

Social workers and mental health

Fact Sheet

What is the role of social workers in mental health?

Social workers are one of the five core professional groups in the mental health field.

In the public and community mental health sectors, social workers have well-established expertise in working with people with serious mental illness and associated problems. They also have a strong and emerging role in the private sector.

Social workers are the second largest allied health profession providing mental health services.

What qualifications do social workers hold?

Like other health professionals, social workers are tertiary qualified. Professional social work education is undertaken either as a four year undergraduate or postgraduate degree and includes supervised clinical practice. All social work qualifying courses have basic mental health content as a core curriculum requirement.

Many social workers specialising in mental health practice have additional relevant postgraduate qualifications with specialist clinical training.

Who are Accredited Mental Health Social Workers (AMHSW)?

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers are social workers accredited by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) as having specialist mental health expertise. This process is undertaken on behalf of the Federal Government and Medicare Australia. To maintain AMHSW status, social workers must meet requirements of the AASW Continuing Professional Development (CPD) program specifically relevant to mental health, including supervised practice.

What do Accredited Mental Health Social Workers do?

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers have a breadth of experience in assessing and working effectively with people experiencing:

- depression and other mood disorders
- anxiety disorders
- psychosis
- relationship problems
- peri-natal problems
- trauma
- personality disorders
- life crises
- childhood disorders
- family conflicts
- suicidal thoughts and behaviours
- eating disorders.

What is their experience and skill set?

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers are specialist practitioners with knowledge and skill in assessing, diagnosing and ameliorating mental health and associated psychosocial problems experienced by individuals, couples or families. They work with people of all ages and backgrounds and are particularly skilled in dealing with complex situations involving additional stresses such as family conflict, unemployment and homelessness.

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers are qualified and skilled direct practice professionals. Nearly 50% have over 20 years practice experience, and approximately 80% have at least 10 years experience.

Accreditation and ethical standards

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional regulator as social work is not yet a registered profession in Australia. The AASW uses a robust national complaints system based on an internationally recognised Code of Ethics.

Professional insurance

Membership of AASW provides appropriate cover for professional liability and indemnity insurance.

Complex care and evidenced based interventions

Social workers assist people with mental health problems to resolve associated psychosocial problems and improve their quality of life. Social workers recognise the broader implications of an individual having a mental illness and the impact on friends, family, work and education. Resolving these issues may involve family work as well as individual counselling and group therapy. The skills, knowledge and perspective of those people suffering from mental illness and their families are valued by social workers.

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers use evidence-based interventions to assist people with mental disorders, including the following Focussed Psychological Strategies:

- Cognitive behaviour therapy (behavioural and cognitive interventions)
- Skills training (problem solving, anger management, social skills, stress management and parenting skills)
- Relaxation strategies
- Interpersonal therapy
- Narrative therapy
- Psycho-education (including motivational interviewing).

Similar to other health professionals, Accredited Mental Health Social Workers work with a broad range of clients. However, some specialise in working with particular client groups such as children, adolescents, adults or older people, and in the use of particular therapeutic approaches such as marital or family therapy. Social workers also work with people with specific disorders, and those at risk of suicide.

When to refer to a Mental Health Social Worker?

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers have particular expertise in helping individuals whose mental health problems co-exist with other difficulties such as family distress, drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment, disability, poverty, and trauma. They seek to identify factors which exacerbate or ameliorate a person's mental health problems, and focus on building strengths and augmenting social supports.

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers work in partnership with other health professionals and community services, and have expertise in case management and care coordination.

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers are providers credentialed by Medicare Australia and are eligible to provide services through a range of government-funded programs, including:

- Better Access to Mental Health Care
- Chronic Disease Management (Enhanced Primary Care)
- Non-directive Pregnancy Counselling
- Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS) program
- Veteran Affairs.

How to refer to an Accredited Mental Health Social Worker

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers can advertise their services on the AASW website through the advanced search directory, to search for an Accredited Mental Health Social Worker in your area please go to: <http://www.aasw.asn.au/find-a-social-worker/search/>