

Stepped system of care for eating disorders

Fact sheet for Primary Health Networks

What is stepped care?

Stepped care is a key part of the Australian Government's Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan, and can be defined as:

"an evidence-based, staged system comprising a hierarchy of interventions, from the least to the most intensive, matched to a person's needs. Within a stepped care approach, a person is supported to transition up to higher-intensity services or transition down to lower-intensity services as their needs change" (1).

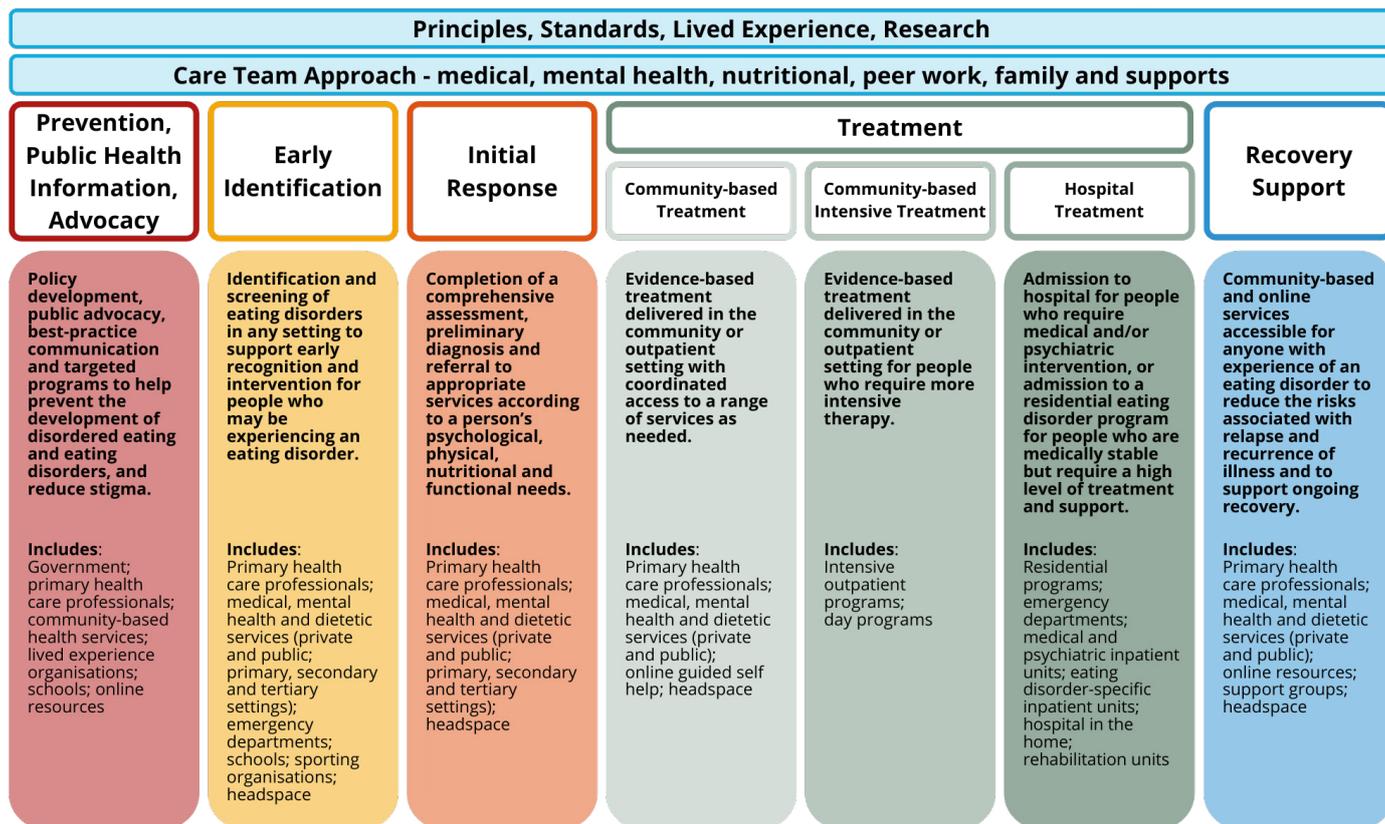
What is the role of Primary Health Networks (PHNs) in the implementation of stepped care approaches to mental health care?

PHNs are expected to utilise a stepped care approach to mental health services planning, commissioning and coordination. This is designed to enhance the allocation of resources according to need, leading to increased effectiveness and efficiency of existing and commissioned primary mental health services. It supports the delivery of person-centred care, as well as an early intervention approach, where people's needs can be addressed by appropriate services at an earlier stage of illness (2).

What does the stepped system of care for eating disorders look like?

Eating disorders are a distinct group of complex illnesses with treatment requirements that are different to other types of mental illness due to the complex overlapping nature of mental health and physical health needs. The provision of a stepped system of care for people with eating disorders is supported by expert consensus as the ideal approach where the continuum includes a full spectrum of levels of intensity, skilled assessment of need and coordinated transition between services as the person's needs change. The National Eating Disorders Collaboration (NEDC) has developed a model of the stepped system of care for eating disorders, with examples of care and treatment services that patients may require across the course of illness and recovery (shown in Figure 1 below).

Stepped System of Care for Eating Disorders



(NEDC, 2021)

Figure 1: A stepped system of care for eating disorders.

The stepped system of care for eating disorders delivers coordinated, evidence-based services that increase or decrease in intensity according to a person's changing psychological, physical, nutritional and functional needs. Progression along the continuum is not linear and response to treatment is individual and variable. People may require recurrent episodes of treatment, at different levels in the continuum of care and from different service providers.

What is the role of PHNs in the stepped system of care for eating disorders?

Operating as service commissioners and system integrators, PHNs have an important role in identifying needs and improving access to primary care services for people with eating disorders, as well as improving the coordination of care. People with lived experience of an eating disorder have ranked provision of reliable referral information at first point of contact, and better pathways between inpatient and outpatient treatment as key priorities for them (3). In addition, PHNs have a role in building the health workforce's capacity to respond to eating disorders and communicating evidence-based information to health professionals and consumers.

References

1. Australian Government Department of Health. The fifth national mental health and suicide prevention plan. Department of Health; 2017. <http://www.coaghealthcouncil.gov.au/Portals/0/Fifth%20National%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Suicide%20Prevention%20Plan.pdf>
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3. National Eating Disorders Collaboration (NEDC). e-Bulletin issue 66: Building the system of care. NEDC; 2020. <https://www.nedc.com.au/research-and-resources/show/issue-66-building-the-system-of-care>

The National Eating Disorders Collaboration (NEDC) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health.

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