

# Speech pathology in mental health services

## Mental health

Mental health is related to promotion of well-being and prevention, treatment and rehabilitation of people affected by mental health disorders. Mental health disorders affect a person's social, emotional and/or behavioural functioning and can be influenced by a number of individual and environmental factors including biological, psychological and social factors.

## Communication impairment

Communication disorders may involve difficulties in one or more of the following:

- Speech production
- Understanding what other people are saying
- Formulating ideas into words to talk to or respond to others
- Having the social skills required to interact appropriately with others across the lifespan in a variety of situations

Communication impairment can impact on a person's ability to participate in school and education, get and keep a job and socialise with their family, friends and community. This limits the way they form friendships and relationships as well as affecting the development of appropriate communication skills.

## Communication and mental health disorders

Communication disorders often co-occur in individuals with mental health issues, with some people experiencing mental health problems related to pre-existing communication conditions (e.g. they feel depressed or anxious about their communication difficulties). Communication and/or swallowing difficulties can also be part of a person's mental health disorder (e.g. disordered speech and language can be features of schizophrenia, and swallowing difficulties as part of dementia). Swallowing disorders in mental health often occur as a side effect of medication or as a result of substance abuse or acquired brain injury.

Adults and children with speech and language impairments are more likely to have mental health problems than those without. There is also a strong link between a person's communication skills and their mental health status.

## The role of speech pathologists in mental health

Speech pathologists aim to improve a person's communication and swallowing skills so they can function in everyday life. The goal of speech pathology intervention is to improve a person's ability to function physically, socially and mentally at home, in the classroom, in the workplace, in social situations and in mental health treatment programs.

Speech pathologists are an important part of the mental health team that assesses people with mental health issues, as they identify communication difficulties and develop appropriate treatment targets. As part of a mental health team, speech pathologists play an important role in diagnosing certain mental health conditions, like dementia, schizophrenia, autism spectrum



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disorder and speech and language disorders. They also provide intervention to improve communication and swallowing difficulties. This includes:

- Producing visual schedules to help someone understand and participate in their treatment
- Social skills therapy to improve their social interactions
- Establishing safe and effective eating, drinking and swallowing practices to help make sure adequate nutrition and hydration, as well as to reduce the risk of choking and medical problems such as pneumonia associated with inhaling food or fluids.

## The role of speech pathologists in early detection and intervention

Speech pathologists working as part of a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service assess and provide intervention to children and young people experiencing social, emotional and/or behavioural difficulties that can include relationship, developmental and psychological problems. These children often have trouble coping at home and at school.

In some cases children accessing child and adolescent mental health services may have suffered trauma, abuse or neglect, be cared for by a parent or guardian with a mental illness, be involved in the Youth Justice System or be in a dedicated mental health setting such as an adolescent inpatient psychiatric unit or group day program.

Some signs that may indicate a child or young person could have a communication difficulty that impacts on their mental health include:

- Difficulty interacting socially

- Isolation within the family or at school
- Difficulty making speech sounds
- Difficulty understanding others or expressing their feelings and ideas verbally
- Behavioural difficulties

Common mental health problems seen in children and young people accessing child and adolescent mental health services include:

- Depression including suicidal thoughts and behaviour
- Anxiety e.g. social phobia, social anxiety, school refusal
- Social problems e.g. making friends, bullying, family problems
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Autism spectrum disorder
- Intellectual disability
- Attachment and personality disorders
- Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder
- Severe language disorder
- Substance use disorders
- Psychotic disorders
- Eating disorders

Following assessment, a child and adolescent mental health services speech pathologist may provide:

- Consultation to the mental health treatment team, family and school
- Strategies to maximise communication development and achievement of successful outcomes
- Resources e.g. visual schedules, social stories
- Recommendations for additional assessment or intervention
- Support and counselling around communication difficulties.

## How do I become a speech pathologist?

Speech pathology is an accredited undergraduate or entry level masters degree.

To find out more go to [www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/education-and-careers/university-courses](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/education-and-careers/university-courses)

## How do I find a speech pathologist in my area?

Go to [www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au) and click on "Find a Speech Pathologist".

For further information contact **Speech Pathology Australia** – the national peak body representing speech pathologists, the professionals who work with and advocate for people who have a communication disability and all Australian consumers of speech pathology services.