



**Mental Health
Australia**

Measuring what matters: submission to the Australian Government Treasury

31 January 2023

Mentally healthy people,
mentally healthy communities

mhaustralia.org

Mental Health Australia commends the Australian Government for committing to ‘measuring what matters’ to improve the lives of Australians, by developing a holistic national framework to track progress and wellbeing beyond traditional macroeconomic indicators.

Mental health is fundamental to progress and wellbeing

Mental health is an intrinsic component of our individual and collective wellbeing, quality of life, and capacity to contribute and participate socially and economically. All Australians are affected by mental ill-health – either personally or through experiences of our families, friends and colleagues. Most recent data shows nearly half (44%) of Australians have experienced a mental disorder at some time in their life, and one in five (21%) in the last year.¹

Mental health is about more than experience or absence of mental health conditions though. The World Health Organisation describes mental health as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, to realise their abilities, to learn well and work well, and to contribute to their communities”.² Reflecting this breadth, the Brain and Mind Centre has proposed a measurement of ‘Mental Wealth’ as a holistic measure of national prosperity capturing both economic and social productivity, underpinned by cognitive and emotional wellbeing, social cohesion and civil contributions.³

This inherent connection between mental health, wellbeing and productivity was also observed by the Productivity Commission in their 2020 inquiry into mental health. The Productivity Commission estimated that mental illness and suicide cost the Australian economy up to \$70bn per year, with a further cost of \$150bn per year in diminished health and reduced life expectancy for people living with mental illness.⁴ The Productivity Commission pointed to systemic reforms to Australia’s mental health system to reduce these costs and improve wellbeing.

Further, mental health is a clear priority for Australian communities, highlighted even further by the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing natural disasters. Globally, mental health has been rated by citizens in 2022 as the second biggest health problem, surpassed only by COVID-19.⁵ In Australia, young people consistently rate mental health as one of the top three most important issues facing the country today.⁶

Given this, Treasury should consider including mental health as a key measure of national progress and wellbeing in the national framework to ‘measure what matters’. Outlined below are examples of indicators Treasury may consider.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing* (2022), <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/mental-health/national-study-mental-health-and-wellbeing/latest-release>

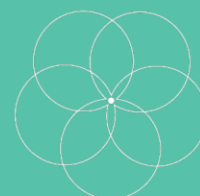
² World Health Organisation, *World mental health report* (2022), 8, <https://www.who.int/teams/mental-health-and-substance-use/world-mental-health-report>

³ Brain and Mind Centre, University of Sydney, *Mental Wealth: A new measure of national prosperity*.

⁴ Productivity Commission, *Mental Health*, (2020), <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report/mental-health-volume1.pdf>

⁵ Ipsos, *World Mental Health Day 2022: Global advisor survey* (2022), <https://www.ipsos.com/en/world-mental-health-day-2022>

⁶ Mission Australia, *Youth Survey 2022* (2022), <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/what-we-do/research-impact-policy-advocacy/youth-survey>



Measuring mental health

There are many possible indicators to measure mental health and wellbeing. As outlined by Treasury's indicator briefs, the OECD Framework for Measuring Well-Being and Progress includes a measure of personal happiness or wellbeing, referred to as 'negative affect balance', measured through the Gallup World Poll. This measure focuses on the proportion of people reporting more negative than positive feelings experienced the previous day. However, there are other existing indicators that are more closely tied to the Australian context and national mental health policy and strategies.

The Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan (concluded in 2022) included 24 performance indicators designed to collectively measure the health and wellbeing of Australians and the performance of the mental health system.⁷ A number of these indicators are relevant for Treasury's consideration in development of a new national framework. For example, the indicator of adults with high/very high psychological distress, as measured through the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) through the National Health Survey, is useful in monitoring population prevalence of mental ill-health,⁸ and is well-known and widely used across the mental health sector.

Further, many indicators for national mental health policy and system monitoring are related to broader indicators and priority areas. For example, addressing the disparity in life expectancy for people with mental illness is a key priority outlined in the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement, and included in the indicator framework for the Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan. This aligns with the OECD Framework indicator on 'premature mortality' measuring preventable deaths. Disaggregating broader indicators (such as premature mortality, employment and social participation) by populations of interest including people living with mental illness, could effectively align the overarching national framework to existing strategies and indicators already agreed to by governments.

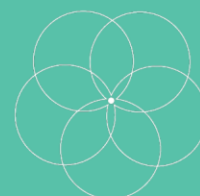
Promisingly, many indicators across social determinants of mental health are already included in the OECD Framework - including income, housing, employment and social connection. However, there is a significant gap in the OECD Framework in measuring access to health services. Access to appropriate health care when needed is clearly an important component of wellbeing. This is identified in the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement where 'service availability and timeliness' is an agreed priority indicator for development.⁹ As discussed above, measurement of access to mental health services could be included within measurement of access to health services more broadly.

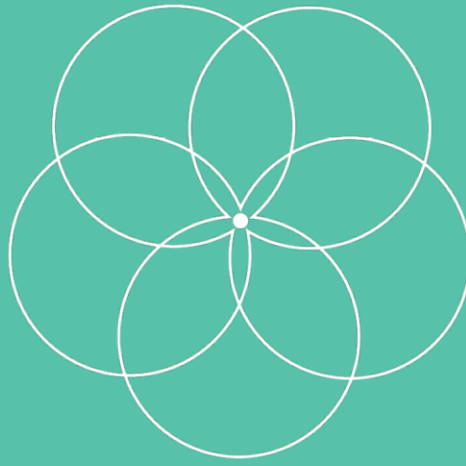
Mental Health Australia would be pleased to work with the Australian Government Treasury further to identify the most appropriate mental health indicators for the national framework.

⁷ Council of Australian Governments, *The Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan* (2017) <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/Monitoring-and-Reporting/Fifth-Plan>

⁸ Kessler, R.C., Andrews, G., Colpe, et al (2002) Short screening scales to monitor population prevalences and trends in non-specific psychological distress. *Psychological Medicine*, 32, 959-956, DOI: 10.107/S0033291702006074

⁹ National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement (2022), https://federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/sites/federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/files/2022-05/nmh_suicide_prevention_agreement.pdf





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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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