

# The Mental Health Brain Story



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## Mental health and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people take a holistic view of mental health, and prefer to consider mental health within a framework of ‘social and emotional wellbeing’.

For example,

*“The social and emotional well being concept is broader...and recognises the importance of connection to land, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family and community, and how these affect the individual. Social and emotional wellbeing problems can result from unresolved grief and loss, trauma and abuse, domestic violence, removal from family, substance misuse, family breakdown, cultural dislocation, racism and discrimination and social disadvantage”.*<sup>1</sup>

In this flipchart the biomedical understanding about mental health problems is presented. Knowledge about what happens in the brain and how that effects feelings and behaviour can be used to understand social and emotional wellbeing frameworks. This information can also be interpreted for local relevance as appropriate by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

## Acknowledgements

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Original concept by Sheree Cairney.

Artwork by Joseph Fitz & Sheree Cairney.

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Thanks to the AIMHiNT Indigenous Reference Group and Steering Committee, the Council for Aboriginal Alcohol Program Services (CAAPS) and Bachelor College Mental Health Students in Alice Springs and Darwin.

1: Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice, 2010, p76.

## **Objective**

This flipchart is designed for use by health professionals, community workers, educators, Aboriginal health workers, Aboriginal mental health workers, drug and alcohol workers, students and community members.

It can be used to accompany a drug treatment program, or as an educational resource.

This resource is part of a series that also includes the following flipcharts:

- *The Grog Brain Story*
- *The Mental Health Brain Story*
- *Sniffing and the Brain*
- *When Boys and Men Sniff*
- *When Girls and Women Sniff*

It is designed for use mainly with Indigenous people in urban, rural and remote settings.

It uses plain English language and informative images to provide straightforward and clear information, about:

- how a healthy brain and nervous system work
- how problems with the brain, nervous system and lifestyle can lead to mental health problems
- different types of mental health problems
- how to manage and get help for mental health problems.

## Tips for educators

- Read the flipchart a couple of times before you use it with others, to educate yourself or refresh your knowledge.
- Ask a doctor, nurse or mental health worker to explain anything that you do not understand.
- When using the flipchart, the image page faces the client or students and the text page faces the health educator.
- The text is a guide to the images.
- Refer to the images regularly.
- Feel free to elaborate or add familiar examples and stories.
- Encourage comments and questions from the client/students.
- Think of the natural chemicals in the brain and nervous system as similar to water in a river system that needs to be kept in balance (as shown on pages 11 and 12).

## PART 1



# HEALTHY BRAIN

## *The brain*

- Inside your head is your **brain**.
- Each person's **brain** is very different.
- The **brain** is like our control centre.
- The **brain** is where our personality, actions and emotions are controlled.
- The **brain** also controls our memory, language and our creativity.
- The **brain** is an important part of who we are.



PART 1

## HEALTHY BRAIN

*The brain*

A side-view illustration of a person's head with dark hair. A colorful brain is shown inside, with yellow, pink, and blue areas highlighted to represent different regions or functions. The person is wearing a purple shirt.

## PART 1

# HEALTHY BRAIN



*The brain*



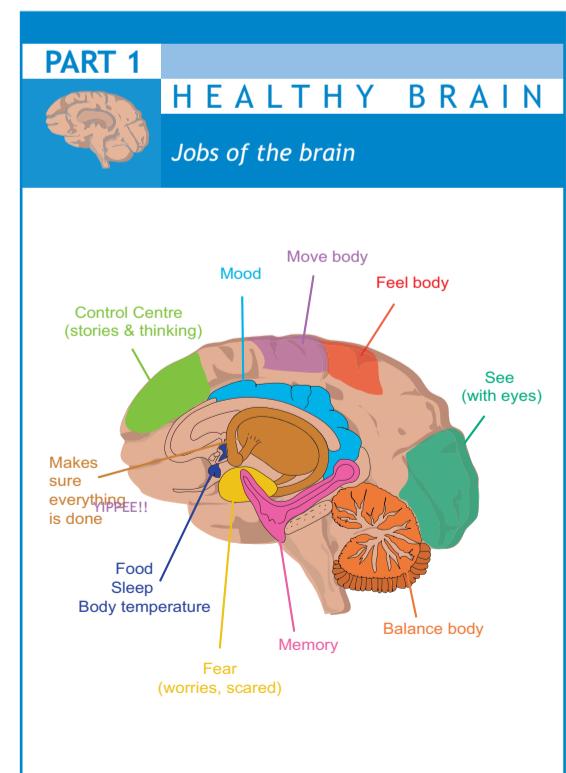
# PART 1



## HEALTHY BRAIN

### *Jobs of the brain*

- Each area of the brain has a special job to do. This picture shows where each different job is controlled in the brain.
- The **light green** area is the control centre of the brain. It controls your thinking, your emotions and your actions. This is where you put together your stories.
- At the top of the brain, the **red** area is sent messages **FROM** the body like how the body is moving or how it is feeling.
- The **purple** area sends messages **TO** the body telling it how and when to move.
- The **pink** area organises your memory.
- The **blue** area in the middle of the brain is very important for controlling mood, like how happy or sad you feel.
- The **orange** area at the bottom of the brain balances your body both when it is moving and when it is still.
- The **dark green** area at the back of the brain is sent information from the eyes and puts together a picture in the brain of what you see through your eyes.
- The **yellow** area is the ‘fear’ centre of the brain. It is where big worries or feeling scared comes from.
- The small **dark blue** area controls things like how well you sleep or eat and your body temperature.
- The **brown** area is like a ‘housekeeping’ area. It makes sure that all the jobs of the brain are getting done properly.
- These different areas are always working together and talking to each other.
- The brain uses chemicals to send messages to different parts of the body.

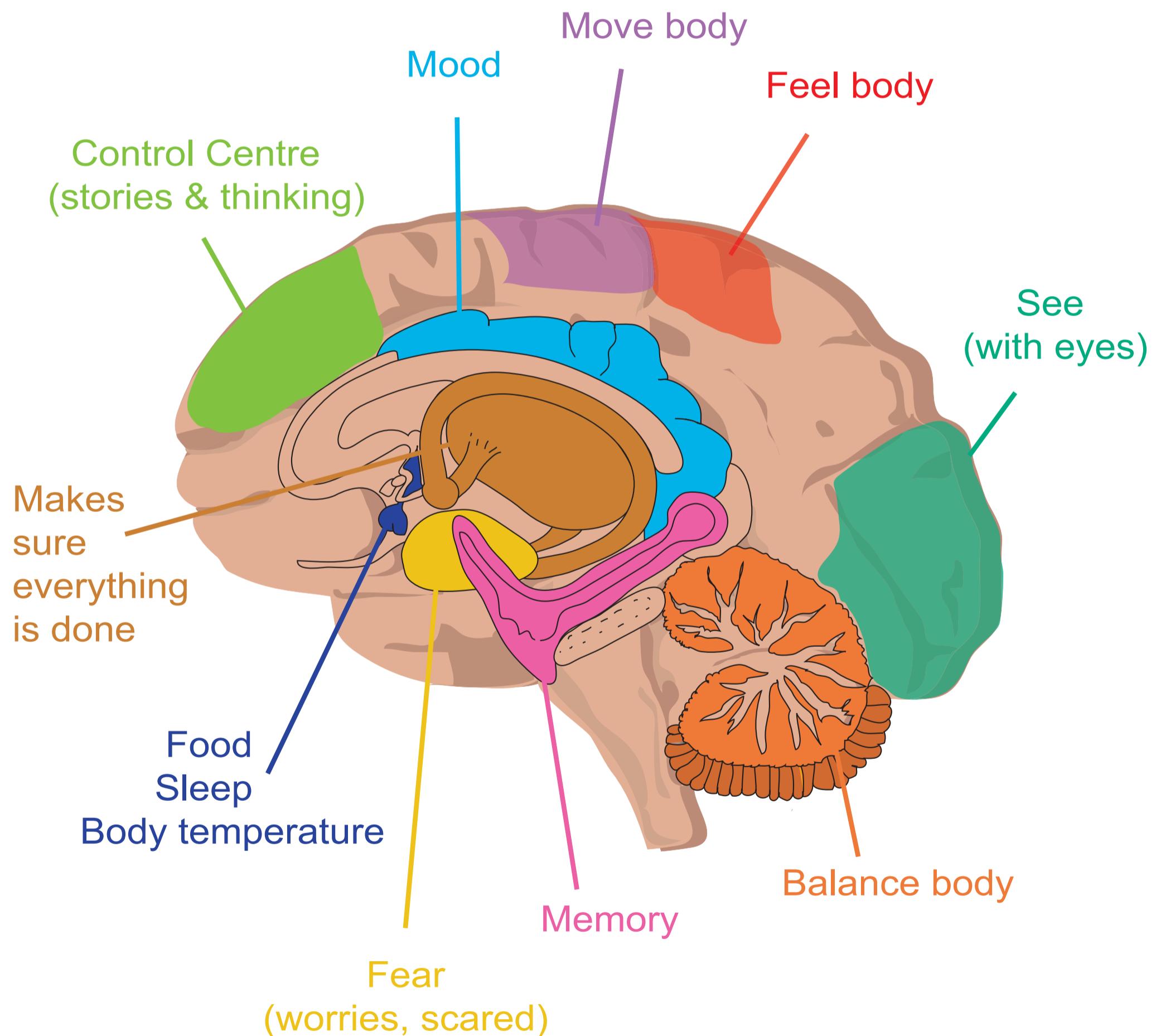


## PART 1



# HEALTHY BRAIN

*Jobs of the brain*



## PART 1



# HEALTHY BRAIN

*The brain makes its own chemicals*

- Now let's look at the **chemicals** in the brain.
- **Chemicals** are cells in our body that carry information and can change the way we feel and act.
- The brain makes its own **chemicals**.
- They help us do everything that we do.
- **Chemicals** can make us:
  - feel happy or sad
  - feel hungry or tired
  - feel angry or worried
  - feel stressed or relaxed
  - feel strong
  - have good moods or bad moods.
- It is important for the **chemicals** in our brain to stay balanced for us to be healthy.

PART 1

## HEALTHY BRAIN

*The brain makes its own chemicals*

A stylized illustration of a person's head in profile, facing right. The brain inside the head is depicted with vibrant colors: yellow, pink, and blue. The person has dark skin and short black hair. The background shows a green field and a blue sky with white clouds.

## PART 1



# HEALTHY BRAIN

*The brain makes its own chemicals*



## PART 1



# HEALTHY BRAIN

*Living in a healthy way keeps the chemicals in the brain balanced*

- When we live a healthy way, the chemicals in our brain stay balanced and we feel good.
- Living in a healthy way means:
  - eating healthy food
  - being active (playing sport, hunting)
  - going out bush or visiting country
  - staying away from bad food, drugs and grog
  - having strong, healthy relationships
  - studying and working or staying at school
  - treating ourselves, family, community and people around us with love and respect
  - respecting Elders and Traditional Lore.
- These things will keep the chemicals in our brain balanced, and then our bodies and relationships will be healthy.
- It is important to keep the balance!

PART 1

## HEALTHY BRAIN

*Living in a healthy way keeps the chemicals in the brain balanced*

A central illustration of a human brain with colorful, swirling patterns inside, set against a yellow background. Surrounding the brain are various icons representing healthy living: a person running, a person reading a book, a fish, a camel, a small tree, a speaker system, and a plate of food. The overall theme is the connection between a healthy brain and a healthy lifestyle.

## PART 1



# HEALTHY BRAIN

*Living in a healthy way keeps the chemicals in the brain balanced*



## PART 1



# HEALTHY BRAIN

## *The nervous system*

- The **nervous system** is the name for the brain and all the nerves that join the brain with the body.
- Nerves in the **nervous system** are like the branches in a tree or the creeks in a river system.
- The **nervous system** carries messages from the brain to the body and the body to the brain.
- The **nervous system** controls everything we do.
- The **nervous system** is like our body's 'knowledge system'.

PART 1

## HEALTHY BRAIN

*The nervous system*

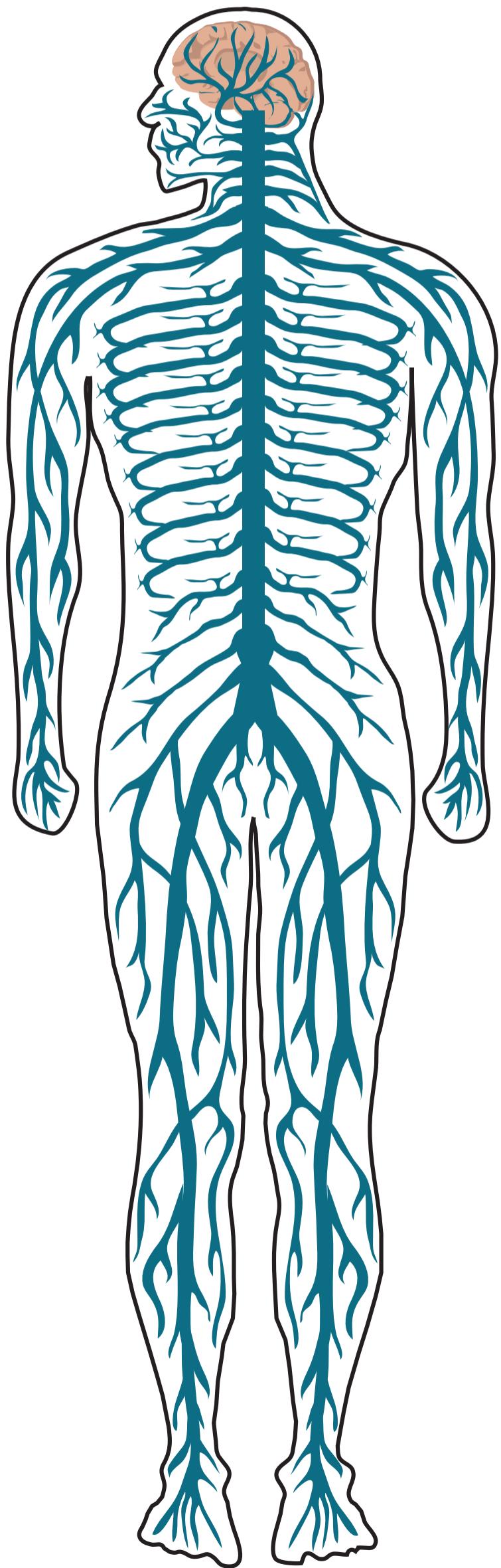
A diagram of the human nervous system, showing the brain at the top and a network of blue lines representing nerves branching down through the spinal cord and out to the arms and legs. A text box to the right of the diagram states: "Carries messages around the body."

## PART 1



# HEALTHY BRAIN

*The nervous system*



**Carries  
messages  
around the  
body.**

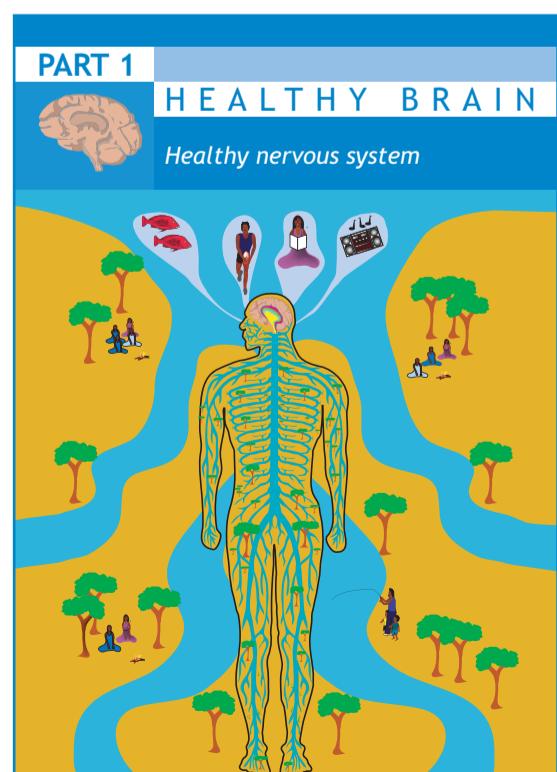
## PART 1



# HEALTHY BRAIN

## *Healthy nervous system*

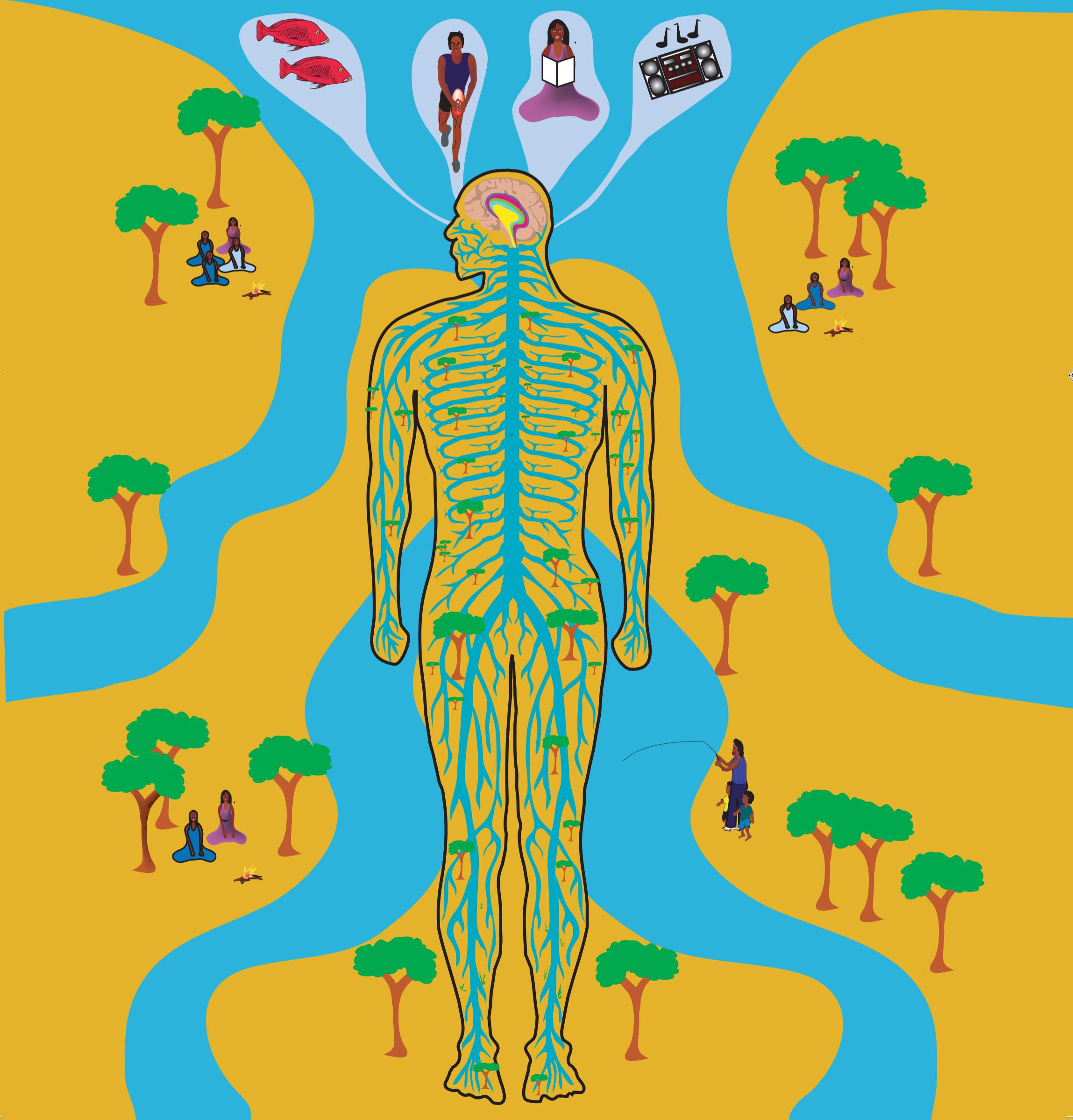
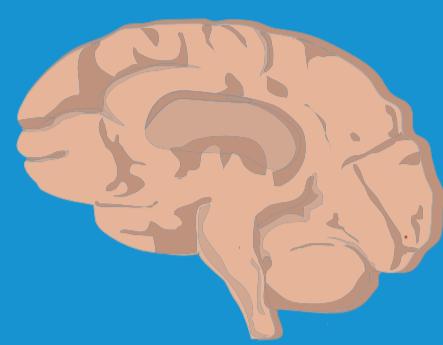
- Our body makes lots of different chemicals that keep our nervous system working properly.
- Keeping these chemicals balanced makes sure our nervous system is balanced.
- When we are healthy, the chemicals in our nervous system are balanced like water in a healthy river system (water that is clean, flowing and full of life).
- That way food can get to all parts of our body and waste can get taken away.
- This is like a healthy river system that takes clean water to feed all of the plants and animals along the river, keeping them all healthy.



## PART 1

# HEALTHY BRAIN

*Healthy nervous system*



## PART 2



# PROBLEMS WITH THE BRAIN

## *Balance problems*

- Some things we do can change the chemicals in our brain.
- These things can cause **balance problems** in the brain:
  - drinking grog, sniffing petrol, using gunja or other drugs
  - too much worry or stress
  - family troubles
  - bad sleep
  - bad food
  - getting sick.
- These things can cause **balance problems** in everyone, but in some people it happens much easier than in others.
- Sometimes it runs in the family.
- Let's see what happens when we have **balance problems** in the brain.

**PART 2**

**PROBLEMS WITH THE BRAIN**

**Balance problems**

Some things can make the balance no good:

Drugs and alcohol      Bad food

Stress      Bad sleep

Sniffing petrol

Family history

Smoking gunja

Getting sick

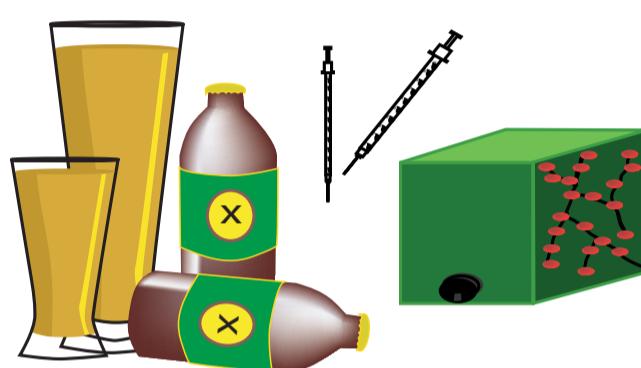
## PART 2



# PROBLEMS WITH THE BRAIN

## *Balance problems*

Some things can make the balance no good:



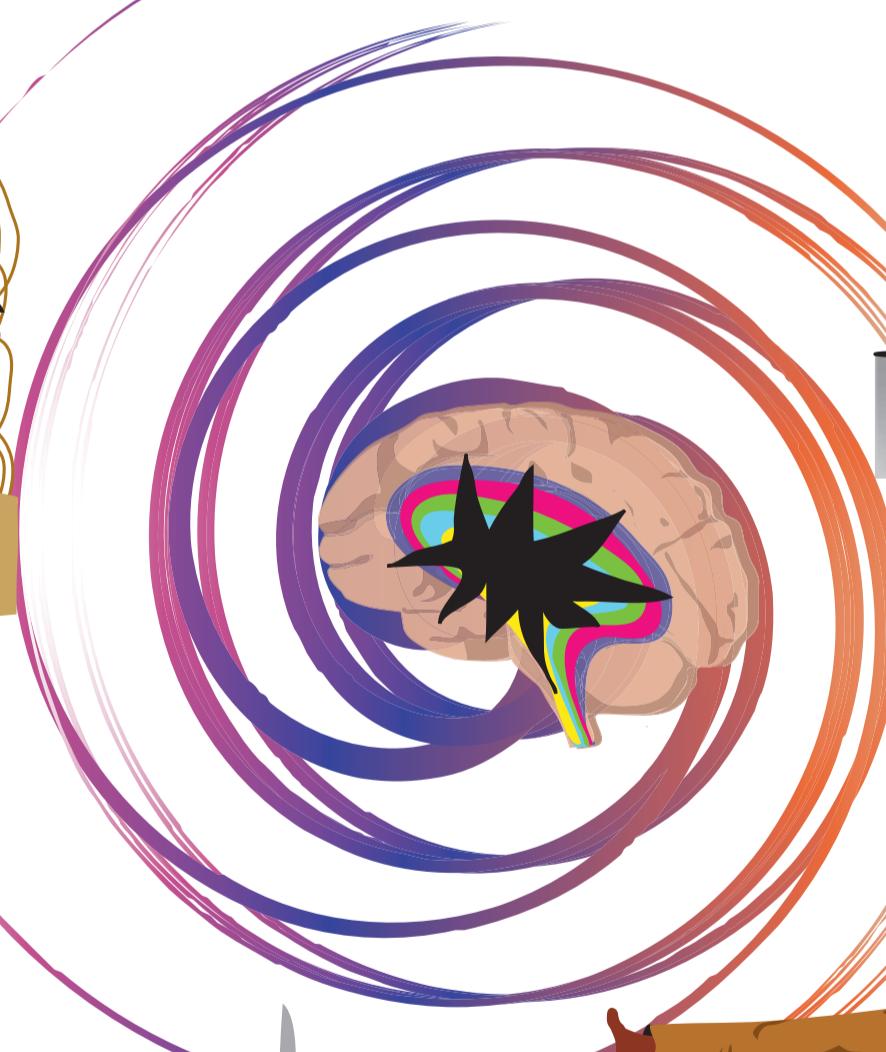
Drugs and alcohol



Bad food



Stress  
Bad sleep



Sniffing  
petrol



Family history



Smoking gunja



Getting sick

## PART 2



# PROBLEMS WITH THE BRAIN

## *Balance problems and mental health*

- When there are balance problems, the nervous system is like a river system with dirty water or water that doesn't flow.
- The wrong messages are sent around the brain and nervous system.
- When this happens, the person can have problems with their **mental health**.
- With **mental health** problems, the balance is no good and confused messages are sent around the brain and nervous system.
- These confused messages mean that a person can feel sad when they should feel happy, or they can see or hear things that aren't really there.
- It is like the brain is sick, just like the body can get sick.
- There are different types of **mental health** problems.
- Some people have worse **mental health** problems than others. Some people get a few different types of mental health problems at the same time.
- Let's look at some of the things that can happen to a person when they have problems with their **mental health**.

**PART 2** PROBLEMS WITH THE BRAIN  
*Balance problems and mental health*

The person's balance is no good, just like a river system with water that is dirty or doesn't flow properly.

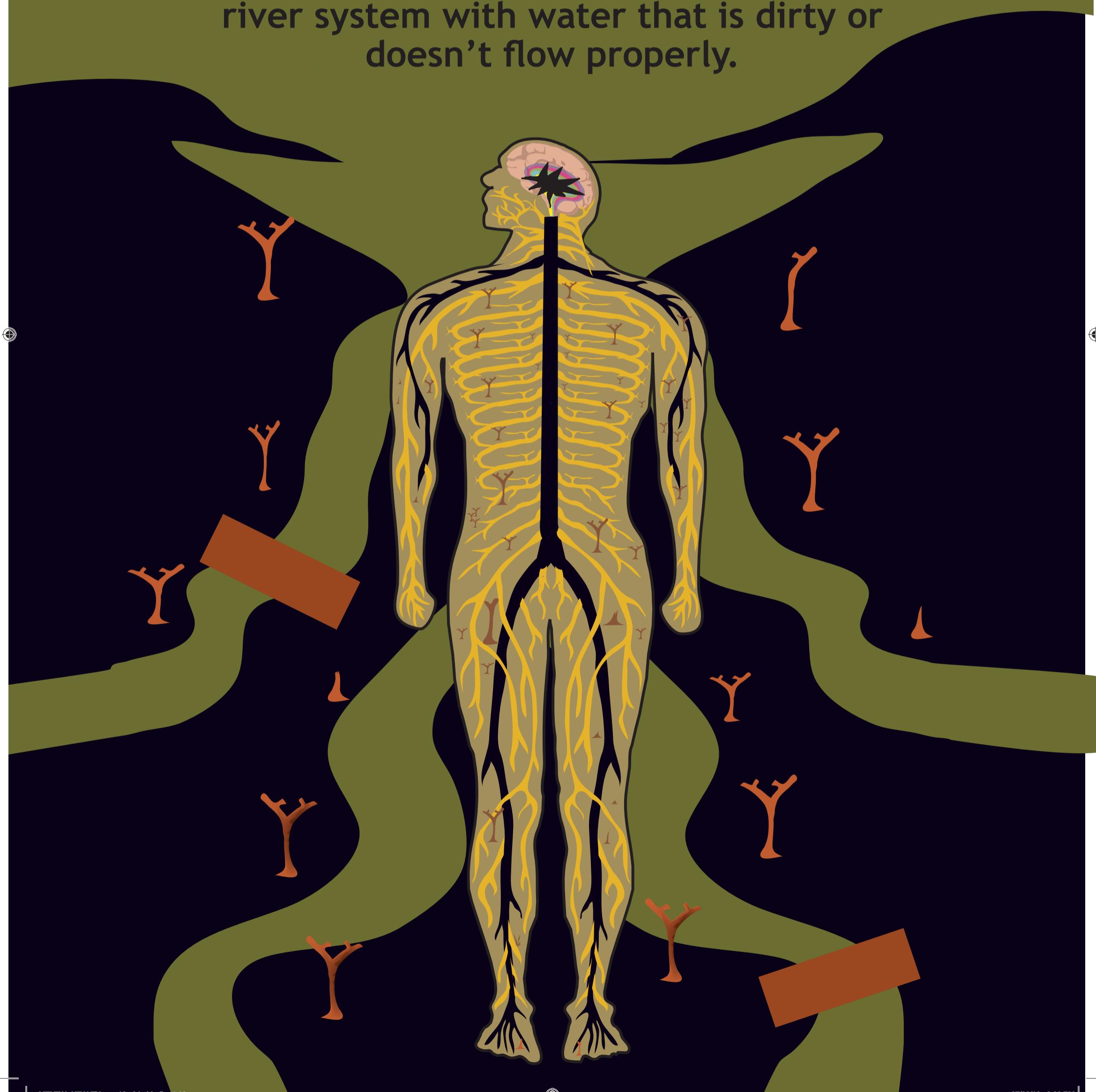
## PART 2



# PROBLEMS WITH THE BRAIN

*Balance problems and mental health*

The person's balance is no good, just like a river system with water that is dirty or doesn't flow properly.



## PART 3



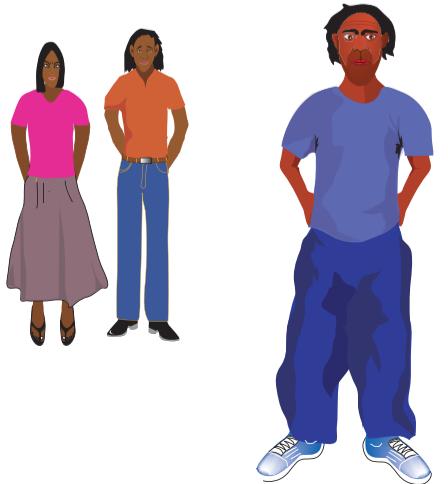
# MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

## *Paranoia*

- Some people with mental health problems think that everybody is against them or talking about them.
- They might think other people don't like them or are trying to hurt them.
- This is called **paranoia** or being **paranoid**.
- Somebody who is **paranoid** may feel like they are getting really sick when they are not.
- They may think that something bad is going to happen when there is no reason to think that.
- Sometimes people get more **paranoid** when they smoke gunja (marijuana, cannabis).

 PART 3	MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS
	Paranoia

Think other people are talking about them or laughing at them.

An illustration showing three people standing side-by-side. On the left is a woman in a pink t-shirt and purple skirt. In the middle is a person in an orange t-shirt and blue pants. On the right is a person in a blue t-shirt and dark blue pants. All three individuals have their hands on their hips and are looking towards the right.

## PART 3



## MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

### *Paranoia*

**Think other people are talking about them or laughing at them.**



## PART 3



# MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

## Anxiety (*big worries*)

- One type of mental health problem can happen when a person has too many worries or stress that don't go away.
- They may not be big worries but the person makes them big worries.
- This is called **anxiety**.
- A person with **anxiety** may talk really fast or talk a lot.
- They might feel restless and nervous.
- They might also feel sweaty, shaky and feel their heart beating fast.
- People can have **anxiety** because too much of a chemical called adrenaline is in the brain and body.
- Some people need medicine to help get the right balance of adrenaline in the brain.
- Other people may just need to talk with a professional like an Aboriginal mental health worker or a counsellor to help them deal with their feelings and worries. Some people call this 'talking therapy'.

PART 3 MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS  
Anxiety (*big worries*)

Nervous, shaky, always worrying

An illustration depicting anxiety. On the left, there is a small figure of a person sitting in a chair, looking distressed with hands near their face. To the right, a larger figure of a woman with dark hair and brown skin has a worried expression. Concentric circles radiate from behind her head, symbolizing the intensity and all-encompassing nature of anxiety. The background is a dark green color.

## PART 3



# MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

*Anxiety (big worries)*

Nervous, shaky,  
always worrying



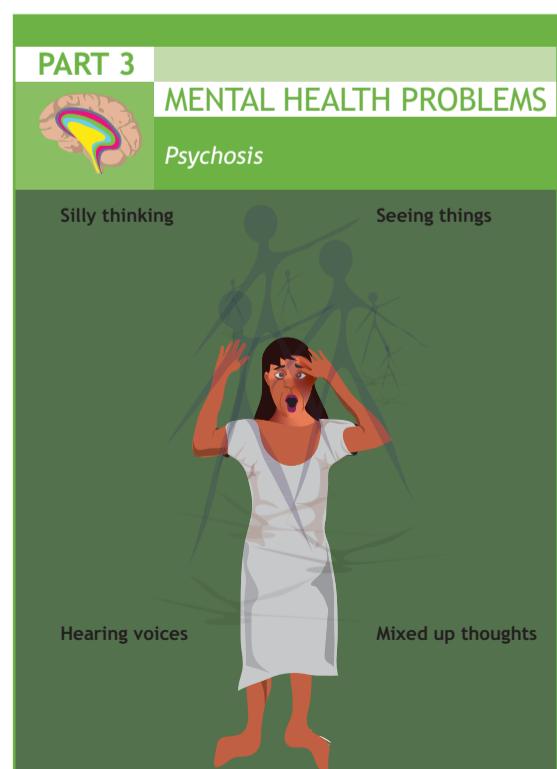
## PART 3



# MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

## *Psychosis*

- One type of mental health problem is called **psychosis**.
- A person with **psychosis** might see things that other people can't see. Sometimes these things scare them.
- They might hear things that other people can't hear, like somebody talking to them.
- Sometimes the voices tell them they are a bad person or tell them to do bad things.
- They can't think clearly.
- They might have mixed up thoughts or silly thinking.
- People with **psychosis** can act really strange or confused.
- They can become angry for no good reason, and might get violent and try to hurt their friends or family.
- **Psychosis** or **psychotic** experiences can be different to spiritual experiences, that may be part of cultural practice. It may be hard to tell the difference.
- A person experiencing **psychosis** will have problems with their family and friends, and may have trouble in their daily life unless they get help.



## PART 3



# MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

## *Psychosis*

Silly thinking

Seeing things

Hearing voices

Mixed up thoughts



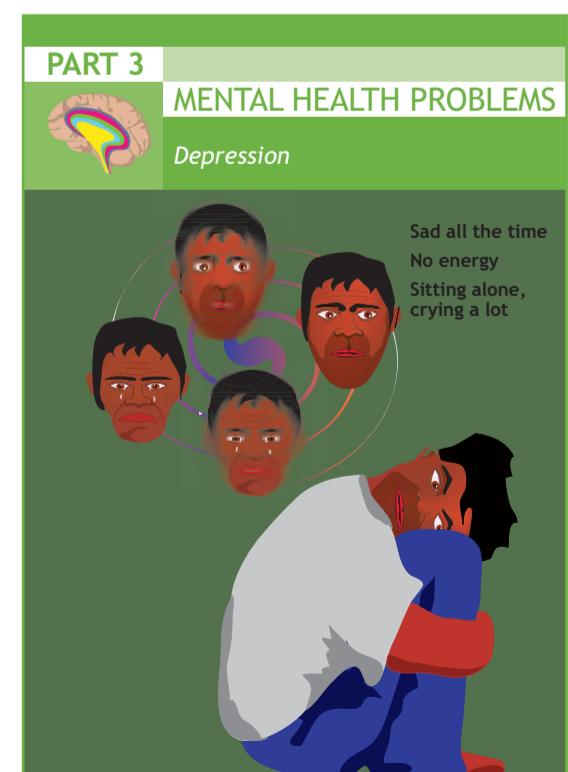
## PART 3



# MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

## Depression

- Another type of mental health problem is called **depression**.
- A person with **depression** can feel sad all the time for no reason.
- A person with **depression** might:
  - cry a lot
  - feel lazy all the time and not want to go out of the house
  - sit alone all the time and not want to talk to other people
  - feel so bad, they feel like hurting themselves
  - think about dying all the time, or talk about dying all the time.
- A person with **depression** may even want to kill themselves. It is called **suicide** when someone does kill themselves.
- People can get **depression** because there is not enough of a chemical called serotonin in the brain.
- To get better, they may need to take medicine to help them get enough serotonin in their brain.
- People who are **depressed** can also be **psychotic** (see page 21).



## PART 3



# MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

## *Depression*



## PART 3



# MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

## *Mania and bipolar disorder*

- One type of mental health problem is called **mania**.
- A person with **mania** can have too much energy and may not feel the need to sleep much at all.
- When a person has **mania** or a ‘high’ mood, they might walk and talk and think very fast.
- **Mania** can be part of another mental health problem called **bipolar disorder**.
- **Bipolar disorder** means that the person’s mood can swing from high to low and back again.
- **Mania** is the high point of **bipolar disorder** and depression is the low point. Some people have just **mania** or just depression but when they have both at different times, it’s called **bipolar disorder**.
- People who are **depressed** or **manic** can also be **psychotic** (see page 21).

<b>PART 3</b>	MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS
	<i>Mania and bipolar disorder</i>
Too much energy, racing around High mood, not much sleep	

## PART 3



# MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

*Mania and bipolar disorder*



**Too much energy, racing around**

**High mood, not much sleep**

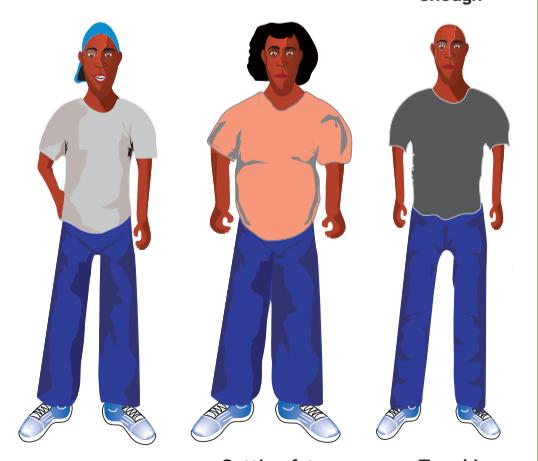
## PART 3



# MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

## *Eating and sleeping problems*

- When the balance in the brain and nervous system is no good, people can also have **eating problems** or **sleeping problems**.
- People with **eating problems** may eat too much bad food and get fat.
- Or they might not eat enough food and get too skinny.
- A person with **sleeping problems** may sleep too much, or not sleep enough, or not sleep very well.
- Both **eating** and **sleeping problems** can be signs of mental health problems.

 PART 3	MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS		
	Eating and sleeping problems		
<p style="text-align: center;">Eat too much      or      Don't eat enough</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">Getting fat      or      Too skinny</p>			

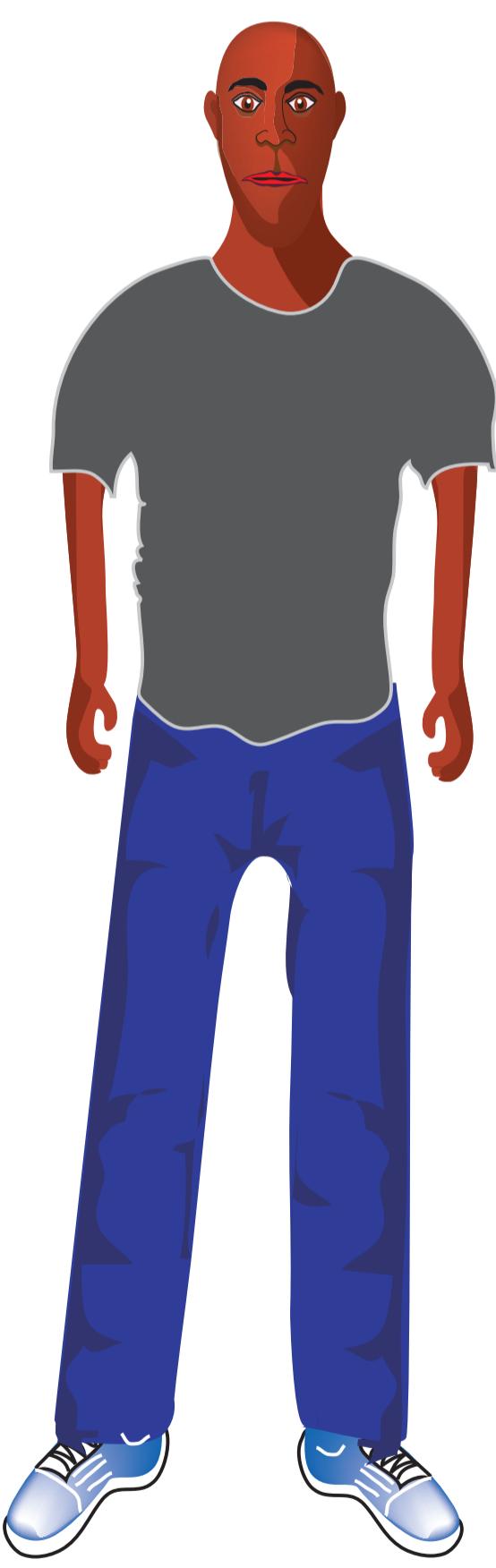
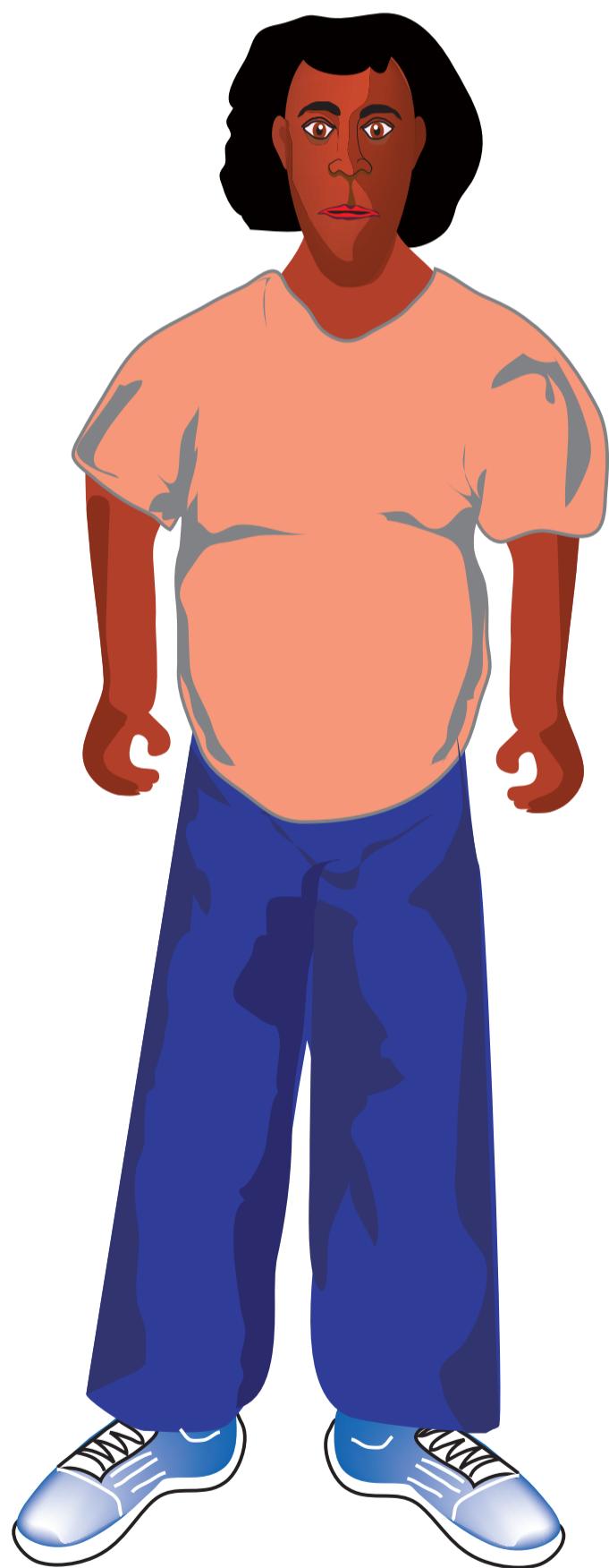
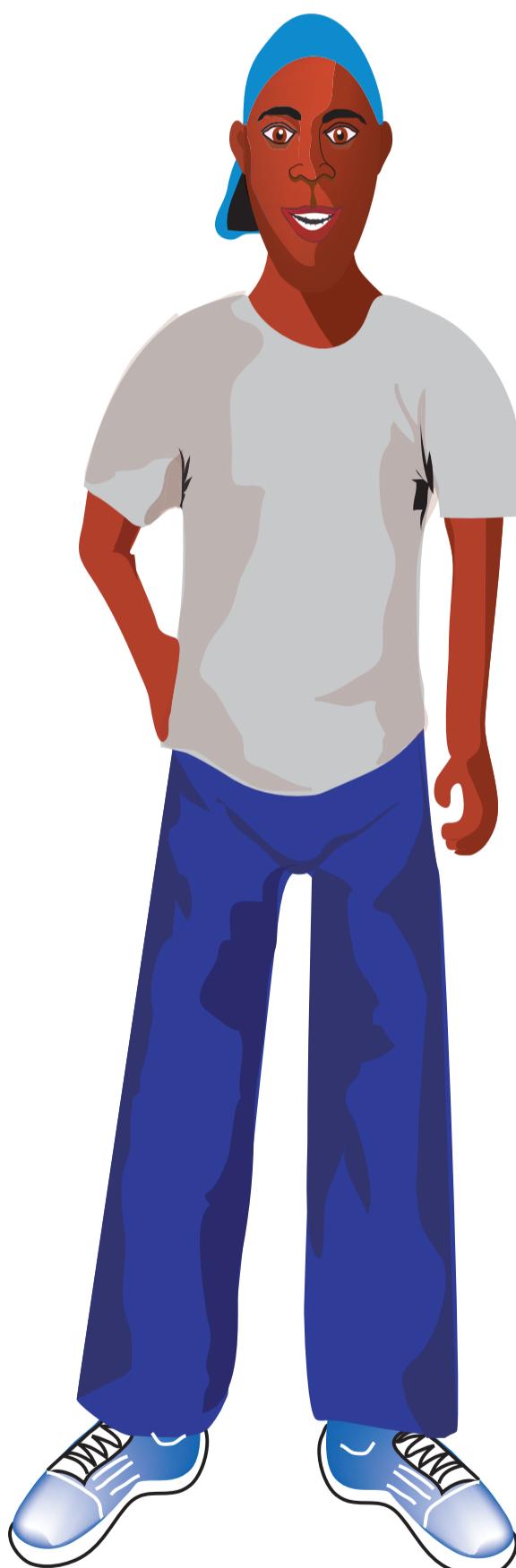
## PART 3



# MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

*Eating and sleeping problems*

**Eat too much      or      Don't eat  
enough**



**Getting fat      or      Too skinny**

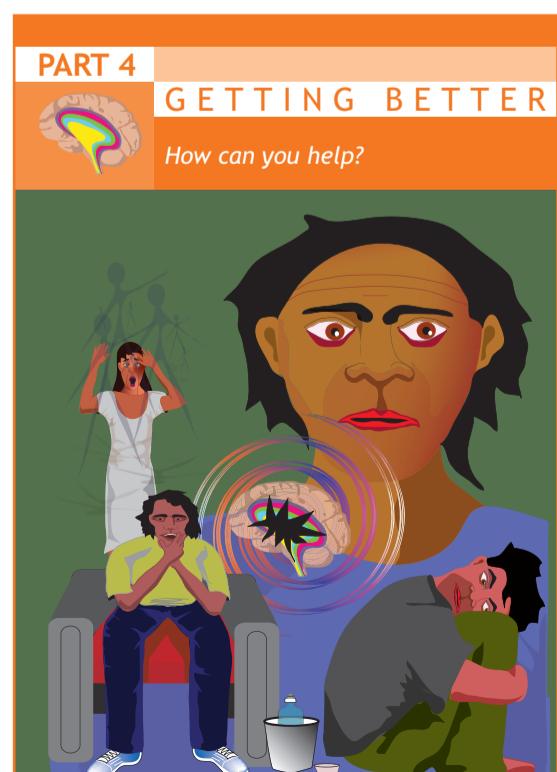
## PART 4



# GETTING BETTER

## *How can you help?*

- If you or someone you know is having mental health problems, it is important to get the balance back, before the problems get worse.
- There are many things you can do to help get the balance back, and live a happy and healthy life.
- If the mental health problems don't go away easily, you may need medical help, and you may need to take medicine.
- Now let's see what you can do to help.



## PART 4

# GETTING BETTER



*How can you help?*



## PART 4



# GETTING BETTER

## *Get the balance back*



The chemicals in the brain need to get balanced again.



There are many ways to do this, some of them are:

- eat good food
- sleep well
- talk with someone you trust about how you are feeling
- use less drugs and alcohol, or use none
- find family and friends to support you
- respect culture
- see an Aboriginal healer
- go to work or school.



You can also do healthy things that make you feel good, like:

- play sport
- dance
- listen to music
- play music
- paint
- join in Ceremony
- go hunting
- spend time on country.



It is also important to talk to someone about your problems early when they are small, rather than wait until they get out of control. For example, small problems like feeling a bit sad can become bigger and bigger and may even lead to suicide if they are not fixed early.

**PART 4** **GETTING BETTER**  
*Get the balance back*

Listen to Elders  
Eat good food  
Play sport  
Respect culture  
Stop smoking and drinking

Go to work  
Get enough sleep  
Join in Ceremony  
Go hunting

Eat good food

Play sport

Respect culture

Get enough sleep

Go to work

Go hunting

## PART 4

# GETTING BETTER

*Get the balance back*



**Listen to Elders**

**Eat good food**

**Play sport**

**Respect culture**

**Stop smoking and drinking**

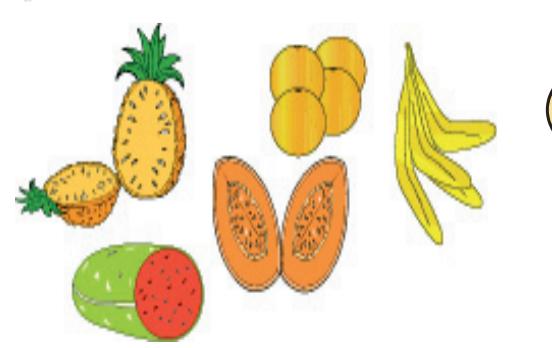


**Go to work**

**Get enough sleep**

**Join in Ceremony**

**Go hunting**



## PART 4



# GETTING BETTER

## *How to get help*

- If the problems are more serious and don't go away easily, you may need medical help.
- An Aboriginal mental health worker can help, and you can also get medical advice at the health clinic from a nurse or doctor.
- A psychologist or psychiatrist can also help, if they are available.
- It may help to have a family member or someone you trust with you for support.
- You may need to take medicine to get the chemicals in the brain balanced again.
- It is important to listen to the medical advice about how to take the medicine (how much and when). It may not work properly if you don't take it the right way.
- Family and friends can help you remember to take the medicine and to do things that help keep the balance (page 31).
- There are some phone numbers on the next page that can also help.

**PART 4** **GETTING BETTER**  
*How to get help*

Health Clinic

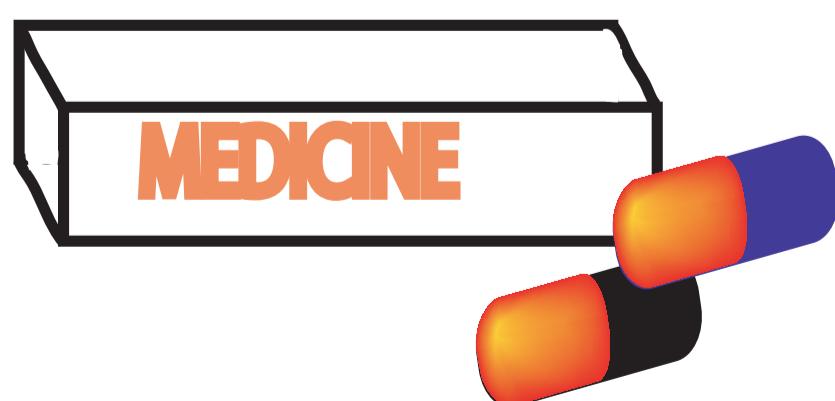
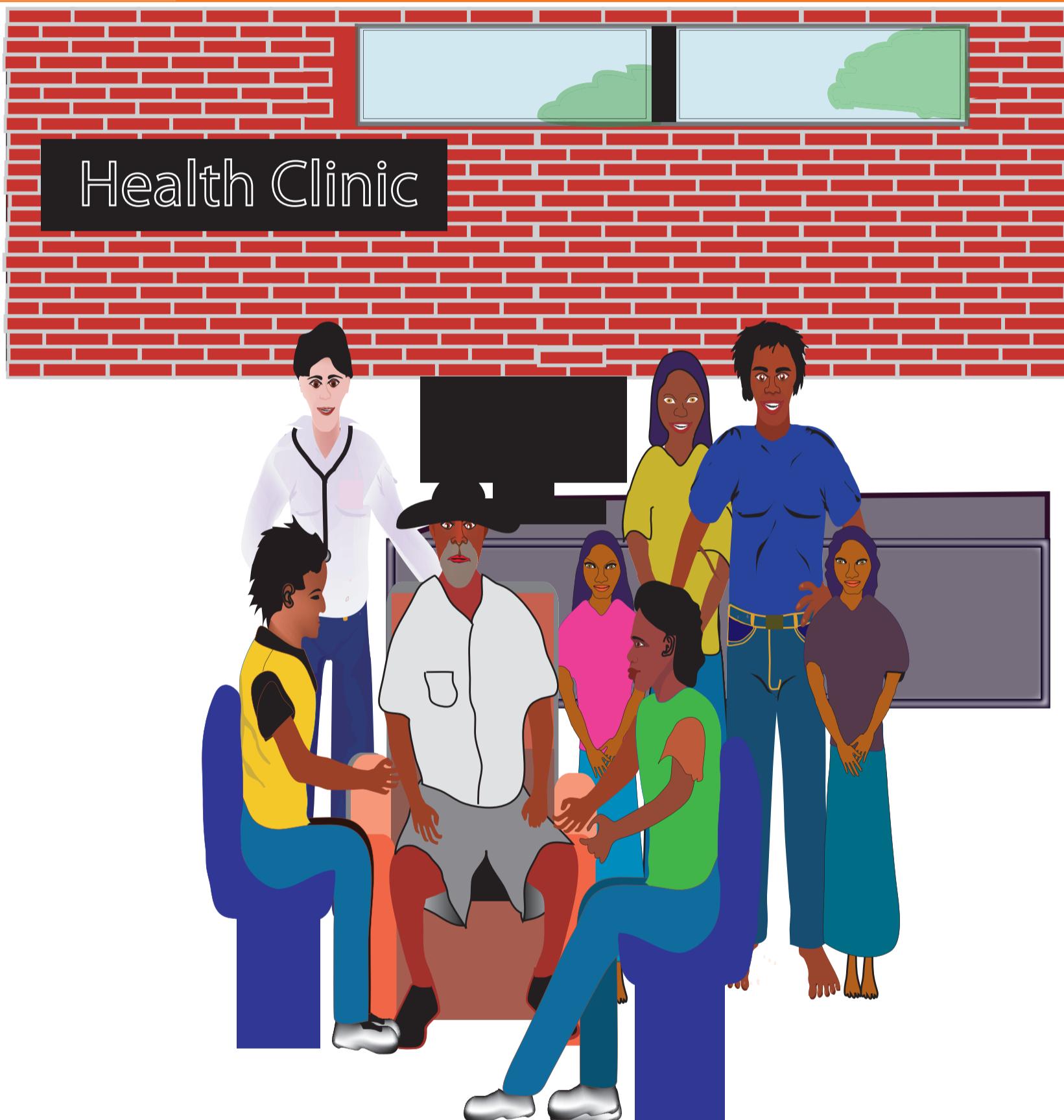
- Get help from family
- See the Aboriginal mental health worker or doctor
- May need to take medication

## PART 4



# GETTING BETTER

*How to get help*



- Get help from family
- See the Aboriginal mental health worker or doctor
- May need to take medication

## PART 4



# GETTING BETTER

## *Where to get help*

You can get lots of useful information if you call the numbers below. These places can offer you counselling anytime or can refer you to appropriate treatment services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in your area.

**You can call all of these numbers, from anywhere in Australia, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.**

Calls to all of these numbers are free from public telephones, but charges may apply when you call from a mobile phone.

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**Lifeline:**  
**13 11 14**  
A free telephone  
counselling service  
[www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

**Beyond Blue:**  
**1300 22 4636**  
An information line for  
general inquiries  
[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

**Kids Helpline:**  
**1800 551 800**  
A free telephone  
counselling service  
[www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

**Headspace:**  
A national youth mental  
health foundation  
helping young people  
aged 12 to 25 years.  
[www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)

**National Suicide callback  
service: 1300 659 467**  
A free telephone  
counselling service