



Clinical Toolkit

Clinical Tips: Engaging a Young Person

Why is engagement important?

The primary goal of the initial assessment is to engage, assess risk and the need for care rather than make a definitive diagnosis.

Although subthreshold symptoms (symptoms that don't quite meet the diagnostic criteria in terms of number or intensity) are common, they can be associated with significant distress, decrease in functioning and they are a risk factor for later illness development. For example, bipolar disorder can initially present with non-specific psychopathology, including depression. Therefore, it is important to intervene, even if symptoms are subthreshold.

Early intervention includes assessment of the need for care. Applying a low threshold for care can reduce the risk of developing a mental illness and prevent further deterioration in functioning.

Tips for Engaging a Young Person

Ensure enough time to develop trust

This may mean that assessment continues over a number of sessions to get a full picture of the presentation and if it is changing over time. This also supports successful engagement, which can assist young people to feel less distressed.

Normalise questions

Let young people know that you always ask these questions. It provides context and highlights that you commonly see people with similar thoughts or feelings.

For example, if a young person discloses that they feel sad, you could follow on with:

'Sometimes when young people feel sad, they might have thoughts about harming themselves or thoughts about dying or suicide. Have you had any thoughts about harming yourself or about suicide?'

Involve family and friends

Recognise that they may have better knowledge of the patient's history as well as the family history of mental health and other illnesses. They also play an important role in supporting a young person's recovery, including adherence to treatment and reducing relapse and are likely to themselves feel an impact of the young person's illness.