

The Emotional Health Project

UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION IN GIRLS

The Emotional Health Project is funded by the Australian Research Council. It aims to understand how genes and cognitive factors interact with the environment to affect girls' anxiety and depression over time. Students at schools that participate in the Emotional Health Project in 2016 will receive an efficacious cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) program (Chilled@School) that promotes resilience and healthy responses to stress. Students will also gain hands-on experience with world-class clinical research.

WHY IS THE EMOTIONAL HEALTH PROJECT IMPORTANT?

Anxiety and depression are two of the most common mental health problems in children and adolescents. Although anxiety tends to appear earlier in life than depression, these disorders often co-occur and are more common in girls than boys. Both disorders have a negative impact on the lives of young women, affecting their academic performance and peer relations, and increasing later risk of mental health problems. Significant progress towards understanding the causes of emotional disorders has been made in recent years and it is clear that genetic, cognitive and environmental factors play an important role, but the interrelationships of these mechanisms remain unclear. To address these urgent mental health issues, Macquarie University, in collaboration with two NSW girls' schools, have formed a novel partnership. We are now looking for a third school to join the Emotional Health Project.

THE AIMS OF THE EMOTIONAL HEALTH PROJECT

Serving as a future model for other Australian schools, this project aims to improve the mental health of students—a key issue for the partner schools—and to answer critical research questions regarding the causes and prevention of mental health problems in children and adolescents. The research aim of the Emotional Health Project is to examine, in novel ways, how genetic risk and cognitive factors interact with children's and adolescents' environments to affect anxiety and depressive disorders over time.

WHAT WOULD YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THE EMOTIONAL HEALTH PROJECT INVOLVE?

If your school decides to join the Emotional Health Project, all students in years 7-11 will be invited to participate in three research sessions and eight sessions of Chilled@School, as described below.

Sessions involved in the Emotional Health Project		
Session	When is this session run?	Length
Research Session	Up to one month before Session 1	1-2hr
Chilled@School Program		
1-7	One week apart	1hr each
8	Two months after Session 7	1hr
Research Session	No more than one month after Session 8	1hr
Research Session	Twelve months after Session 8	1hr

RESEARCH SESSIONS

Students will be asked to complete an initial research session, which takes place in a classroom setting, and takes 1-2 hours. In the research sessions, students answer self-report measures on anxiety, depression, perceived parenting behaviour, positive and negative life events, threat interpretation bias (e.g., does the student interpret ambiguous situations in a negative way?), puberty, substance use, and eating disorder symptoms. The students also complete a computer reaction time task to assess attention bias (i.e., is the student more likely to focus on negative things in their environment). Within a few weeks of completing

the Chilled@School sessions, students will be asked to repeat these measures to examine the changes in their emotional health from the program. Twelve months later, students will be asked to complete the measures a third and final time to determine how students' emotional health has changed or stabilised over this longer time frame. As part of the research component of the Emotional Health Project, parents are also invited to complete a brief online questionnaire about their daughter's emotional health.

On one occasion (usually the first research session) students are invited to provide a saliva sample for genetic analysis to examine whether specific genes are related to anxiety, depression, and the outcome of the Chilled@School program. These genetic samples are sent in batches to the UK, stored at the Social Genetic and Developmental Psychiatry Centre in London until the analysis is complete, and the samples are then destroyed.

THE CHILLED@SCHOOL PROGRAM

In 2016, students in years 7-11 at your school will take part in the Chilled@School program. Chilled@School is an eight-session program run in the classroom by a clinical psychologist who is experienced in the treatment of childhood and adolescent anxiety. The aim of the program is to promote resilience and healthy responses to stress. It is a classroom adaptation of the internationally recognised Cool Kids program, which effects positive change that is maintained for up to six years. Chilled@School uses a cognitive behavioural approach, which means that it focuses on how to identify upsetting thoughts, and to understand the effect of these thoughts on emotional and behavioural responses. The program aims to build confidence by teaching techniques to help face anxiety-provoking situations and by teaching problem solving, assertiveness and breathing techniques to develop resilience. The sessions use discussion, activities and video-based examples to help teach these skills.

NOTE

This research has ethics approval from the Macquarie University Research Ethics Committee, and from the NSW State Education Research Applications Process. All data collected is confidential, and is de-identified before storage or analysis.

THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF YOUR SCHOOL IN THE PROJECT

- We ask that the participating schools make a financial contribution towards the costs of running the program, but the level of this contribution is flexible, and the financial resources of the school will be taken into account.
- An important role of the school is to engage the school community with the Emotional Health Project.
- The most demanding aspect of running the project is scheduling the Chilled@School program into the school timetable. Our team will be there to assist wherever possible, and there is some flexibility in the scheduling of the program to fit around the existing timetable.
- Any financial contribution by the school towards the costs of running the project would enable more flexible delivery of the Chilled@School program.
- We also appreciate staff support in running the research and Chilled@School sessions. In our experience, a successful strategy has been to ask the teachers of the classes attending a session to assist.

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

If you are interested in joining the Emotional Health Project, or want to learn more, contact Anna McKinnon on (02) 9850 9163 or anna.mckinnon@mq.edu.au

FIND OUT MORE

Dr Anna McKinnon
Macquarie University NSW 2109 Australia
T: (02) 9850 9163
Anna.mckinnon@mq.edu.au

CRICOS Provider No 00002J



MACQUARIE
University