

## Psychosocial Assessment for Young People

An expansion of the H.E.A.D.S.S. assessment by Alexandra Parker, Sarah Hetrick and Rosemary Purcell, Centre of Excellence, Orygen Youth Health Research Centre and **headspace**. Original publication Goldenring, J. M. & Rosen, D. S. (2004). Getting into Adolescent Heads: An essential update, *Contemporary Pediatrics*, 21, 64-90

The **HEADSPACE** assessment guides the interviewer through a series of domains in order to assess areas of difficulty that may be indicative of psychosocial problems.

### Tips for engagement and interviewing

#### Interview domains

#### Wrapping up the interview

### Tips for engagement and interviewing

#### **The note an interviewer strikes at the outset may affect the entire outcome**

- Introduce yourself to the young person first
- Ask the young person to introduce you to others who may be present
- This gives the young person a clear message that you are interested in him/her

#### **Don't begin the interview by asking 'why are you here?'**

- Chat with the young person about lighter, non-threatening topics
- Provide an outline of what's going to happen, including an idea of the range of questions
- Prepare them for the sensitive nature of some of the questions
- Let the young person know they can choose not to answer any questions
- Create an empathetic stance by acknowledging they may feel uncomfortable at times

#### **Build rapport so that the young person feels their concerns have been heard**

- The young person should come away feeling that someone cares and that it might be useful to return
- Ask open-ended questions so that there is opportunity for rapport building and engagement
- The goal isn't just to elicit information about what might be 'wrong' with the young person

#### **Spend time during the interview asking for feedback**

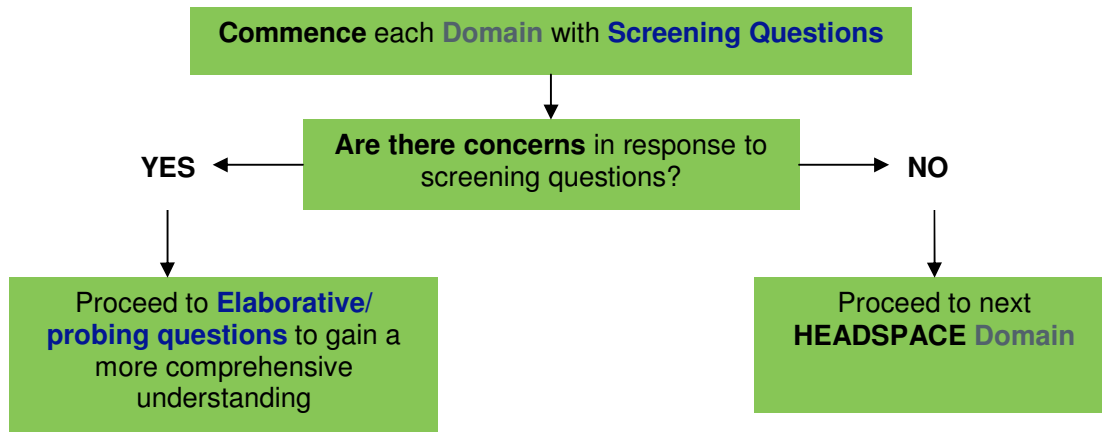
- Check that you understand the young person's main concerns and difficulties
- Clarify the young person's goal in coming to the assessment
- Before concluding, ask if they have any questions or anything more to add

#### **Parents, family members, or other adults should not be present during the interview unless the young person specifically gives permission, or requests it**

- The amount of time you spend with the young person alone will depend on his/her developmental age

## The HEADSPACE Domains

The HEADSPACE interview covers 9 domains: *Home and Environment; Education and Employment; Activities; Drugs and Alcohol; Relationships and Sexuality; Conduct Difficulties and Risk-Taking; Anxiety and Eating; Depression and Suicide; Psychosis and Mania.*



### Use discretion in terms of how screening and probing questions are framed

- Given the age range of **headspace** clients (12-25), the young person's developmental age needs to be taken into account
- For example, in the *Drugs and Alcohol* domain, ask a 12-15 year old *if s/he* drinks or uses drugs, whereas for a 20-25 year old, ask *how often* they use such substances

### The importance of the health practitioner's belief systems and assumptions

Health care providers bring their own set of beliefs and assumptions about young people, based on their own knowledge and experience, which can result in varying levels of tolerance in dealing with particular situations, particularly health risk behaviours.

It is essential to understand youth development and to be aware of the issues that young people might be facing. Young people are appropriately beginning to try out adult behaviours and gain increasing independence from parents and other adults. Taking a respectful stance where young people are seen as responsible and able to make decisions will begin the process of building an effective collaboration between you and the client.

It is important to ask questions in a non-judgemental way that do not imply assumptions, e.g. questions to young women about 'boyfriends' assumes heterosexuality, questions about mum and dad assumes a young person lives at home with two parents. If a health care provider is confronted with a situation that is challenging to them and causes a 'dilemma', it is suggested the health professional consult with a colleague or refer the young person for developmentally appropriate care.

A youth focus will necessarily include listening carefully to their concerns and their goals in coming to see you, and ensuring their active participation in deciding on what to work on and how to work on it. At the same time, young people are still developing and need support and reassurance. The level of their participation will depend on developmental age and stage.

## Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a major concern of young people. Many **headspace** clients may be concerned about what they say getting back to their parents, friends, or school teachers/employers. It is therefore important that the extent of - and limits to - confidentiality are discussed from the outset of the assessment, and revisited as necessary throughout any assessment or treatment period with the young person.

Confidentiality means that what is discussed with the young person is not repeated to others, unless it is deemed to be helpful and there is express permission from the young person. The three main exceptions where it may be necessary to break confidentiality are when:

- (1) the young person is at risk of harming or killing themselves,
- (2) at risk of harming someone else or committing a serious criminal offence, or
- (3) if they are being threatened or harmed (physical/sexual abuse) by someone else.

Many health professionals may also be subject to Mandatory Reporting laws in suspected cases of child abuse and neglect (only mandatory for a young person under the age of 16). The professionals mandated to report varies across the different states and territories (see <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/sheets/rs3.html>).

It may also be that disclosure is necessary in order to obtain information from other agencies or to engage other agencies in order to treat the young person. In this case permission to disclose should be obtained in writing from the young person for non-urgent communications.

### Important confidentiality considerations

- Confidentiality is essential to promote young people’s access to health care, especially for sensitive concerns such as mental and sexual health, and substance abuse.
- Whilst it is important to involve parents, direct evidence that shows any direct benefit of doing such is lacking.
- Legally, young people over 15 years can obtain their own Medicare card.
- Whilst statutes vary by state, young people aged between 14 and 16 are considered legally able to consent to their own medical and dental treatment without having to undergo a mature minor assessment

From Sancu LA, Sawyer SM, Kang MSL, Haller DM, Patton GC. Confidential health care for adolescents: reconciling clinical evidence with family values. *Medical Journal of Australia* :183; 2005. Freelinek via: [www.mja.com.au/public/issues/183\\_08\\_171005/san10946\\_fm.html](http://www.mja.com.au/public/issues/183_08_171005/san10946_fm.html)

### Raising and discussing confidentiality with the young person in this interview

- Ask the young person their understanding of confidentiality to begin the conversation
- Confidentiality must be assured and limits to confidentiality discussed
- Discuss consent to contact other sources when necessary
- Decide with the young person what issues will be discussed with parents and the extent to which parents will be involved in ongoing treatment. This is dependent on factors such as age, living arrangements, cultural expectations and the level of autonomy and closeness within the family

Further information is available at  
<http://www.theshopfront.org/documents/ConfidentialityPrivacy.pdf>

**Domain 1: Home and Environment****Screening Questions**

- Where do you live? Who lives at home with you? How long have you lived here? Is this stable accommodation for you?
- What are your relationships like at home? Are there any problems/fights that worry you?
- Do you feel OK and safe at home?

**Examples of Probing Questions**

- Do you have any brothers or sisters? How old are they?
- Who are you closest with in your family?
- Have there been any changes in your family/home recently (eg. someone left/arrived)
- Are your parents well/OK? What do your parents do for a living?
- What kinds of things do you and your family argue about the most? What happens in the house when there is a fight?
- Is there anything you would like to change about your family? Why?
- Have you ever had to live away from home?

Asking about familial abuse or substance use may be difficult. Using a scenario may facilitate this line of questioning, i.e. “Working with young people I have learned from some that their relationship with their parents is a difficult one; by this I mean they argue and fight. Some young people have told me that they wish their parents did not drink so much or use drugs. Is this a situation in your house? Has anything like it happened to you?”

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**Domain 2: Education & Employment**

**On the basis of obtaining the young person’s demographic details, you will be aware of whether s/he is at school, working or unemployed. Frame the following questions with this information in mind.**

**Screening Questions**

- So you’re at school/working/looking for work. How’s that going?
- Do you enjoy school/work? What do you/don’t you like about it?
- Do you go every day?
- How do you feel you’re coping with school/work? How do you feel about this?

**Examples of Probing Questions**

- Are you doing what you want to do at school/work? What would you prefer?
- Tell me about your friends at school/work? How do you get along with your peers? Is your school a safe place (why)?
- How much school/work do you miss? Have you ever been suspended/fired?
- Why is it so tough at school/work? Do you need help with this?
- Does this ever get you down?

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## Domain 3: Activities

### Screening Questions

- What do you like doing?
- Do you have friends that you hang out with?
- Do you mainly spend time on your own? Is that OK with you?

### Examples of Probing Questions

- Are most of your friends from school/work or elsewhere? Are they the same age as you?
- Do you have one close friend or a few friends? Do you have a lot of friends?
- Do you spend time doing things with your family? What do you do?
- What do you do on the weekends?

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## Domain 4: Drugs & Alcohol

The following questions should take into account the young person’s developmental age.

For those aged 12-16, begin questions with “Do you...”.  
For those aged 17-25 begin with “What do you...”.

### Screening Questions

- Do you drink? Smoke? Have you tried or used drugs? What have you tried?
- What do you like about it? What don’t you like?
- Have you regularly used alcohol or drugs to help you relax, calm down or feel better?
- Have you had any problems with family, friends, police (or courts) related to drinking or using drugs?
- Would any of your friends or family say you have a problem with drinking or drugs?

### Examples of Probing Questions

- How do you (and your friends) take them? (drugs)
- Do you regularly use other drugs? How much and how often?
- Do your friends use alcohol or drugs? When? (eg. parties) How often? How much?
- Do any of your family members drink, smoke or use other drugs? If so, how do you feel about this - is it a problem for you?

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## Domain 5: Relationships & Sexuality

### Screening Questions

- Are you in, or have you ever been in a relationship?
- Are you sexually active? How do you feel about that?
- Do you use condoms, or something else?
- Do you identify yourself as being heterosexual or GLBTQ? (gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender or questioning)

### Examples of Probing Questions

- Do you use contraception? What sort and how often (10, 50, or 70% of the time)?
- Have you ever had pregnancy concerns – eg. being or getting someone pregnant?
- Do you have any concerns about Hepatitis or HIV?
- Have you ever felt pressured or uncomfortable about having sex?
- You don't have to answer this question if you feel uncomfortable, but have you ever been abused, or been forced into having sex? Who did this? When?

### GP Questions

- Have you ever had a genital symptom (eg. discharge or sore) that you are concerned about? Have you ever been checked for a sexually transmitted disease?

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**Domain 6: Conduct Difficulties & Risk-taking**

**Screening Questions**

- Have you deliberately harmed or injured yourself - like cutting, burning, or putting yourself in unsafe situations? (eg. unsafe sex)
- Have you ever wanted to hurt someone else? Have you acted on this? What has stopped you from doing anything?
- Do you often feel out of control? (with your behaviour)

**Examples of Probing Questions**

- Many young people get frustrated with others. Have you ever felt like this or acted on your frustrations? How?
- Have you ever done something on the spur of the moment that you later regretted?
- Do you get in lots of arguments with your family because they have problems with your behaviour?
- Are you in trouble much at school? Do you feel picked on by teachers?
- Have you ever been involved with the police? Have you ever been charged? Do you belong to a group/gang?

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## Domain 7: Anxiety & Eating

### Screening Questions

- It’s normal to feel anxious in certain situations (eg. heights, public speaking). Are there times when you feel very anxious, nervous or stressed?
- Have you ever felt really anxious feelings all of a sudden - eg. for no reason at all? What was it like?
- Do you think you feel more anxious/worry more than your friends?
- Do you worry about your body or your weight? Do you do things to try to manage your weight (eg. dieting)?

### Examples of Probing Questions

- Do you worry a lot about things that you have no control over? (eg. world suffering, starvation, bad things you see on the news)?
- Do you ever find yourself having to do things over and over, like touching, counting, washing your hands many times, or checking things to make you feel better?
- Do you obsess about things, or get stuck on things, like your homework or appearance having to be perfect? Does your family or friends think you obsess about things? What?
- Have there been any recent changes in your weight?
- Do you get much exercise? What do you like to do?

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## Domain 8: Depression & Suicide

### Screening Questions

- Do you feel sad or down more than usual? Have you ever felt that way? For how long?
- Have you lost interest in things that you usually like?
- Are you having trouble sleeping?
- Do you find yourself spending less and less time with friends?
- Would you rather just be by yourself most of the time? Why?

### Examples of Probing Questions

- Have you thought you'd be better off dead or wished you were dead?
- Have you thought about suicide?
- Have you got a suicide plan?

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## Domain 9: Psychosis & Mania

### Screening Questions

- Sometimes, especially when feeling stressed, people can hear or see things that others don't seem to hear or see. Has this ever happened to you?
- Have you found yourself thinking someone was out to get you?
- Have you found yourself feeling really up or racey, or feeling like you can take on the whole world?
- Have you ever gone for days without sleep? How long?

### Examples of Probing Questions

- Have you ever felt like you have special powers that other people don't have or are especially important in some way? What was this like?
- Have you felt that things around you had a special meaning intended just for you?
- Have you felt like someone or something outside yourself has been controlling your thought, feelings, actions or urges?
- Have you ever felt like your thoughts were less private than usual? For example, like your thoughts are broadcast so that everyone can know what you're thinking? Or that people can read your mind?

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## Suggestions for Wrapping up the interview

### **Give the young person an opportunity to express any concerns you have not covered**

- Ask him/her for feedback about the interview (eg “I’ve asked you a lot of questions today, but is there anything we haven’t covered that you think is important to understand your situation?”)
- Remind them that they are welcome to call you or to come back in to talk about something important to share that may later remember

### **Ask the young person who *they* can trust and confide in and why they trust that person**

- This is important if you have not already identified a trusted adult in the client’s life
- Tell the young person that he/she now has you as someone who can be trusted to help with problems and to answer questions
- Let them know you are interested in them and you want to help them lead a fuller, healthier life

### **For young people who demonstrate significant risk factors, relate your concerns**

- Ask if they are willing to change or are interested in learning more about ways to deal with their problems, leading to a discussion of potential follow-up and therapeutic interventions
- Many young people do not recognize dangerous life-style patterns because they see their activities not as problems but as solutions. The challenge lies in helping the young person to see health risk-taking behaviours as problems and helping to develop better strategies for dealing with them

### **A youth focus will ensure their *active participation* in deciding on what to work on and how to work on it**

- Listen carefully to the young person’s concerns and their goals in coming to see you
- Young people are still developing and need support and reassurance
- Some of their executive and regulatory skills aren’t fully developed, so adult guidance and reassurance can still be very necessary

### **If the young person’s life is going well, say so**

- In most cases, you can identify strengths and potential, or real weaknesses, and discuss both in order to offer a balanced view

## **Conclusion**

Treating young people with respect and engaging them in a process that allows their participation in determining goals and a management plan to meet these goals is essential. Assuming that young people are doing their best (i.e. understanding adolescent development) and using non-judgemental and open questions will facilitate a collaborative working relationship with the young person. Confidentiality is going to be upmost their minds and this is an ongoing conversation with any young person attending the service.