



WELLBEING AND PREVENTION COALITION IN MENTAL HEALTH

**A Pre-Budget Submission from the Wellbeing and Prevention
Coalition in Mental Health.**

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The Wellbeing and Prevention Coalition in Mental Health.



Introduction

The Wellbeing and Prevention Coalition in Mental Health is an informal group of like-minded organisations that advocate for greater government action and investment in the promotion of mental wellbeing and the prevention of mental health conditions.

At present, government expenditure in mental health is heavily skewed towards the provision of services and supports for people *after* they have already started to experience a mental health condition.

We acknowledge that our mental healthcare system continues to experience significant structural challenges, and continued efforts to enhance the availability, affordability, quality, and effectiveness of these supports and services is important. However, we believe that good mental health policy is not only about supporting individuals who experience mental health conditions – crucial though this is – it's also about promoting and protecting the mental health of the whole community.

Mental ill-health is not inevitable and there is growing scientific evidence that we can enhance people's mental wellbeing and reduce their risk of experiencing conditions like depression and anxiety disorders through initiatives that alter the balance of risk and protective factors in people's lives. These initiatives may include:

- Campaigns and programs that encourage people to be physically active, eat a high-quality diet, get a good night's sleep, and avoid smoking, risky drinking, and illicit drug use.
- Psychological literacy and skills-building programs that help people to understand the factors that influence their mental wellbeing and that teach them skills drawn from cognitive behaviour therapy, positive psychology, and mindfulness practices.
- Parenting programs that help parents acquire essential skills to foster warm and supportive child-parent relationships, positive behaviours, and a harmonious family environment.
- Settings-based approaches in early childhood services, schools, universities/TAFEs, and workplaces that create a sense of belonging, and build a positive culture that enables individuals to learn, work, and fulfil their potential free from bullying, discrimination, and other psychosocial hazards.
- Place-based initiatives that empower local citizens and service providers to respond effectively to the risk factors present in their community, using a collective impact approach.
- Public education campaigns that address gender inequality, racism, and discrimination and social policies to ensure everyone has an adequate income, employment if they want it, and stable/affordable housing. [1-4]

The initiatives in the list have decades of credible Australian and global scientific evidence behind them, and are well-accepted as valid approaches to building individual and community wellbeing. However the list is by no means exhaustive, and there are many other ways we can promote and protect the mental wellbeing of the community by focusing on the building blocks of mental health.

It is important to note that efforts to promote mental wellbeing and prevent mental health conditions are complementary to mental healthcare, benefiting those with and those without current conditions. However, given the major imbalance in our current investments, we believe it is time for governments to focus more resources 'upstream' while continuing to work 'downstream'.

This Pre-Budget Submission focuses on some of the key wellbeing and prevention initiatives we believe will help improve the mental wellbeing of every Australian.

1. Invest in the foundations for a systematic approach to mental health promotion.

While Australia has a mental healthcare system – however imperfect – it does not have a mental health promotion system, and we need to create it and strengthen it over time.

Mental health promotion is a specialist field of endeavour that is part of the broader fields of health promotion and public health. It adopts the principles, tools, and techniques of these fields to achieve three key outcomes:

- Helping people experience high levels of mental wellbeing (also known as ‘flourishing’ or ‘thriving’) while avoiding low levels of mental wellbeing (also known as languishing).
- Preventing mental health conditions like depression and anxiety disorders from occurring in the first place.
- Building mental health and wellbeing literacy to support self-care, and to enable help-giving and help-seeking for mental ill-health and suicidal ideation.

Success in the promotion of mental wellbeing and the prevention of mental health conditions requires three elements – evidence-based promotion and prevention programs, mentally healthy public policies, and the systems infrastructure to bring them together in a sustainable and coordinated way.

Just as suicide prevention and mental healthcare cannot occur without critical systems enablers like leadership and governance, delivery systems, workforce, data and information systems, and research and evaluation, we can’t successfully promote and protect the mental wellbeing of Australians without a strong mental health promotion ‘system’ founded on these enablers.

We therefore recommend that the Federal Government:

1. Establishes a dedicated Mental Health and Wellbeing Promotion Office to lead the planning, funding, monitoring and oversight of efforts to promote mental wellbeing, prevent mental health conditions, and build mental health and wellbeing literacy.
2. Implements interdepartmental governance arrangements, such as a Mental Health and Wellbeing Interdepartmental Committee or a ‘Wellbeing Budget’ to enable a ‘whole-of-government’ approach to modifying the key social, cultural, and economic risk factors that influence our mental wellbeing.
3. Develops a National Promotion and Prevention Strategy in Mental Health to replace the 2000 National Action Plan on Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention in Mental Health, which is considerably outdated, and also conflates prevention and early intervention. These are two separate and distinct areas of activity.
4. Allocates at least 5% of the Federal mental health budget to mental health promotion initiatives, creating parity with the existing Federal government policy commitment to allocate 5% of the health budget to health promotion and public health measures by 2030.

2. Start early in life to support mental wellbeing.

The foundations of lifelong mental wellbeing are forged early in life. The perinatal period through to young adulthood is therefore the most crucial period to focus on promotion and prevention. Success requires us to work directly with children as well as with the key adults in their life to create mentally healthy environments in which children and young people can grow, learn, play, and live.

We need to support parents and other caregivers to create a safe, loving, and supportive home environment, characterised by equal and non-violent relationships between parents, secure attachment between a child and their caregivers, high parental warmth and involvement, and a harmonious family environment. We also need to protect children from family violence and child abuse and neglect – both in the home and in the community – given childhood trauma causes 30% of all lifetime mental health conditions. [5-9]

We need to equip our early learning services, schools, universities and TAFEs to promote and protect children's and young people's mental wellbeing by helping children and young people acquire the mentally healthy behaviours and social and emotional skills that enable them to feel good emotionally, relate well with others, and achieve their potential. We also need to ensure that all learning environments enable children and young people to feel safe, valued, respected and listened to; experience a sense of belonging, and positive relationships with their peers, educators and other adults; and are free from bullying, and homophobic and transphobic prejudice and discrimination. [10]

While Australia has a strong track record in this area, not all learning environments are implementing these crucial promotion and prevention programs, and those that are, are often not using programs with a strong evidence base or implementing programs within a continuous improvement framework that ensures their quality. [11-13] There is also a lack of publicly available data to track the wellbeing and prevention initiatives that early learning services, schools, and universities are implementing, and a lack of up-to-date data on the impacts these programs are having at a population-wide level.

We therefore recommend that the Federal Government:

1. Provides parents with free-access to evidence-based physical activity, psychological skills-building, social support, and other wellbeing programs that prevent perinatal depression and anxiety (PNDA) disorders.
2. Continues to support screening programs for PNDA disorders and/or substance use conditions, while also ensuring that any parent who experiences these conditions has rapid access to holistic mental healthcare and community supports and services.
3. Makes the prevention of adverse childhood experiences a national mental health priority, by investing in the development and evaluation of new and more effective ways to prevent child abuse and neglect, supporting programs to screen for adverse childhood experiences and providing specialist early intervention services for children and adolescents exposed to these traumas.
4. Fast tracks the development and implementation of national guidelines for the accreditation of mental health and wellbeing programs in schools, and other ways to assist schools to adopt evidence-based programs and policies. We also need to provide more funding for implementation science and other research that can help us to understand and address the barriers encountered by schools in implementing mental health promotion initiatives effectively.
5. Includes measures of student wellbeing as an outcome of the National School Reform Agreement, and commits to regular (3–5 yearly) national surveys of child and adolescent mental wellbeing.
6. Implements the proposed new programs, supports and services outlined in the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy in full by the end of 2025.

3. Tackle the social determinants of mental health.

We cannot expect people to flourish unless we focus on the social determinants of mental health and tackle social disadvantage.

Our mental wellbeing is influenced by the complex interaction of a myriad risk and protective factors. While some of these factors are unique to each person like our genetic profile, our personality, our life experiences and our actions and behaviours, many factors exist in our shared environments. These are the social determinants of mental health.

The social determinants of mental health are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live and age that are shaped by social, cultural, political and economic forces. [14]

Disparities in power and influence, and unequal access to critical resources such as food security, education, employment, income adequacy, stable and affordable housing, and high-quality health and human services can in turn contribute to disparities in mental health outcomes.

That's why the prevalence of mental ill-health is significantly higher among people who experience socioeconomic disadvantage compared to people from more advantaged backgrounds. It's also why the prevalence of mental ill-health is higher among individuals and groups who experience discrimination, social exclusion, and social inequality such as women, people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) minority or refugee communities, people who identify as LGBTIQ+, people with a disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. [15, 19, 20]

Experiencing high levels of mental wellbeing is difficult if people are dealing with significant financial stress, or they must choose between having healthy and nutritious meals or managing other expenses, or they are homeless or at risk of homelessness because there is a lack of access to secure and affordable housing. [15-18]

It is also difficult to experience high levels of mental wellbeing when people experience a lack of autonomy and barriers to social and economic participation due to discrimination and social exclusion.

While there are a range of opportunities to address the social determinants of mental health, the Wellbeing and Prevention Coalition recommends the Federal Government places particular emphasis on:

1. Increasing cost of living relief to those who need it the most, and consider increasing income support payments to lift people out of poverty.
2. Working with State and Territory Governments to expand and accelerate the building of new social and affordable houses, and increasing Commonwealth Rent Assistance.
3. Implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full and funding and enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to design and manage initiatives that will enhance their social and emotional wellbeing.

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