

# Focusing on the positive

Whether its pimples, parents, or problems with the opposite sex, being a teenager isn't easy.

According to Charmaine Bright, lecturer in psychology at AUT University's School of Public Health and Psychosocial Studies, adolescence can be an especially challenging time, when individuals experience significant developmental changes.

"Research suggests adolescence is a time of psychosocial crises between identity and role confusion. It's a time of great stress, linked to negative outcomes such as depression, delinquency, anxiety and behavioural problems."

At the extreme end of this spectrum, New Zealand's youth are unfortunately over-represented when it comes to suicide rates. New Zealand has the second highest male youth (15-24 years) suicide death rate (after Finland), and the second highest female youth suicide death rate (after Japan).

Bright is currently investigating how school counsellors use strength-based counselling approaches to help build strength and resilience amongst youth.

"Little research has been done in the area of school counselling and positive outcomes for youth. In the past, negative emotions have been researched extensively; however there has been little research looking at positive approaches which explore how adolescent well-being can be fostered."

Strength-based counselling approaches promote the concept of flourishing - put forward by the positive psychology movement - which suggests that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives.

"School counsellors can play an important role in promoting a safe emotional environment for children in schools. Uncovering school counsellors' perceptions and the discourses that are reflected in their work may reveal whether strength-based counselling approaches with adolescents can be considered a valuable component of initial counsellor education, mentoring and professional development programmes."

Based on this approach it may be possible to cultivate social environments that nurture individual strengths like resilience, competence and optimism, says Bright.

"Positive psychology is a developing area of mental health and well-being and it can make a contribution in shifting mental illness towards mental health. It is worth noting that someone who is free from mental illness does not necessarily experience optimal mental health."

Next week is Mental Health Aware-



**Charmaine Bright, Psychology lecturer at AUT**

ness week, which kicks off with World Mental Health Day on October 10. Around 47% of New Zealanders will experience a mental disorder and/or addiction at some time in their lives, with one in five people affected each year. On October 14 (4.00pm), at AUT's North Shore campus, Associate Minister of Health, the Hon Jonathan Coleman will speak about the state of mental health policy in New Zealand. To register please email [sgreenmo@aut.ac.nz](mailto:sgreenmo@aut.ac.nz).

## Pro Vice-Chancellor's Perspective

The 2011 Dean's Lecture Series commenced last Monday with an address by the Minister of Health, the Hon Tony Ryall. The Minister pointed to various health sector achievements including substantially reduced emergency centre waiting times, increased immunisation rates and greater access to elective surgery. He also discussed challenges including rising expectations and demand during adverse economic times. It was clear that there will need to be major changes to the way health care is delivered and the future health workforce is educated. The following three speakers in the Lecture Series, Professor Iain Martin (17 October), Dr Dale Bramley (31 October) and Professor Jonathon Gray (7 November) will pick up these challenges as they examine the public health system from various perspectives.

A probing and robust question and answer session followed the Minister's address. A number of questions focussed on mental health. They included queries

regarding what is being done to address the high youth suicide rate and expand access to psychological and psychiatric services in primary care settings. These and related issues will be the focus of another upcoming campus meeting, a reception to mark this year's World Mental Health Day on the 14 October. Speakers include the Hon Dr Jonathon Coleman, the Associate Minister of Health.

This event and the Dean's lectures are all open to interested members of the public. This year the World Mental Health Day theme is 'the great push: investing in mental health'. It will highlight the benefits to overall health and to individuals, families, communities, the economy and wider society from the provision of a broad range of quality services that promote mental health and prevent and treat mental disorders.



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