![Mental Health Australia]

THE PANDEMIC
AND OUR MENTAL HEALTH

EVERY ELECTION ISSUE
THE PANDEMIC
VOTE WITH MENTAL HEALTH IN MIND

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic Mental Health Australia welcomed the National Cabinet's attention on mental health impacts of the pandemic and social distancing restrictions. In turn we also welcomed the investments at federal, state and territory level to help manage the increased need for mental health supports – particularly in relation to lockdowns and employment.

However, prior to the pandemic a Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health (PC Report) was already highlighting existing fragmentation and under-resourcing. This fragile mental health system has undergone additional stress and strain through the pandemic over the last two years.

The recommendations within the PC Report are our way through and out of the pandemic, knowing full well that there will be a long tail of recovery for many, and that many were in need of help and support well before we had heard of COVID-19.

Systemic mental health reform will not only help us emerge from this pandemic in good health, but it will also prepare our communities for the next flood, fire, natural disaster or even another pandemic.

The pandemic has also shown us how reform can be achieved – where the Australian Government and community acted quickly and collaboratively to implement telehealth, JobKeeper and additional services to support Australian's mental health through this crisis.

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THE FACTS

Thanks to the Black Dog Institute we know that:

Common consequences of disease outbreaks include anxiety and panic, depression, anger, confusion and uncertainty, and financial stress, with estimates of between 25% to 33% of the community experiencing high levels of worry and anxiety during similar pandemics.

People with pre-existing anxiety disorders, existing health anxiety (those who worry excessively about having or contracting illnesses), and other mental health disorders (e.g., depression, and post-traumatic stress) are at risk of experiencing higher anxiety levels during the COVID-19 outbreak and may require more support or access to mental health treatment during this period.

As a result the Australian Government data showed record high rates of use of Lifeline, Kids Helpline and Beyond Blue services in 2020 and 2021.

Australia's Mental Health Think Tank reported that:

• There has been a population-level deterioration in mental health related to the pandemic. This mental health impact has been disproportionately burdened certain members of Australian society, including but not limited to young people; females; people living with a disability or existing mental health issue; culturally and linguistically diverse people; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; people on low incomes, people experiencing job loss or people living in poor quality housing conditions.

• Australia's young people are experiencing a new peak in the national mental health crisis, driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing lockdowns. Anxiety and depression rates are at record levels, calls to crisis lines are at record high levels, and more young people are presenting to emergency departments with self-harm. Mental health support services are overwhelmed. Expanded mental health funding and services announced by the Federal Government and selected state governments are vitally important and welcomed by the sector, but in many cases take time to be fully established.

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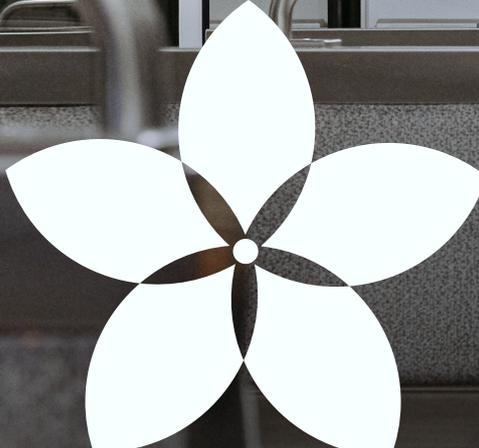
WHAT CAN THE GOVERNMENT DO?

Government must learn from the mental health impacts of the pandemic, especially where gaps have been highlighted in our existing infrastructure.

Government must also build on where investment and need has provided the impetus for innovation in improved service delivery.

It will be years before we can fully comprehend the extent of the impact of COVID-19 and the effect of the shadow mental health pandemic. However, now is the time for governments to act to protect the mental health of Australians and ensure that psychological resilience can be at the foundation of our pandemic-recovery.

On the front line, Australia's healthcare workers are facing extreme pressure from the increased demand on the health system, leading to high psychological stress and burnout. Special consideration needs to be given to mental health and wellbeing support for front-line health care workers.

Emerging research suggests that experience of COVID-19, particularly 'Long-COVID' may be linked to acute and long-term mental health outcomes. Past pandemics show that people who experienced severe and life-threatening illnesses were at risk of posttraumatic stress disorder and depression, months to years following their illness. In addition to the much-needed mental health system reforms systems and supports should be put in place to screen and ensure people at risk of mental ill-health related to experience of COVID-19 have access to appropriate mental health services.

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LOOKING FOR MORE DETAIL OR RESOURCES?

National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan
https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/projects/national-disaster-response/pandemic-response-plan

Mental Health Australia – Issues Paper: Mental Health Response Plan for COVID-19
Issues Paper for NMHC - Mental Health Response Plan for COVID-19 | Mental Health Australia (mhaustralia.org)

Black Dog Institute's Federal Budget submission advocates for mental health and suicide prevention funding
https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/news/federal-budget-submission-2022-2023/

Mental Health Ramifications of COVID-19: The Australian context - The Black Dog Institute
https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/20200319_covid19-evidence-and-reccomendations.pdf

Pandemic fatigue: young people and mental health – The University of Sydney
https://www.sydney.edu.au/engage/events-sponsorships/sydney-ideas/2021/pandemic-fatigue-young-people-and-mental-health.html

The pandemic and your mental health: why recovery may take time - Beyond Blue
https://coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au/COVID-normal/supporting-personal-wellbeing/the-pandemic-and-your-mental-health-why-recovery-may-take-time

Preventing pandemic distress through economic supports - Australia's Mental Health Think Tank
Australia's Mental Health Think Tank Policy Paper August 2021

Mental Health Australia would like to thank its member organisations and key stakeholders for contributing to this extensive body of work on the pandemic has and will continue to impact the mental health of all Australians. If you are a member of Mental Health Australia and would like to add to these resources, please contact info@mhaustralia.org

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