



# Features of a National Pandemic Mental Health Response



# 1. The public health response to COVID-19

- The public health response to the current COVID-19 pandemic has to date been successful in reducing the potential spread of the virus.
- The public health response has been informed by the Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for COVID 19 (available on the internet).
- The plan sets out a number of stages of the pandemic and helps to ensure that quick responses can be actioned as new and unforeseen situations arise.



## 2. Public health responses and their effect on mental health

- The main public health responses to date have included physical distancing, stay at home policies, and physical isolation/quarantine measures.
- Many of the measures have been contained in public health orders and involved policing/fines for breaches.
- The social and economic impacts of these measures have been both very abrupt, and very significant.
- These social and economic impacts, as well as anxieties around the virus itself, have led to a negative effect on some people's mental health.
- Evidence from studying previous pandemics shows there are risks of increasing mental ill health and suicide during the crisis and recovery phase



### 3. Developing mental health responses to the pandemic

- On 29 March 2020 the government released a \$1.1 billion package to ramp up mental health services in light of the pandemic. The bulk of the package is for expanding Medicare subsidies for telehealth services.
- \$74 million of this package focused specifically on increasing funding for mental health digital and phone services and a range of mental health programs and helplines.
- Domestic violence services also received increased funding.
- States and territories have also funded specific mental health measures to respond to the pandemic.



## 4. Next steps for the mental health response

- Australian Ministers responsible for mental health met on 24 April and agreed that a mental health pandemic plan should be developed to enable a nationally consistent and co-ordinated response as we move into the next stages of dealing with the pandemic.
- The National Mental Health Commission has been tasked with co-leading this by working with other jurisdictions to produce a response.
- The work will be presented in early May.





## 5. Scope for a national mental health pandemic plan

- The purpose of the plan is to identify specific challenges to mental health and wellbeing associated within each phase of Australia's national pandemic response, and to outline the measures required to address them. The phases are:
  - **Physical distancing:** including gathering restrictions, self-isolation and quarantine.
  - **Standing down:** easing of restrictions
  - **Targeted action:** where monitoring allows for surges/emergence of hot spots to be managed
  - **Long-term recovery:** sustainable responses that provide proactive addressing of risk and protective factors.
- For each phase, **triggers for action and escalation** will be identified. Some groups in the population will require specific responses.
- **Data collection is crucial** (just as it has been in the physical tracking of the virus).



## 6. Key Points

- Mental health assessment, treatment and support are important goals for the response to the COVID-19 pandemic
- Mental health should be considered in the development of all responses to the pandemic across all levels of Government and community
- Public messages need to address concerns while being safe, considered and balanced with positive messaging about protective behaviours
- Some groups in the community will need targeted mental health services and social services over the short, medium and longer term
- Workforce considerations and modes of service delivery are important areas to address



## 7. Our aims

- Facilitating broad access to services while acknowledging diversity within the community and tailoring services to match
- Supporting mental health measures through clear and consistent communication strategies
- Integration and consistency across new measures and current service systems delivered via a national approach.





## 8. Consultation Process

- Scoping any further ‘burning’ issues
- Staying connected in communicating what is being progressed
- What do you need from us during this very tight timeframe?

