

Mental health and communication needs

People with mental health needs often have communication and swallowing difficulties.

In fact, people with communication and swallowing difficulties are more likely to experience mental ill-health.

Speech pathologists help with communication and swallowing. They are an essential part of the mental health care team.

Types of mental health needs and other conditions that can contribute to poor mental health

People with mental health needs may experience one or more of the following:

- mood and anxiety disorders, such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- attachment and personality disorders
- psychotic disorders (including schizophrenia)
- behaviour disorders
- eating disorders
- attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- autism
- intellectual disability.

Communication difficulties

People with **communication disorders** may have trouble with the physical act of speaking.

They may also have trouble understanding what other people say, expressing their thoughts and feelings using words, and/or interacting socially with others.

Communication difficulties frequently co-occur with neurodivergent conditions (e.g., schizophrenia, autism) and/or mental health needs (e.g., anxiety, depression) either as part of the condition itself or as a side effect of medication used to treat the condition or need.

Swallowing Difficulties

Problems with eating, drinking, and swallowing are known as dysphagia. Many people living with poor mental health have difficulty swallowing food or drinking safely. Dysphagia can lead to life-threatening choking episodes, inhalation of food and fluids (that can cause aspiration pneumonia), poor nutrition or hydration, and reduced quality of life.

Swallowing difficulties may occur as part of a neurodivergent condition or mental health need itself (e.g., schizophrenia, dementia) or as a side effect of medication used to treat this condition or need.

People with dysphagia may have mental health needs, such as anxiety and depression, because of the impact swallowing difficulties can have on quality of life and social opportunities.

How a speech pathologist can help

Speech pathologists help people improve their communication and swallowing skills.

They support people to function at home as well as in the classroom, workplace, social situations, and mental health treatment programs.

Speech pathologists play an important role in the mental health care team, helping to diagnose mental health needs. They can find out how a person's social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties might be related to their communication or swallowing needs.

Speech pathologists develop plans to help the person overcome difficulties and understand and participate in their treatment.

They play a vital role in mental health services across the lifespan, including in the following areas:

Prevention and health promotion

Speech pathologists work with people who more likely to have both mental health needs and communication difficulties.

These include:

- people with socioeconomic disadvantage
- people who have suffered abuse or neglect
- children and young people in out-of-home care
- young people and adults in contact with the criminal justice system.

Speech pathologists try to intervene as early as possible.

Infant mental health

Speech pathologists help parents and carers of infants and young children to use positive communication that improves the chances of secure attachment.

Babies whose parents or carers have mental health needs may develop feeding difficulties. Speech pathologists help parents and carers to increase the safety and enjoyment of feeding.

Child and youth mental health

Children with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties often have underlying communication needs that are masked by concerning or challenging behaviours (also known as behaviours of distress).

Speech pathologists assess and treat any communication needs that may be contributing to these behaviours of distress.

Adult mental health

Speech pathologists provide information on a person's current communication skills and swallowing abilities. This work helps the mental health team to make accurate diagnoses and provide support, treatment, and care.

- Speech pathologists also provide advice and treatment to:
- develop a person's communication skills
- ensure information is communicated in a meaningful way
- help the person to eat and drink safely.

Find out more

- [Speech Pathology Australia: Mental Health and Trauma](#)