

Mental Health

Mental health is related to the promotion of wellbeing and the prevention, treatment and rehabilitation of people living with a mental illness. Mental illness can affect a person's social, emotional and/or behavioural functioning and can be influenced by many individual and environmental factors.

Individuals accessing mental health services often have conditions such as:

- Mood disorders, e.g., depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD);
- Attachment and personality disorders;
- Psychotic disorders (including schizophrenia);
- Behavioural disorders;
- Eating disorders;
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD);
- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD);
- Intellectual disability.

Communication disorders and mental illness

Communication disorders may involve difficulties with the physical production of speech/voice, understanding what other people are saying, expressing thoughts and feelings in words, and/or interacting socially with others. Individuals with communication disorders are at a significantly greater risk of developing social, emotional and/or behavioural difficulties, including mental illnesses, than the general population. Communication difficulties may develop either due to the mental illness itself or as a side effect of medication used to treat the mental illness.

Swallowing disorders and mental illness

Problems with eating, drinking and swallowing are known as dysphagia. Dysphagia may result in life-threatening choking episodes, aspiration pneumonia (resulting from food/fluids being inhaled into the lungs),

compromised nutrition or hydration, and reduced quality of life.

People living with a mental illness are at a significantly greater risk of developing swallowing disorders than the general population. This can be for several reasons, such as the side effects of medications, individuals also having other conditions (e.g., brain injury, or intellectual disability), and/or changes caused by the mental illness itself. People with dysphagia are also at a greater risk of experiencing mental health difficulties, in part because of the impact swallowing disorders can have on quality of life and social opportunities.

The role of speech pathologists in mental health

Speech pathologists improve a person's communication and swallowing skills so they can 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. Speech pathologists diagnose communication and swallowing disorders and, as part of the mental health team, can play an important role in diagnosing mental illnesses. They also help to determine whether communication or swallowing difficulties are part of the current mental health issue or whether there is an underlying communication/swallowing disorder. They then develop appropriate targets to help overcome difficulties and help the person understand and participate in their treatment.

Speech pathologists provide intervention to improve communication and swallowing, including:

- Providing individual or group therapy to develop an individual's speech, language, and social communication skills;

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- Collaborating with other mental health professionals to ensure communication difficulties are considered in the context of other mental health interventions;
- Supporting an individual's communication (including using visual resources, where appropriate) to enable them to understand and participate in their treatment and recovery;
- Establishing safe and effective eating, drinking and swallowing practices to help make sure people have adequate nutrition and hydration, as well as to reduce the risk of choking or pneumonia.

Speech pathologists play an important role in mental health services across the lifespan, including:

Prevention and health promotion

Speech pathologists work with populations at an increased risk of experiencing both mental illness and communication difficulties, e.g., those from a socially disadvantaged background, individuals who have suffered trauma, abuse or neglect, children and young people who are in out of home care, and young people and adults in contact with the criminal justice system, in order to reduce the risk of potential problems developing.

Infant mental health

Speech pathologists support the interactions between carers and their young children to help ensure positive communication and attachments, thereby reducing the risk of future issues. A parent's mental illness can also increase the risk that a baby will develop feeding difficulties. Speech pathologists assess the infant's feeding skills, and provide intervention to increase the safety and enjoyment of feeding.

Child and youth mental health

Children may develop social, emotional, and/or behavioural difficulties and may struggle to cope at home and at school. These difficulties can mask underlying communication needs. Speech pathologists assess and treat any speech, language and/ or social communication needs that the child or young person may be experiencing and which may be contributing to, or resulting from, the mental health difficulties.

Understanding the young person's strengths and weaknesses also helps carers, school teachers and other mental health clinicians offer appropriate support in their home, school and work environments, and within mental health programs.



Adult mental health

Speech pathologists working with adults living with a mental illness can provide information on their current communication skills and swallowing abilities. This helps the mental health team to make accurate diagnoses and provide effective intervention. Speech pathologists provide advice and treatment to develop the communication skills of an individual with mental illness, ensure information is communicated in a meaningful way, and help them to eat/drink more safely.

How do I become a speech pathologist?

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

To find out more go to [speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/become](https://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/become)

How do I find a speech pathologist in my area?

Go to www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/find

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 and/ or swallowing disability, and all Australian consumers of speech pathology services.

Contact Us

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