

Mentalising

The ability to understand minds is called mentalisation. Understanding other people's behaviour and our own in terms of thoughts, feelings, wishes, and desires is a major developmental achievement that originates in attachment relationships. It allows us to make sense of ourself and others and thus gives us the capacity to regulate our emotional reactions. Temperamental differences and developmental experiences contribute to a person's capacity to mentalise. In some cases, this capacity is underdeveloped, and so emotional reactions are difficult to manage. For everyone, it can also vary with the interpersonal context and the level of emotional arousal, resulting in a temporary loss of the ability to reflect on minds when the *fight-flight* reaction is triggered.

There is good evidence that directly addressing mentalisation problems is helpful for problems arising from emotional dysregulation. This programme is a recent initiative to help people struggling with dysregulated emotions and less severe behavioural problems arising from emotional dysregulation (eg, minor self-harm, substance misuse, anger dyscontrol, relationship conflict, unstable emotions, etc.).

About this programme ...

Early intervention is encouraged for intense and unstable emotions that lead to self-harm and/or repeated suicide attempts, before these problems permanently derail personality development and problems such as Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) emerge that require secondary-level Specialist Mental Health Service (SMHS) involvement.

Treatment for BPD has found that certain types of psychoeducational groups are helpful in orienting people toward improved reflective capacity that helps them manage emotional reactions better. The MindWise Programme is a series of educational groups offering useful information for people whose problems are not amenable to medication interventions alone, and who do not require the SMHS 18-month MindSight Programme.

MindWise is a CDHB initiative to evaluate the utility of early intervention for self-harm and emotional dysregulation. The programme is coordinated through Stepping Stones Trust with support from MBT-NZ, the MindSight Programme and other NGO's. Research evaluation of the pilot is being undertaken by the Department of Psychology, University of Canterbury.

As the programme does not provide on-going clinical care, primary responsibility will remain with the referrer for the follow-up of any issues arising while in the course. The primary eligibility is young adults (18-35) with unstable emotional reactions and some form of self-harm (generally of low to moderate risk). Some symptoms of BPD may be present, but participants will generally be below diagnostic threshold for BPD. Ongoing substance use, mood disorder or cognitive problems that could interfere with attendance would most likely exclude the referral.

For information or to refer, phone 027-212.6663 or e-mail mindwise@stepstone.org.nz

Canterbury
District Health Board
Te Poari Hauora o Waitaha

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UNIVERSITY OF
CANTERBURY
Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha
CHRISTCHURCH NEW ZEALAND

MindWise

HELP FOR SELF-HARM AND PROBLEMS
IN EMOTIONAL SELF-MANAGEMENT

 **stepping
stone trust**

Te Roopu o te Taumata Kohatu

COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH
RECOVERY SERVICES

Everyday life presents each of us with challenges that provoke emotional reactions, some of which are upsetting emotions - disappointment, sadness, frustration, etc. Variations in inherited temperament and life-experience impact on the way a person experiences and manages distress. Sometimes, emotions feel so overwhelming that the person resorts to emergency measures to try and cope with their distress through withdrawal, substance use, self-harm; or are left feeling so unhappy that they wonder if life is worth living.

Our emotional responses are a vital source of knowledge for navigating personal relationships and understanding ourselves. But, the ability to sense, understand and respond to emotions – in ourselves and in others – is a complex skill that takes a long time to develop. When disrupted, it's hard to know one's own mind, and difficult to understand the minds of others. The resulting confusion and misunderstanding can then result in distress that triggers even more emotion - resulting in emotional reactions are either so strong that they disrupt a person's functioning, or the individual has difficulty managing (regulating) emotions.

What is needed is direct help in strengthening the capacity to understand and express emotions. When a person can use and communicate emotional signals well, emotions are no longer overwhelming and unable to be managed.

This 12-week educational programme provides information and tools to grow the ability to understand and use the intelligence of our emotions – both in relation to oneself as well as in relation to understanding others. The programme is designed for people experiencing emotional problems where they use self-harm as a way to cope with emotional distress.

The elements in this programme are drawn from things that are known to be helpful. However, this particular format needs to be evaluated to understand how helpful it is or isn't. Those attending the first few groups must agree to assist with the research evaluation. This involves completing a small number of questionnaires and being willing to monitor thoughts and behaviour - during the group programme, as well as for three months before and after the group.

If this group might be helpful for you, your GP can refer you to the MindWise Programme so that you can talk to someone in more detail about what is involved.

