



# 10 tips for working with people with mental health issues

**Foreword:** Nutrition plays a complex role in people's mental health. Trust, respect, and hearing each person's lived experience is crucial to being able to provide appropriate and safe nutrition counselling. It is important to uphold truly person-centred care alongside evidence-based practice, and to acknowledge that mental health is multifactorial and more complex than diet alone.

## Purpose

This resource aims to provide 10 helpful tips to encourage and build confidence in all dietitians to work effectively with people living with mental health issues. This was compiled by mental health dietitians from clinical experience and is not an exhaustive list of all possible strategies. We encourage dietitians to work through the tips below and find their own approaches to work thoughtfully with their population.

## 1. Ensure your work is person-centred

- Practise active-listening and use motivational interviewing skills such as openness, reflecting, affirming, and summarising to help the person you are working with feel heard
- Regularly practise self-reflection and reflexivity to understand how your experiences may impact how you hear and speak to the people with whom you are working
- Understand that every person with mental illness has a very different lived experience, and that often people know what strategies and approaches will be helpful for themselves

## 2. Be trauma-informed

- A significant number of people with mental health issues have faced adverse experiences in their lives. Listen to people's stories, and try to understand their unique perspectives by viewing the situation through their prism
- If you do not understand a person's experience or what they are telling you, seek supervision, further professional development, or if appropriate ask the person to explain their perspective to you
- Some individuals may choose to not disclose their mental health experiences and that is ok. Seek an understanding of mental health experiences through professional development (see Further resources section)

## 3. Understand the individual's life situation

- Ask the client about bio-psycho-social factors such as relationships, medication side effects, food insecurity, food skills and employment. These factors could be affecting their capability to work with you towards their nutrition goals
- Work with the client to connect them to appropriate supports and services for any issues beyond your scope as the dietitian
- Ask the person what they feel would be most helpful for them, and what strategies or supports they feel most comfortable with - and assist with supporting the person to access, action, or plan these approaches

#### 4. Let the individual client's experiences guide your expectations and plan

- Listen to, and be present with, the individual in front of you, rather than making assumptions based on a diagnosis or preconceptions
- Just as not all mental illnesses are alike, every individual will present a unique set of experiences, strengths, challenges and goals
- It is OK to ask your client questions about their experiences - no one expects you to know and understand everything!

#### 5. Consider the mental health continuum model

- A person's wellbeing and capacity to make practical changes can be impacted by how they are managing at that time
- Mental health and wellbeing can fluctuate at different times, from 'managing well' to experiencing a significant impact on daily functioning, so plan dietary advice to meet a person's immediate and changing needs. See [Heads Up](#) for more information.

#### 6. Involve the client's support networks and health care team

- Work the client's consent, involve family, carers, support workers and other clinicians in the person's care team to learn more about the person and to foster a collaborative care approach. [Working with the mental health care team' resource](#)

#### 7. Celebrate every success and ride the lows with the client

- Ensure goals are SMART (Specific, Meaningful, Adaptive, Realistic, Time-framed) and step-wise to create shorter term milestones and a sense of achievement which in turn can improve motivation and sustainability
- Consider using the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) approach to SMART goals

#### 8. Shift from nutrition education to nutrition counselling, active listening, and practical changes

- Ask what is possible, what barriers exist before their goals, what we can do to remove or mitigate these barriers
- Apply motivational interviewing and health coaching techniques to guide the client towards recovery and better outcomes using their experiences and strengths

#### 9. Set boundaries for yourself and for when working with clients

- Consider boundaries for certain clinical cases - for example, at what point would you refer a client with complex needs to a higher level of care, or only work with the person with the support of a multidisciplinary team
- Consider individual self-care boundaries such as leaving work on time, not answering work calls or emails outside of office hours

#### 10. Surround yourself with support

- Source support from family, carers and colleagues to help support the work you are doing with clients
- Set up clinical supervision with a more experienced mental health Dietitian or mental health clinician
- Use the [MHANDi CIRT](#) (critical incident reflection tool) and [Mental Health and Wellbeing Decision Tree](#) to navigate difficult clinical scenarios

### Further resources:

- [Emerging Minds](#)
- [Hearing voices network](#)
- [Beyond Blue](#)
- [BPD Foundation](#)
- Please also refer to the other MHANDi documents on the [Dietitians Australia resource library](#) for more information on mental health-related topics

### Acknowledgements

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**Afterword:** When working to improve the mental health and wellbeing of others, it is also important to look after your own mental health. Personal life stress, and stress related to work can affect your mood, thoughts and feelings in

different ways, at different times. Remember to be mindful of your own wellbeing and make time to take care of your mental health at work, such as debriefing, taking a short walk/break outdoors, seeking support, and practising self-care. If any of the topics discussed in this resource brought up any distress for you, you can find helpful resources at Beyond Blue, Head to Health, and Mental Health Australia.

**Disclaimer:** The aim of this document is to both provide an introduction and highlight the key nutrition issues in mental health. This resource has been reviewed to ensure the information is current and up to date, however it is not an in-depth literature review. References, recommended reading and resource lists are included for further research