

Seeing our Psychologists

A Parents Guide to Supporting Adolescents

Whilst growing independence means your child is beginning to face some situations on their own, they still require strong guidance and leadership from parents for emotional, financial and logistical support. As parents we understand you want to know what's happening, what they are experiencing and how you can help. It is however also important that you gradually give them the space to manage these moments on their own. Therefore we have put together some helpful information to allow you stay in the picture, give them the room to make appropriate decisions independently, and guide you as to how to best support your adolescent.

What should I bring to my First Session?

- Before the session, aim to have a collaborative discussion with your adolescent to establish whether they agree with your perspective around the concerns and therapy goals. If their perspective differs, ask your adolescent to write their own list.
- It is helpful to consider when concerning symptoms do and don't occur, when they started, what you both would like to get out of attending, and any questions either of you may have.
- If applicable, please also bring your adolescent's Mental Health Care Plan (MHCP) letter from the GP.

What can I expect in the First Session my child has with their Psychologist?

- The first session takes two hours and is an opportunity for us to understand your perspectives and develop a working relationship with your adolescent. The psychologist will ask a variety of questions to get a sense of what has brought you both in to see us, as well as discussion around your adolescent's life history and other life areas, such as school and interests. An in-depth discussion about why they are experiencing their difficulties and treatment options will also occur.
- If your adolescent is 14 to 15 years old, you will be included in the session to provide information, support your adolescent and to hear the proposed treatment plan. There may be a time where you are asked to wait outside whilst the psychologist begins to establish rapport directly with your adolescent.
- Due to the legal age of consent, if your adolescent is 16 to 17 years old it is your adolescent's decision as to whether you are included in the process. Parental involvement is always encouraged, although ultimately it is your adolescent's decision.

What can I expect after their First Session?

- Adolescents' emotions and behaviours after the first session are a bit of a mixed bag – they can largely vary and can also be difficult to predict.
- Some adolescents may feel exhausted after talking about their emotions and want a quiet car ride home. Others may be visibly distressed after talking about difficult emotions and thoughts for two hours; this is particularly likely for adolescents who avoid talking about the 'bad times'. They may desire physical comfort and want to talk about the session, or want space and quiet time. Some adolescents may feel content and relieved after expressing themselves and being listened to by another adult.
- Do not be surprised if your adolescent does not want to immediately discuss the session with you. They may choose to do this later at a time when you are not expecting it. If they don't talk to you, remember that adolescence is a natural time for independence to grow. Not speaking with you does not mean there is anything wrong with your relationship; it is a sign of healthy and normal adolescent development.

What should I do after the First Session?

- It is difficult to predict how your adolescent will react to the initial session, even for themselves. For this reason, after the session the best approach is to let them know that you are happy and willing to talk about the session if this is what they want. But if not, it is most helpful to accept this.
- Your adolescent not wanting to talk after the session is not a reflection that the session went poorly or they are withholding information from you, rather it is an indication that they need time to process their own emotions and thoughts, or that they are beginning to exert a sense of independence, which is common and normal during adolescence. In these times, it is helpful to say you will be there to listen to them and speak about the session, when and if they choose to.

What should I tell my adolescent before their First Session?

- It is helpful to explain to your adolescent the initial session process prior to the session. Let them know that the initial session is for a 120 minute period and subsequent sessions are 60 minutes. Advise them that today it will be your adolescent's decision as to whether they would like their parent in the session or not.
- You can let your adolescent know that they are likely to discuss the problem, context around the problem, and other more enjoyable topics such as school, friends and childhood. Explain to your adolescent it is likely that you will speak alone with the psychologist at times.
- It can also be helpful to explain that although sessions may not always be enjoyable, they will be beneficial in the long term. Explore the benefits that may arise with your adolescent, for example what behaviours they may no longer experience (e.g. avoiding certain situations) and what might they be able to do (e.g. enjoy certain activities more).
- It can be helpful to ask your adolescent how they feel about talking with someone they do not know and how they expect to feel after. Offer whether there is anything you can do to make them feel more comfortable during the process.
- Encourage your adolescent to ask their psychologist any questions that they might have. You can let them know it is important to be honest with their psychologist so that they can be helped.
- Explain to your adolescent that after each session they will be given an at-home task that may include writing a list, completing a sheet or doing an activity.

What will my adolescent need to do between sessions?

- Psychologists will typically give your adolescent a task or handout to complete between each session. The psychologist may either explain the at-home task to you or ask your adolescent to independently complete it.
- It is very important that at-home tasks are practiced so that the skills learnt and practiced in session are generalised into daily life. One of the biggest predictors of treatment success is the regular practice of at-home tasks. However adolescents often have difficulty motivating themselves to complete tasks. For this reason, it can be helpful for you to encourage them to complete the task, and remind them of the reasons for the task being given to them.

When will I see a change in my Teenager?

- Noticeable change takes time. Most adolescents have developed their unhelpful thoughts, emotions or behaviours over years. These patterns have become habits, and like any habit they will take time to shift, with the process at times being challenging for your adolescent.
- In the first session issues are identified. At the beginning of therapy, adolescents often feel confused and overwhelmed. They may be reluctant to present to therapy. The following stage of treatment typically involves skill development. During this time a trusting relationship with the psychologist should emerge and your adolescent may begin to feel more comfortable. As a result after the middle stage of treatment, parents may be able to observe 'glimpses' of change, such as an increased willingness to come to therapy, experiencing a greater sense of 'good times' at home. This may include less angry outbursts or fewer instances of emotionally shutting down, and more enjoyable family and peer interactions.
- More noticeable change likely takes longer. For your adolescent to feel more confident in their daily life, strategies will need to be implemented and reinforced regularly and in different situations. Often parents, and sometimes even members outside of the family, can observe clear changes after 10 sessions. However, longer term traits and more engrained patterns of thoughts, emotions and behaviours can take longer to shift, and therefore reaching observable change may be a longer process. If your adolescent's therapeutic journey is likely to take some time, their psychologist will explain this to you during your sessions.

Why your Teenager may be hesitant about treatment

- All parents have their adolescent at the forefront of their mind and it makes sense that as a parent you may be naturally concerned about their progress. Times when it can be particularly easy to doubt progress is when your adolescent becomes unwilling to attend therapy, especially if they previously had been enjoying it.
- Around the middle of treatment your adolescent's psychologist will begin to challenge their unhelpful thoughts, emotions and behaviours, and encourage them to engage in more helpful ones. This may be difficult for your adolescent to do; although at the same time is vital to their progress. As a parent, your role is to encourage them to stick with therapy, letting them know it will get easier over time. Reminding your adolescent about a change earlier on in their lives (such as when they first started high school) and how difficult that was initially, but how easy it seems now, may be a helpful starting point.
- The second reason your adolescent may be reluctant to attend sessions is that they often tend to avoid talking about negative thoughts and emotions as this makes them feel 'bad'. However, at times it will be necessary to discuss these thoughts and emotions, which may feel challenging to them. Sometimes this may result in them appearing more distressed or emotionally shut down after a session. This is largely a reflection that your adolescent is not used to speaking about difficult thoughts and emotions, although with practice this will get much easier over time.
- As a parent, your role is to empathise and (if they allow you, physically comfort) your adolescent, and remind them of how courageous they are being by asking for support. It is also helpful to explain to your adolescent that by choosing to talk about their negative thoughts and emotions now, they will be unlikely to 'pop up' in the future without their control.

As a parent, what will my involvement in therapy be?

- It is likely that most sessions will involve the psychologist and your adolescent alone. At times the psychologist may choose to have part of a session, or even a whole session with you. Early on this may involve your psychologist explaining normative adolescent development. Other times, it may include updating you on your adolescent's progress and discussing any barriers to progress.
- It may also involve parent management strategies to help you feel more adept at managing your adolescent's thoughts, emotions and behaviours at home. Specifically, this can include skills to modify your home environment or changing the way you interact with your adolescent, so as to help them progress towards their goals.
- The psychologist will encourage your adolescent to update you on their progress and any at-home tasks. Your adolescent may ask for your support to ensure completion of at-home tasks.
- If you think you would like to be more involved in your adolescent's therapy, it is helpful to just let the psychologist know. Open communication with the psychologist about your concerns is always encouraged.

