other community-based services.

**For more information:** [www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services)

### Adult Mental Health Services (16–64 years)

The **target group** for AMHS are people with serious mental illness or mental disorder who have associated significant levels of disturbance and psychosocial disability due to their illness or disorder. These are people with a diagnosis of a major mental illness, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or serious depression and will include some people with other conditions such as severe personality disorder, severe anxiety disorder, or those who present in situational crisis that may lead to self-harm or inappropriate behaviour towards others. The distinguishing factor is the level of severity of the disturbance and impairment.

**For more information:** [www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/adult](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/adult)

### Crisis Assessment and Treatment (CAT) services

These services operate 24 hours a day and they provide:

- services to people within the AMHS target group (above).
- urgent community-based assessment.
- short-term treatment interventions to people in psychiatric crisis.
- intensive community treatment and support, often in the person's own home, during the acute phase of illness as an alternative to hospitalisation.

**For more information:** [www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/adult](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/adult)

### Primary mental health and early intervention teams (PMHEI)

These teams:

- support and enhance the capacity of primary care providers, especially general practitioners and community health services, to recognise and respond to mental disorders more effectively.
- provide consultation, liaison, education and training services to primary care providers for both low and high prevalence disorders.
- focus on disorders such as depression and anxiety, and provide some short-term direct care treatment and assessment for these high prevalence disorders.

**For more information:** [www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/adult](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/adult)

## Aged Persons Mental Health Services

Aged persons mental health services are:

- for people with long-standing mental illness who are now 65 years or older.
- for people who have developed functional illnesses such as depression and psychosis in later life.
- for people with psychiatric or severe behavioural difficulties associated with organic disorders such as dementia.

**For more information:** [www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/aged](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/aged)

## Victorian Dual Disability Service (VDDS)

- This service supports the Area Mental Health Service (AMHS) teams in the assessment and management of people who have both an intellectual disability and a mental illness.
- Telephone advice is provided to anyone needing information about the presentation, assessment or management of people with intellectual disability and mental illness.
- Clinical assessment and management recommendations can be requested by:
  - Clinicians from Specialist Area Mental Health Services.
  - Behaviour Intervention Support Team of Disability Services North and West Metropolitan region.

Note: VDDS does not provide direct treatment but works with the Specialist Area Mental Health Services in ensuring assessment and appropriate management.

**For more information:** [www.vdds.org.au](http://www.vdds.org.au)

## Service access and provision for people with an intellectual disability

1. Adults with **common but less severe** mental health disorders eg anxiety, mild/moderate depression, obsessive compulsive disorders are entitled to services and care from:
    - Mainstream health services such as general practitioners (GP) and Community Health Centres.
    - Referral to a private psychologists and/or a private psychiatrist may be appropriate (on referral from GP).
    - Primary Mental Health and Early Intervention teams (see above).
  2. Adults with **serious mental illness**, such as a severe mood disorder (depression or mania), or psychotic illness, are entitled to services and care from mainstream health services and Area Mental Health Services (AMHS). The Victorian Dual Disability Service (VDDS) is available to support the AMHS teams in the assessment and care of people with both intellectual disability and mental illness.
- For more information:** [www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/adult](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/adult)
3. Adults with **severe psychiatric disturbance – or severe behaviour related to a psychiatric disorder** – that is of immediate danger to themselves or other people or property in their vicinity are entitled to services and care from the Crisis Assessment and Treatment (CAT) teams. The Victorian Dual Disability Service (VDDS) is available to support the AMHS teams (including CAT teams) in the assessment and care of people with both intellectual disability and mental illness.

**For more information:** [www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/adult](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/adult)

4. Adults who have **psychiatric or behaviour disorders related to an organic disorder associated with aging** such as dementia are entitled to services and care from the Aged Persons Mental Health Teams. The target group for this service is usually over 65 years, but also includes people in whom changes associated with aging occur at an earlier age, such as people with Down syndrome who develop Alzheimer's dementia. The Victorian Dual Disability Service (VDDS) is available to support the AMHS teams in the assessment and care of people with both intellectual disability and mental illness.

**For more information:** [www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/aged](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/aged)

## Contact numbers for

### Area Mental Health Services Psychiatric Triage Services

(information, assessment and referral)

24 hours a day, 7 days a week

For maps of regions below see:

[www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/adult/index.htm](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/adult/index.htm)

#### Metropolitan:

Central East:	Tel: 1300 721 927
Dandenong:	Tel: 1300 369 012 / Fax: (03) 9554 1985
Inner South East:	Tel: 1300 363 746
Inner Urban East:	Tel: 1300 558 862
Inner West:	Tel: 1300 304 407
Mid West:	Tel: 1300 859 764
Middle South:	Tel: 1300 369 012 / Fax: (03) 9554 1985
North East:	Tel: 1300 859 789
North West:	Tel: 1300 768 073
Northern:	Tel: 1300 650 295
Outer East:	Tel: 1300 721 927
Peninsula:	Tel: 1300 792 977
South West:	Tel: 1300 657 259

#### Rural:

Barwon:	Tel: (03) 5226 7410
Gippsland:	Tel: 1300 363 322
Glenelg (South Western):	Tel: 1800 808 284
Goulburn and Southern:	Tel: 1300 369 005
Grampians:	Tel: 1300 661 323
Loddon Campaspe /Southern Mallee:	Tel: 1300 363 788

#### North Eastern Hume:

Wodonga:	Tel: 1300 881 104
Wangaratta:	Tel: 1300 783 347
Northern Mallee:	Tel: 1300 366 375

### Victorian Dual Disability Service (VDDS):

Provides support and training on request to Area Mental Health Services in assessment and management of people with both intellectual disability and mental illness.

Tel: (03) 9288 2950  
 Fax: (03) 9288 2953  
 Email: [vdds@svhm.org.au](mailto:vdds@svhm.org.au)

## Complaints

Complaints are an important way of identifying problems in the existing service framework and function and so contribute to service improvement.

1. If you are unhappy with the service your client receives inform those treating the patient that you are not satisfied, explain why and notify your manager.
2. If you are still not satisfied with the service received inform the director of the service treating the patient that you are not satisfied, explain why and notify your manager.
3. If you are still not satisfied with the service received notify your manager and inform the Office of the **Health Services Commissioner** or, if the complaint is specifically in relation to specialist public Mental Health Services, the **Office of the Chief Psychiatrist**.
4. A family member, friend, health professional or disability worker can make a complaint to the **Office of the Health Services Commissioner** or, if the complaint is specifically in relation to specialist public Mental Health Services, the **Office of the Chief Psychiatrist**.

### Office of the Health Services Commissioner: Complaints and Information

**Tel:** 1800 136 066  
 (03) 8601 5200  
**Fax:** (03) 8601 5219  
**TTY No.** 1300 550 275  
**Mail:** Health Services Commissioner  
 30th Floor  
 570 Bourke Street  
 Melbourne VIC 3000

For more information: [www.health.vic.gov.au/hsc](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/hsc)

### Office of Chief Psychiatrist:

**Tel:** 1300 767 299 (9 am to 5 pm)  
 (03) 9096 7571  
**Fax:** (03) 9096 7697  
**Mail:** Chief Psychiatrist  
 Mental Health Branch  
 Department of Human Services  
 Level 17  
 50 Lonsdale Street  
 Melbourne VIC 3000

For more information: [www.health.vic.gov.au/chiefpsychiatrist](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/chiefpsychiatrist)

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