

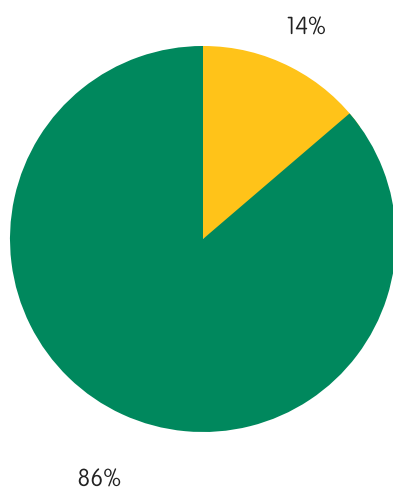
ALOPECIA, TEENS AND MENTAL HEALTH

An Information Sheet for Parents, Guardians and Family Members.

Research has shown that individuals living with Alopecia Areata may be at a higher risk of developing depression, anxiety and other mental health disorders. Knowing the signs can help to identify mental health concerns early and get support as soon as possible.

Alopecia Areata does not cause mental health conditions, but it can be an elevating risk factor. It is possible that experiencing Alopecia Areata can make young people feel isolated, angry, ashamed, or powerless to control their own body. In some cases, these feelings can exacerbate tendencies toward anxiety or depression.

According to Youth Beyond Blue, around one in seven young Australians will experience a mental health disorder. Depression and anxiety disorders are the most common and can have very real impacts on the lives of young people and their families. Mental health disorders can also be a risk factor in suicide. Sadly, suicide is the number one cause of death among those aged 15-25 in Australia, claiming more young lives each year than car accidents. Being aware of how to discuss mental health with young people and where to find additional support can help to improve these figures in the future.



As many of 14% of young Australians will experience a mental health disorder.



What do Anxiety and Depression look like in teens with Alopecia Areata?

The loss of one's hair is a loss, and it is normal to experience a grieving process. In some cases, the negative feelings can endure and impact on quality of life. It is also not uncommon for young people with alopecia to experience bullying or to hear misinformed and upsetting comments from others which can negatively impact their feelings about their hair loss.

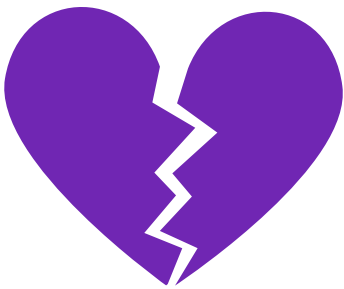
Anxiety:

While it is normal, and in fact healthy, to feel some stress or worry when dealing with everyday problems, anxiety disorders occur when these feelings persist over time or cause difficulties with day to day life. Anxiety is the most common mental health concern in Australia and affects two million Australians every year, including more than half a million young people.



Depression:

Depression affects an individual's thoughts, feelings, energy levels and behaviour, often presenting as feelings of hopelessness, sadness, exhaustion, irritability or emptiness which persist for several weeks or longer. It is important to remember that there are many different types of depression, and different ways it can present – for example, some people may have trouble sleeping and no appetite, while others may be exhausted and sleep and eat much more than normal.



Overall, anxiety and depression disorders don't look different in teens with Alopecia Areata than in teens without it. However the cause of the distressing feelings may be easier to identify and the support they need to address these emotions may be different.

It is normal for young people to experience ups and downs, especially when dealing with something as emotionally complex as Alopecia Areata. Changes in mood, levels of participation and thinking patterns which persist for more than a couple of weeks may indicate that your young person needs extra support.





Changes in mood include:

- Being irritable or angry with friends or family.
- Feeling tense, restless, stressed or worried
- Crying at sudden or random periods, feeling sad or down for long periods of time

Changes in activity include:

- Not enjoying or not wanting to be involved in things they would normally enjoy
- Being involved in risky behaviour they would normally avoid
- Unusual sleeping or eating habits, or substance use.

Changes in thinking include:

- Having a lot of negative thoughts
- Expressing distorted thoughts about themselves and the world (e.g. everything seeming bad and pointless).

How to start a conversation?

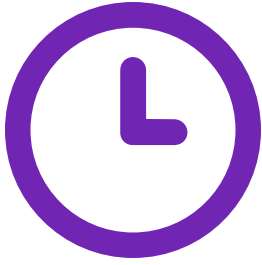
Beginning a discussion on mental health with young people can be challenging, especially if you are worried about them. Here are some tips;



SETTING THE SCENE: It is important for young people to feel comfortable opening up about their mental health, and you can help set up an environment which encourages open and supportive communication in several ways. Spending regular time with them, showing interest in what is happening in their life, and demonstrating that you take their feelings seriously by listening well and showing empathy are all good tips.

Before you start discussing mental health concerns with your young person, ensure that you are personally capable to deal with the answers. Often young people are worried that their support network might be upset, overwhelmed, shocked, angry, or blame themselves if the young person mentions that they are struggling.





PICKING THE TIME: Think about a good time and place to talk about sensitive subjects. For example, would they find it easier to talk while driving or going for a walk? Would they prefer to be out of the house with no interruptions? Would they prefer to have someone else there for support? Remember it is most important for them to be comfortable.

WHAT TO SAY: There is no perfect way to discuss mental health, and what might work best for each family and young person is different. How you talk with your young person will depend on their age and understanding – the language you use should feel natural. If your young person opens up about their mental health, reassure them early on that you're glad and relieved that they're talking to you.

Sometimes it can be helpful to begin with a general and open question such as "How is school going?", "How are you getting on with your friends?" or "How are you feeling about your alopecia?". When moving onto more specific thoughts and feelings, it can be helpful to use 'I' statements. Referring to your own feelings and concerns can help to prevent your young person becoming defensive.

- I've noticed that you seem to have a lot on your mind lately. I'm happy to talk or listen and see if I can help.
- It seems like you haven't been yourself lately, how are things?
- You seem [anxious/sad], what is happening for you? We can work it out together.
- It's ok if you don't want to talk to me, you could talk to [trusted/known adult]. I will keep letting you know I love you and am here for you.

It is also important to be mindful of how comments may be interpreted incorrectly by your young person. You might be tempted to say that alopecia is only hair, to remind them of the positive things in their lives, for example, their physical health. However, if your young person is struggling to see any positives, they may feel like you aren't hearing them about the deeper emotional impact that Alopecia is having on them.



Taking Care

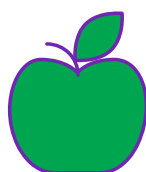
Mental health is fundamentally connected to physical health, healthy relationships, and healthy lifestyles. Exactly what this means will vary from one family to another, but there are many options to consider:



- Staying connected and encouraging your young person to be with friends and family, as well as reaching out to an Alopecia Support Group



- Maintaining social support and self-confidence by staying involved and engaged with activities and interests, like sport or music.



- Caring for physical needs, such as building a good sleeping pattern, making mindful choices about food and exercise

Families and friends supporting young people struggling with mental health should remember their own needs and know where to get information and support for themselves. Remember that there is no such thing as a perfect parent, and that you can reach out to mental health support services or AAAF to know more about how to support your young person.

Social support can also be immensely beneficial to helping young people living with Alopecia Areatata to have a more positive experience with the condition. Connecting with other individuals who have this condition can help to manage feelings of isolation, as well as provide a support network who can answer questions, share frustrations and discuss living with Alopecia Areatata. Family members can also benefit from connecting with other families who are currently living with Alopecia Areatata. AAAF run online support groups which can help facilitate this. Find out more by visiting www.aaaf.org.au



Australia Alopecia Areatata Foundation Inc.

*Alopecia Areatata
..... it's life changing*



What to do if you are worried about your young person's mental health and safety?

Having conversations about mental health can be scary for everyone. Here are some things you can do if you are worried about your young person's mental health and safety:

- Let them know that you are concerned.
- Remind them that talking about a problem can help.
- Talk openly and honestly with them.
- Acknowledge that opening up about personal thoughts and feelings can be hard and sometimes scary
- Reassure them that you will be there for them and ask what they need from you (they might not know what they need).
- Offer to help them find information and an appropriate service, and offer to attend the service with them if they want.

Some young people might deny there is anything wrong and may refuse help. If you think something is wrong, be persistent - It's okay to raise your concerns again. Opening up about personal thoughts and feelings can take some time so it's important to be consistent. Young people are less likely than any other group to seek help for mental health concerns, especially young men, and most will experience symptoms for over a year before they reach out.

Suicide:

Often when families are concerned about suicide, they can struggle with how to discuss it. Many worry that asking young people about suicidal thoughts or behaviours will put ideas in their head. This has been studied and found to not be the case. In general, if something has happened to give you cause for concern, then asking is the only way to know more.

If you are worried about suicide, ask direct questions. For example, 'Have you ever thought about death?' or 'Have you ever thought about ending your life?'. If you are not sure how you might feel hearing 'yes' to this question, seek professional support to help you manage the conversation. If you have immediate and serious concerns for their health or safety of a young person, it is recommended that you stay with them, remove access to methods of harm, and contact a local mental health service, call 000 or take them to an emergency department.



Where to find Support?

There are numerous services around Australia which can help provide information, tools, resources, therapy and treatment for mental health disorders. Visiting your GP is one way to find what options are available in your area, discuss a mental health care plan, and get a referral to the services you may need. Your young person may also be able to access support services or resources through their school or university. Phonenumber or web-chat based mental health services, such as eHeadspace, BeyondBlue and Lifeline, can also be an excellent source of support, and may feel less confronting than visiting with a doctor face to face.

Some places to start looking are listed below.

- **Beyond Blue**

www.beyondblue.org.au

- **Kids Help Line**

www.kidshelpline.com.au

- **ReachOut**

www.reachout.com.au

- **Headspace**

www.headspace.org.au

- **Lifeline**

www.lifeline.org.au

- **Australian Psychological Society**

www.psychology.org.au

Alopecia Areata can feel very isolating, especially if you don't know any other individuals or families living with this condition. AAAP run online support groups to help connect people with others who living with alopecia. This provides a supportive environment to ask questions, seek the experiences of others, or even just vent feelings in a friendly setting. Your young person can join their local group, and so can you. We have many parents, guardians and family members who find the Support Groups an invaluable resource. For more, visit www.aaaf.org.au

1 Koo, J. Y., Shellow, W. V., Hallman, C. P., & Edwards, M. F. (1994). Alopecia Areata and increased prevalence of psychiatric from: www.health.gov.au

2 Mythbuster - Suicidal Ideation. (2009). [ebook] Headspace, p. 2. Available at: <https://headspace.org.au/assets/Uploads/Resource-library/Health-professionals/suicidal-ideation-mythbusterv2.pdf> [Accessed 19 Dec. 2017].

3 Identifying risk factors and warning signs for suicide. (2017). [ebook] Headspace, p.2. Available at: disorders. International Journal of Dermatology, 33(12), 849 – 850.

4 The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents. Report on the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing. Available <https://headspace.org.au/assets/School-Support/Identifying-risk-factors-and-warning-signs-for-suicide-web.pdf>

