



Free mental health support for children and young people

Our Case for Change - Federal Election 2025

Vision

No child or young person in this country should be struggling alone. No family should be choosing between putting dinner on the table or getting their kids the mental health support they need. No teacher or principal should be forced to watch their students suffer, knowing that they could help if only the right supports were available.

The next Australian Government could commit right now to investing in the future of our children and young people and promising them and their families **cost-free pathways to mental health care and support**.

Imagine an Australia where every young person knows they have somewhere to turn, and that getting help won't be determined by their postcode, bank account balance or background.

Mental Health Australia looks forward to working with the next Australian Government to deliver this commitment, with implementation to be co-designed with families, young people and the mental health sector.

Context

Children and young people in Australia are experiencing mental ill-health at never-before-seen levels, yet many are unable to access support, with cost the highest reported barrier. Definitive government action is needed to curb this trend and ensure all young people in Australia can access the mental health support they need.

Mental ill-health is the primary threat to the health, wellbeing and productivity of young people as they develop and transition from childhood to adulthood.ⁱ Many issues which go on to develop into mental health problems in adolescence can be identified, prevented and managed if picked up earlier in childhood.

Getting help early is crucial to preventing longer term impacts, yet 1 in 5 people are now delaying or not seeing a health professional for their mental health when they need to due to cost.ⁱⁱ There is a growing divide in access to mental health supports depending on where people live and their income,ⁱⁱⁱ and parents, carers and young people often face overwhelming complexity in finding affordable and accessible supports in their communities.

Recent bi-partisan commitment to increase access to bulk-billed GP care will improve equity in access to crucial healthcare, with mental health challenges the most common reason people visit a GP.^{iv} GPs are an important gateway to other mental health supports, however without further investment, the pathway will end there. We need further changes to ensure availability of mental health supports in the community that GPs can refer people to, as well as appropriate alternate pathways through schools and walk-in community hubs, so that all children and young people can access the mental health supports they need.

Key data

Increasing rate of mental ill-health amongst young people

- the rate of young people experiencing mental health conditions increased by 50% between 2007 and 2022^v
- two in five (38.8%) young people (16-24yo), and almost half (45.5%) of young females (16-24) experience a mental health condition in any given year^{vi}
- an estimated 13% of children aged 0-12 in Australia are experiencing a mental health condition, with 22% of five-year-olds showing vulnerability to mental health issues in their first year of school^{vii}
- mental health challenges are the most common reason people see a GP^{viii}

Cost is a major barrier to accessing mental health care and support

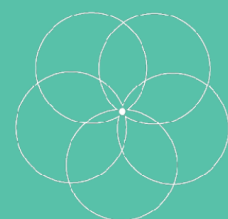
- 20.4% of people delayed or did not see a health professional for their own mental health when needed due to cost in 2023-24^{ix}
- cost is the leading reason for delaying or not seeking mental health care – 60% of young people (18-24) report cost as a significant barrier – more than any other age group^x

Prevention and early intervention is crucial

- two thirds (62.5%) of mental illnesses emerge before the age of 25, with 15 the average age of onset^{xi}
- symptoms at as young as 5 years of age are associated with increased likelihood of future mental health concerns^{xii}
- for every dollar invested in the prevention of depression or anxiety at school or university, there is an up to \$3.10 return in health-care savings and increased productivity^{xiii}

Mental health is a key election issue

- 81% of Australian voters are concerned about mental health, and 75% believe government needs to do more to address this issue
- nearly two thirds (63%) of voters say they are more likely to back parties committed to increasing mental health funding to improve access to services
- more than half (57%) of voters say cost of living increases have negatively affected their mental health in the last 12 months^{xiv}



Options for implementation

All political parties should commit in their election platforms to ensuring cost-free pathways to mental health care and support for all children and young people in Australia aged 25 and under.

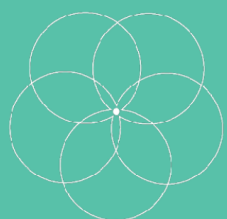
Implementation of this commitment should be co-designed with families, young people and the mental health sector. Actions could include:

Create free and accessible mental health care pathways

- Increase access to free, community based mental health support across the country by scaling up funding to hub-based services to employ psychologists, psychiatrists, paediatricians and other allied health staff in multidisciplinary teams
- Ensure gap-free access to mental health professionals by raising MBS rebates for psychology, psychiatry, paediatric care and other allied mental health support, building on the recent commitment to bulk-billed GP consults
- Reduce wait times and increase access to supports by engaging provisional psychologists in hub-based services with appropriate supervisory arrangements
- Ensure young people don't fall through the gaps by increasing capacity of existing youth mental health services to meet need, including for young people with complex or co-occurring needs
- Ensure children and young people in regional and rural areas can access the care they need by exploring innovative models of care, such as telehealth and interdisciplinary approaches

Expand existing mental health services to meet need

- Ensure children, young people and parents seeking mental health support online can easily find free quality supports, by increasing capacity of existing evidence-based digital services to meet need
- Provide local one-stop hubs for families to turn to when they need support, by expanding the Head to Health Kids Hubs Network and continuing to evaluate and adapt the model to meet community needs
- Ensure young people from diverse backgrounds can access culturally appropriate support by increasing funding for First Nations-led, multicultural community led and LGBTQI+ community led mental health services



Use the education system as a pathway to mental health support

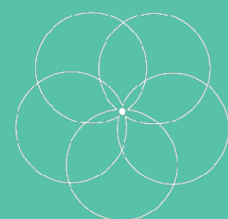
- Ensure every child receives effective mental health and wellbeing support through extending investment in existing evidence-based, whole of learning community programs within schools and early childhood learning services to meet demand across the country
- Provide all children and young people access to specialist mental health support if needed through their place of learning, by expanding access to mental health professionals within schools and early childhood learning services

Increase focus on prevention

- Work with State and Territory Governments to guarantee that, wherever a child is born, routine health checks in early childhood will include assessment of social and emotional wellbeing
- Increase support for parents and caregivers, with a particular focus on the perinatal period
- Drive a whole of government focus on preventing and mitigating adverse childhood experiences as a leading contributor to mental ill-health

Grow the workforce to ensure timely access to support across the country

- Progress priority actions of the National Mental Health Workforce Strategy, beginning with increasing access to training through increased subsidies, placements and traineeships
- Implement a 'Recruit to Train' child mental health workforce expansion project in areas of high unmet need, including regional and remote areas
- Support growth of the youth peer mental health workforce, through the National Peer Workforce Association



References

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- ⁱⁱ ABS (2023-24), **Patient Experiences 2023-2024 financial year**, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
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- ^{iv} The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (2024). **General Practice: Health of the Nation 2024**. East Melbourne
- ^v ABS (2020-2022). **National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing** [Internet]. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- ^{vi} ABS (2020-2022). **National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing** [Internet]. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
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- ^{viii} The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (2024). **General Practice: Health of the Nation 2024**. East Melbourne.
- ^{ix} ABS (2023-24), **Patient Experiences 2023-2024 financial year**, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- ^x Black Dog Institute (2024). **Navigating Australia's mental health system in 2024: Consumer report**. Black Dog Institute, Sydney.
- ^{xi} Solmi M, et al. (2022). **Age at onset of mental disorders worldwide: Large-scale meta-analysis of 192 epidemiological studies**. Nature: Molecular Psychiatry, 27(1), 281–295.
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- ^{xiii} Mihalopoulos C, et al (2019). **The economic case for investing in mental health prevention**. National Mental Health Commission, Canberra.
- ^{xiv} RedBridge Group for Mental Health Australia (December 2024) **Voters' attitudes towards mental health policy**

