

**Mental Health
Australia**

Draft National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030

Response to Department of Health Consultation

19 April 2021



Mentally healthy people,
mentally healthy communities

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Introduction

Mental Health Australia congratulates the Department of Health (the Department) on the development of the Draft National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030 (the Strategy).

In response to the Department's earlier Consultation Paper, Mental Health Australia raised significant concern that mental health had not been adequately included in the Consultation Paper to inform the development of the Strategy. This submission pointed to the high and increasing impact of mental ill-health for Australians, the importance of prevention for addressing this trend, the inherent interconnectedness of mental and physical health, and the need to integrate mental and physical health responses.

As such, Mental Health Australia is pleased to welcome the inclusion of mental health as a key focus area in the Draft National Preventive Health Strategy. The addition of this seventh focus area on "protecting mental health" goes a long way to addressing this gap, and along with integration of mental health across the whole Strategy, will far more effectively support the preventative health aims of the Strategy.

Mental Health Australia also commends the Department on their consideration of wider determinants of health beyond the health sector in the Strategy, and recommends further consideration of how the Strategy can drive collaboration across Government departments, in partnership with the NGO and private sectors to address them in the future.

This submission to the Department's consultation on the Draft National Preventive Health Strategy is in line with the survey questions posed through the Consultation Hub, but focuses only on those areas of most relevance to mental health.

Feedback on focus areas

As outlined in our submission to the Consultation Paper, physical and mental health are inherently interconnected, and inclusion of mental health in the Strategy is imperative to achieve its long term holistic aims for improving Australian's health.

The Strategy includes a list of reports that offer 'Related Strategic Guidance' for each of the focus areas. In addition to the reports currently listed for the mental health focus area, the National Mental Health Commission's Vision 2030: Roadmap, the National Suicide Prevention Adviser – final advice report (submitted to the Prime Minister December 2020) and the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System could be referenced.

The Strategy is strengthened in this section through the inclusion of protective factors that support positive mental health and wellbeing, and by identifying priority population groups who experience higher rates of mental ill-health or greater barriers to mental health service access than the general population.

A number of existing priorities for the prevention of mental ill-health have been identified,¹ which include:

- supporting parents to help their children thrive
- building child and adolescent social supports and protective life skills
- supporting young people and adults to look after their mental health as well as their physical health
- creating mentally healthy workplaces

¹ Prevention Coalition in Mental Health (2020). *Primed for prevention: A consensus statement on the prevention of mental disorders*. Retrieved 14 April 2021 from <https://preventionunited.org.au/advocacy/consensus-statement/>



- addressing the social determinants of mental health
- strengthening the research evidence and improving data collection.

Some of these areas are considered in the Strategy, but could be further consolidated.

The discussion in the focus area on mental health could also be further strengthened through consideration of secondary and tertiary prevention interventions, support prevention of mental ill-health across the lifespan and early in the onset of illness or an episode of illness. There is a significant body of evidence regarding the effectiveness, and potential return on investment, of mental health and suicide prevention interventions and services across the lifespan.^{2,3}

Feedback on targets for focus areas

The following response relates to focus area seven; protecting mental health, which has one target of “Towards zero suicides for all Australians”.

Mental Health Australia supports the existing target regarding suicide prevention. This is a critical priority in protecting Australians’ mental health, and there is strong support across the mental health and suicide prevention sector for this existing goal of the Australian Government.

However, prevention of mental ill-health is much broader than suicide prevention. While there are strong links between mental ill-health and suicidal behaviour, many people who experience mental illness do not experience suicidal ideation, and many people who die by suicide do not have diagnosed mental illness.⁴ Particular interventions for prevention of mental health conditions exist, but despite their evidence base and cost-effectiveness have not yet been implemented at the necessary scale.⁵ Additional targets should therefore be included in the Strategy to drive mental ill-health prevention, as related but distinct to suicide prevention.

Development of additional targets should take into account previous work to design measurable targets across mental health undertaken over time. For example, the 2012-22 COAG Roadmap for National Mental Health Reform included preliminary targets and indicators, including regarding preventing and reducing the impact of mental health issues and mental illness.⁶ More recently, the Prevention Coalition on Mental Health has compiled a Consensus Statement outlining six key priorities, which could be considered as a conceptual framework for considering focus targets for mental health reform.⁷ In the end, it is imperative that targets outlined for mental health in the Strategy also align with those outlined in the National Mental Health Commission’s Vision 2030 to ensure shared strategic direction in mental health policy across government.

² Mental Health Australia and KPMG (2018). *Investing to Save: the economic benefits for Australia of Investment in Mental Health Reform*. Retrieved 15 April 2021 from

https://mhaustralia.org/sites/default/files/docs/investing_to_save_may_2018_-_kpmg_mental_health_australia.pdf

³ Productivity Commission (2020). *Mental Health*, Report no. 95, Canberra. Retrieved 15 April 2021 from

<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report/mental-health-volume2.pdf>

⁴ Productivity Commission (2020). *Mental Health*, Report no. 95, Canberra. p.409. Retrieved 13 April 2021 from

<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report/mental-health-volume2.pdf>

⁵ Prevention Coalition in Mental Health (2020). *Primed for prevention: A consensus statement on the prevention of mental disorders*. Retrieved 14 April 2021 from <https://preventionunited.org.au/advocacy/consensus-statement/>

⁶ Council of Australian Governments (2012). *The Roadmap for National Mental Health Reform 2012-2022*. Retrieved 13 April from

<https://www.coag.gov.au/sites/default/files/communique/The%20Roadmap%20for%20National%20Mental%20Health%20Reform%202012-2022.pdf>

⁷ Prevention Coalition in Mental Health (2020). *Primed for prevention: A consensus statement on the prevention of mental disorders*. Retrieved 14 April 2021 from <https://preventionunited.org.au/advocacy/consensus-statement/>



Feedback on policy achievements for focus areas

The following response relates to focus area seven; protecting mental health.

It is as yet unclear in the document how the policy achievements will be assessed, and their relationship to the targets. The first three policy achievements (kept well in the community, community cohesion, and reducing stigma) are particularly difficult to measure in their current form. Measurement is essential for public accountability and driving genuine change, and should be further considered.

Mental Health Australia supports the ambition of the current policy achievement areas outlined, however further work is required to ensure the policy achievements are aligned with Vision 2030 for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention and the recommendations of the Productivity Commission inquiry into Mental Health. These two extensive works, along with the final advice from the suicide prevention adviser (yet to be publically released) will guide mental health and suicide prevention reform over the next decade. The work of the National Preventive Health Strategy should be aligned and complementary to these reforms, in order to achieve the ambitious aims of the Strategy and improved health outcomes for all Australians.

Mental Health Australia recommends inclusion of a further policy achievement and associated target regarding access to mental health support services that are appropriate to need. Currently, many people do not have access to appropriate mental health support when and where they need it⁸ — accessibility was the most commonly raised concern in recent community consultations undertaken by the National Mental Health Commission to inform Vision 2030.⁹ Barriers and delays in accessing support often exacerbate experiences of mental ill-health. Timely access to appropriate services is imperative for prevention and should be a specific policy achievement area for the National Preventive Health Strategy.

A further policy achievement and target area could address the need to implement specific strategies to address the disparity in physical health outcomes for people with mental illness. As acknowledged in the Strategy, people living with mental illness have lower life expectancy and poorer physical health outcomes compared to the general population. People with mental illness face particular barriers (particularly stigma and discrimination) in accessing care for physical health conditions, which will not be addressed by work towards other focus areas of the Strategy. This warrants consideration of a particular policy achievement area related to equity in quality and access of physical health care for people living with mental illness.¹⁰

Conclusion

The Draft National Preventive Health Strategy provides a sound framework to build a sustainable prevention system to improve the health of all Australians across the lifespan. The inclusion of a specific focus area on mental health in the Strategy amends a major gap identified previously, and ensures the holistic and integrated approach necessary to achieve the Strategy's aims. However, the Strategy could be further strengthened through inclusion

⁸ Productivity Commission (2020). Mental Health, Report no. 95, Canberra. Retrieved 13 April 2021 from <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report/mental-health-volume2.pdf>

⁹ National Mental Health Commission (2020). *Vision 2030; Blueprint for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention*. Retrieved 16 April from https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/getmedia/27e09cfa-eb88-49ac-b4d3-9669ec74c7c6/NMHC_Vision2030_ConsultationReport_March2020_1.pdf

¹⁰ National Mental Health Commission (2016). *Equally Well Consensus Statement: Improving the physical health and wellbeing of people living with mental illness in Australia*, Sydney. Retrieved 13 April 2021 from <https://www.equallywell.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Equally-Well-National-Consensus-Booklet-47537.pdf>



of further target areas regarding prevention of mental ill-health, in addition to the existing single target regarding suicide prevention.

Mental Health Australia looks forward to working with the Australian Government to implement this strategy to improve Australian's long-term health and wellbeing.

About Mental Health Australia

Mental Health Australia is the peak, national non-government organisation representing and promoting the interests of the Australian mental health sector and committed to achieving better mental health for all Australians. It was established in 1997 as the first independent peak body in Australia to represent the full spectrum of mental health stakeholders and issues. Mental Health Australia members include national organisations representing consumers, carers, special needs groups, clinical service providers, public and private mental health service providers, researchers and state/territory community mental health peak bodies.

Mental Health Australia aims to promote mentally healthy communities, educate Australians on mental health issues, influence mental health reform so that government policies address all contemporary mental health issues, conduct research on mental health issues, and carry out regular consultation to represent the best interests of our members, partners and the community. These endeavours in education and policy reform are matched by our commitment to researching more innovative approaches to the provision of mental health care. In addition, Mental Health Australia continues to focus on the human rights of people with a mental illness.

One in five Australians are affected by mental illness annually. We cannot afford to be complacent in our efforts to achieve changes to our mental health care system when we consider the impact of mental ill-health on our community.



Mental Health Australia



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Mental Health Australia is the peak independent national representative body of the mental health sector in Australia.

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