

Mental health in Australia

Our nation's mental health

- **Almost half of all Australian adults will face mental ill-health during their lives.¹**
- One in five Australians aged over 16 experience a mental illness in any given year,² with mental and substance use disorders comprising around 12 per cent of our nation's total burden of disease.¹
- In 2017-18, 13 per cent of Australian adults experienced high, or very high levels of psychological distress.³
- However, recent data revealed around 20 per cent of Australians reported experiencing high, or very high levels of psychological distress in 2020/21, representing a significant increase.
- Almost one in four women have witnessed high, or very high levels of psychological distress compared with almost one in five (17 per cent) men.⁴
- Younger Australians (aged 18 – 34 years) are also in distress, with almost one in three reporting high, or very high levels of psychological distress, compared to 18 per cent, and 10 per cent of those aged 35 – 64, and 65+, respectively.⁴
- In June 2021, 27 per cent of people living in Victoria experienced high, or very high levels of psychological distress compared with the rest of the Australian population (18 per cent).⁴
- Less than one-in-six people with psychological distress are seeking professional help.⁴



Treating mental health

- Psychotherapy – a group of therapies provided by a psychologist, counsellor or psychiatrist – is proven to be an effective management and treatment option for many psychological and mental illnesses, and may be delivered in-person, or virtually.⁵
- Concerningly however, a significant proportion of our population who stand to benefit from psychotherapy, currently lack access.⁶
- GPs are the first port of call for Australians seeking mental health support, with one in five Australians engaging in a mental health consultation with their GP each year.⁷
- In addition to being a first point of contact, GP's have a strong role to play in facilitating access to other providers in mental health management.⁸
- More people receive mental health treatment from their GP than from psychologists and psychiatrists combined.⁹
- About one in eight GP consultations relates to a mental health problem, equating to about 20 million consultations per year.⁹
- Australians living with mental illness report 'complex and chaotic' service pathways, and insufficiencies in primary care settings, specifically concerning accurate and timely diagnosis, and continuity of care between GPs and specialist mental health service providers.⁸

Major barriers to seeking mental health support

- The common barriers to seeking mental health care are most associated with geographical location, time, cost and stigma.
- Barriers to care for mental health issues can lead to delayed help-seeking. Failure to seek help, or delaying seeking help, slows the recovery time, and can lead to serious events, such as suicide.¹⁰

Geographical location

- Australians living in regional or remote areas have substantially less access to mental health services than those residing in major cities.⁶
- In some communities, particularly in regional and remote areas, waiting times to access mental health support can be up to three to eight months.¹¹

Time

- Time is a fundamental barrier to seeking mental health care, with issues including difficulty in scheduling an appointment due to long wait times, and arranging time off work, due to a shortage of after-hours appointments.¹⁰
- The establishment of privately-run services in mental health plays a significant role in reducing the waiting list of government-funded services.¹¹
- People located beyond major cities are more likely to struggle in securing appropriate support because there are fewer mental health professionals, which can result in long delays.¹²
- Shift workers and those with difficult scheduling needs are limited by standard face to face hours and availability.
- A lack of timely and appropriate medical care can lead to the deterioration of preventable and/or treatable mental and physical health problems, or contribute to these, potentially requiring hospitalisation or other increased service use.¹³

Cost

- Mental health services are generally not funded to a level which reflects the extent of mental illness within the Australian community, resulting in significant, unmet need for care.¹⁴
- Low availability of government funded psychological support pathways creates pressure for people to seek support privately.
- In Australia, a standard 50 to 60 minute consultation with a private psychologist, will cost on average \$267.00.¹⁵ Private psychologists set their own rates and may adjust fees according to the client's financial circumstances.¹⁵
- Medicare benefits are available for specified psychological services for people with certain mental health disorders.¹⁵
- To be eligible to receive psychological services under Medicare, a person must be referred by their GP or in some instances by a psychiatrist, paediatrician or consultant physician.¹⁵

Stigma

- The ongoing stigma associated with seeking and receiving mental health support¹⁶ poses a major obstacle for many Australians with psychological distress.
- Stigma arises out of negative attitudes, opinions, and stereotypes, and may lead to discrimination against those with any form of mental illness. Stigma is a key influence on those who seek help, and affects the timeliness of their help-seeking.¹⁰
- In relation to the stigma associated with mental illness, accessing mental health services privately, so as to not be easily identified by other members of the community, can be a barrier to seeking, and accessing support, particularly in regional and remote locations.¹¹
- Many Australians living in regional or remote locations prefer to see a clinician who they do not know, and who is not a member of their community, as they do not want to discuss their personal lives and mental health concerns with someone they may know, or see socially.¹¹

Telehealth and mental healthcare

- Telehealth is a safe, timely, convenient, and effective option for increasing every Australian's access to mental health care, particularly for those who face logistical, financial, and stigma-related barriers to receiving in-person treatment.¹⁷
- Innovative, 'tele-tech' models of care combine secure, online platforms with next-generation videoconferencing technologies, to provide entirely virtual support. Improved uptake of these digital healthcare models is key to overcoming these barriers, to ensure all Australians can access professional mental health support, when, and where they need it.
- According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, patients report high levels of satisfaction with telehealth sessions, and nearly half (49 per cent) of Australians are likely to use a telehealth service beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸

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