



Mental health in Australia

An APS insights paper

Summary

The mental health of Australians is an issue receiving growing attention from the government and the general population alike. Despite increased investment in mental health services from state and federal governments¹, one in two Australians will face mental ill-health at some point in their lives² and 3,000 Australians sadly end their lives each year.

This paper, developed especially for philanthropists, examines the mental health ecosystem at a high level and outlines some of the key issues facing the sector. At the end of the paper, we provide a link to a list of charitable organisations working in the mental health space for you to consider.

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Introduction

Mental health and wellbeing is a spectrum on which we all sit. People with the more common disorders of anxiety and depression, as well as those who suffer psychotic disorders, can have different levels of mental health along the spectrum.



Charitable giving to mental health organisations is increasing as community recognition of the need translates into funding in the space.³ There are multiple ways your funding can positively impact the mental health ecosystem and different cohorts of individuals.

Awareness and prevention

Mental health awareness is about understanding our mental health needs and potential vulnerabilities to episodes of mental ill-health. Attitudes towards mental ill-health as well as social and cultural factors influence awareness. Stigma and a lack of understanding are significant barriers to awareness. Many charities are focused on removing stigma and increasing awareness and knowledge around mental health. As the onset of mental illness is typically around mid-to-late adolescence,⁴ many charities operating in this space work with young people in and around the education system.



The mental health ecosystem

Early intervention

Early intervention is about identifying the onset of potential mental ill-health and, where necessary, offering rapid treatment response to minimise the severity and duration of the condition and to reduce its broader impacts. It requires a coordinated effort from those in a person's life – family, friends, teachers, employers, and health care workers – and can have positive immediate and long-term outcomes.

Support and recovery

Access to mental health care is a significant challenge in many parts of Australia because the need for both clinical and psycho-social services is significantly greater than their availability. Many services are also currently directed towards a crisis response model instead of a mental wellbeing model, and there is minimal access to recovery support.

Governments direct funding to traditional support services associated with mental illness. However, many people with mental health problems need care beyond clinical treatment.



Often clinical care needs to be complemented by access to a range of supported accommodation options, stable housing, and community support services focused on employment, income support, education and social and family support. It jeopardises a person's recovery and capacity to live in the community when one or more of these needs is unmet.

Who is most vulnerable to mental ill-health?

Whilst anyone can experience mental ill-health, some cohorts of people are over-represented. The rates of suicide in specific groups display some startling statistics:

Young people

Suicide is the leading cause of death for Australians between the ages of 14-44.⁵

Males

75% of those who die by suicide are of the male gender.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

The suicide rate amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is twice that of non-Indigenous people.

People in rural and regional areas

The suicide rate amongst people in rural and regional areas is also double that of people in non-rural and regional areas.

LGBTQI+ people

People aged between 16-27 who identify as LGBTQI+ are five times more likely to attempt suicide, whilst transgender people over the age of 18 are 11 times more likely.⁶

Key issues in the mental health sector

As well as expanding knowledge, services, and solutions across the mental health ecosystem, there are several key issues where both funding and expert efforts are focused.

Suicide prevention and 'postvention'

The importance of suicide prevention education and initiatives is well established in the sector. Support services focusing on the aftermath of a suicide attempt or death from suicide receive more focus. While a critical area of service provision is around support for an individual who has attempted suicide to prevent further attempts, there is also a significant need to support those impacted by the suicide, including friends, family, community, first responders, frontline workers, and others. Research suggests approximately 135 people are exposed to each suicide death⁷ and the impacts will vary by community. Like any intervention, postvention strategies need to consider the characteristics and context of the specific community affected.

The rise of climate anxiety

Climate anxiety; where people feel sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and guilty about climate change; is on the rise.⁸ Many young people say their feelings about climate change negatively affect their daily life and functioning. Many charities run resilience and mental health programs specifically linked to climate change, particularly for rural and regional areas.



The impact of social media

Social media can positively and negatively impact young people.⁹It allows them to socialise, stay up to date with events and access support. However, it can also lead to anxiety, disrupted sleep and increased bullying. Many youth-focused charities work with teens to instil healthy digital habits. Whilst all mental health organisations recognise the importance of having people with lived experience of mental illness involved in their work, this area is one where young people develop and deliver programs.

Digital mental health services

Whilst digital mental health services have been in existence for several years, the onset of COVID-19 accelerated their development and delivery. Digital mental health refers to services delivered online, via mobile or phone, including programs, apps, online support communities, webchat and email, and telephone crisis and counselling lines. These services bring significant benefits to practitioners and clients, offering convenience and increased accessibility (particularly for people in rural and regional areas or with a disability). They can also provide anonymity, helping people overcome the stigma surrounding seeking help.

Funding opportunities

Many charities operate in the mental health sector, focusing on different ecosystem areas, specific cohorts of individuals, and specialised approaches to intervention and support.

Philanthropic funding for organisations focused on advocacy and research creates change.

Advocacy

Advocacy drives systemic change to ensure fair treatment and social justice for people living with mental illness and their carers. Through the voices of those with lived experience to advocate to governments and key decision-makers, advocacy is a critical part of improving the systems and structures underpinning the mental health system.

Research

There is a wide range of research conducted by expert scientists and practitioners to understand better how we design support and treatment for those who have a mental illness. Scientists are engaged in laboratory research investigating the causes of mental illness, along with a growing focus on personalised medicine to treat disorders. Practitioners are looking at translating scientific knowledge into support, counselling and crisis services, including new and better ways to deliver holistic support.

Find out more

APS has developed a list of some of the charities working in the mental health space for you to consider:

[Give list - Mental health](#)

If you have any questions or would like to discuss funding the mental health space further, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

Footnotes

1 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-11/billions-mental-health-funding-federal-budget/100130802>

2 <https://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/mental-health-and-suicide-prevention>

3 McCrindle Australian Communities Report - 2021

4 [Black Dog Institute, Facts & figures about mental health](#)

5 <https://www.lifeline.org.au/resources/data-and-statistics/>

6 <https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/media-releases/funding-needed-for-suicide-prevention-coordinator/>

7 Maple, M, Sanford, R. (2019). Suicide exposure and impact within a non-representative Australian community sample, *Death Studies*, Jan, 2019; Cerel J, Brown MM, Maple M, Singleton M, van de Venne J, Moore M, Flaherty C, 2018. How many people are exposed to suicide? Not six. *Suicide & Life-threatening Behavior*.

8 Marks, Hickman, Pihkala, Clayton, Lewandowski, Mayall, Wray, Mellor, van Susteren; Young People's Voices on Climate Anxiety, Government Betrayal and Moral Injury: A Global Phenomenon, *The Lancet* prepublication, 2021.

9 <https://kidshelpline.com.au/teens/issues/social-media-and-mental-health>