



### What is SPARX?

- SPARX is a self-help internet-based E-therapy programme, developed for young people who may be experiencing mild to moderate depression or anxiety. It is delivered and supported online. The programme is designed as a game and uses Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) to teach users five behaviours known to be especially important in protecting against depression – problem solving, being active, positive cognition, social skills, and relaxation.
- SPARX talks to young people in a language and genre they understand, and which can be undertaken in the individual's own time and place. Trials have shown that the programme is at least as effective as 'standard' treatments (face-to-face counselling, medication) for NZ youth aged 12 – 19 years seeking help for depression. They have also shown that SPARX worked equally well across ethnic groups, genders and targeted age groups.

### Why create SPARX?

- Depression is a particularly disabling disorder and is costly to society all over the world. It is a major underlying risk for attempted and completed suicide, is a relapsing disorder and it is common in young people with an estimated one-in-five 18 year-olds having suffered an episode of clinical depression.
- Around three-quarters of young people with depression or anxiety will not see a mental health professional and therefore do not receive treatment. There is a need for a simple and effective therapy that can be delivered easily and cost-effectively to large groups of young people which has resulted in SPARX.

### SPARX the game

- Access to SPARX is through a dedicated website ([www.sparx.org.nz](http://www.sparx.org.nz)), which also includes:
  - Background information for young people, their families/whanau and professionals who work with adolescents
  - The 'Mood Quiz' – a depression screening tool
  - Information on where to get help (including Lifeline and Youthline and the emergency 111 number).
- SPARX is set in a fantasy world where the user chooses an avatar whose mission is to save the world from gloom and negativity. Through a series of quests, the user develops skills that help the user accomplish the game's goal. (e.g. dealing with negative thoughts, problem-solving, activity scheduling, relaxation, etc.). The same skills can also be used to help the young person better manage their mood and stresses in real life.
- The therapy was largely developed by a team of researchers and clinicians at the University of Auckland, in conjunction with game developers Metia Interactive. The research team was led by Associate Professor Sally Merry, a Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, Head of Department of Psychological Medicine and Director of The Werry Centre for Child and Adolescent Mental Health.
- The project was funded by the Ministry of Health through the Prime Minister's Youth Mental Health Project (<http://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/mental-health-and-addictions/youth-mental-health-project>).
- SPARX was developed in partnership with Māori researchers, clinicians and software developers; Pacific and Asian advisors had input throughout the development and testing; trials included substantial numbers of all major ethnic groups in New Zealand.

### Supporting SPARX

- Youthline and Lifeline can provide clinical back up support to SPARX users who request it. There is a dedicated line (0508 4 SPARX) that is staffed by professional counsellors 12 hours a day 7 days a week, with an afterhours service available outside those times. On screen messaging can also remind users that the emergency 111 number can be used.



### **Evaluating SPARX**

- SPARX was tested in a large randomised controlled trial by the University of Auckland between 2009 and 2010. SPARX was compared with standard care provided to young people with mild to moderate depression and found to be as effective as at least four counselling sessions, with each session lasting on average 30 to 60 minutes. Remission rates were higher for the group treated via SPARX.
- Results from the study were published in the 19 April 2012 edition of the influential British Medical Journal. Three doctoral projects also evaluated SPARX with specific groups of young people. The findings can be found here: <http://www.bmj.com/content/344/bmj.e2598#>
- In 2013 SPARX received international recognition for its innovation and effectiveness at the Unesco Awards for eContent and Creativity.

### **Rolling out SPARX to our community**

- SPARX will be promoted within the health sector and schools as part of the Prime Minister's Youth Mental Health Project. In addition, information about SPARX will be provided to concerned parents, families and whanau.

### **How much has it cost?**

- The Prime Minister's Youth Mental Health Project is investing \$62 million over four years on a range of initiatives to improve youth mental health. The SPARX e-therapy initiative has a budget of \$2.7 million over more than three years, which includes the cost of the licence and contract with UniServices delivering the programme.