

COVID-19 AND AUSTRALIA'S MENTAL HEALTH

REPORT OF JUNE 2021 MEETING OF AUSTRALIA'S MENTAL HEALTH THINK TANK

Strengthening the social fabric that connects Australians, tackling the impacts of the economic exclusion confronting many Australians, especially young Australians, and enhancing access to comprehensive mental health care across the country, have emerged as the top priorities of Australia's Mental Health Think Tank as we enter the next stage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Drawing together expert researchers and practitioners from across Australia, Australia's Mental Health Think Tank met over 24 and 25 June 2021 to examine the emerging research evidence on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Australians' mental health, and the effectiveness of Australia's response.

The Think Tank noted that the consequences of the pandemic on mental health in Australia are similar to other countries, which have had much higher rates of COVID-19 infection and mortalities. This mental health "shadow pandemic" is the reality for Australians now, and is likely to have lasting impacts into the future.

The Think Tank also recognised that the ongoing struggle to vaccinate the Australian population effectively and to reopen society fully meant that the pandemic was likely to continue to exert significant and long-lasting social dislocation and impacts on Australians' mental health.

About Australia's Mental Health Think Tank

Australia's Mental Health Think Tank is an independent group of world-leading researchers, leaders in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, clinicians, people with lived and living experience of mental ill-health, business leaders, carers and policy experts. It is chaired by Professor Maree Teesson AC.

Australia's Mental Health Think Tank aims to stimulate bold thinking around a national response to mental health, initially focused on the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, particularly for young people.

The national Think Tank was formed in late 2020 with the support of the BHP Foundation, and is currently hosted by the University of Sydney (the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use in partnership with the Sydney Policy Lab). The Think Tank seeks to forge collaborative relationships between society, researchers, industry, policy makers, people with lived and living experience of mental ill-health, and politicians to enable the creation of new knowledge and change that will shape an Australia where mental health is valued.

Understanding the impact of the pandemic on Australia's mental health

At the June meeting, Think Tank members considered both local and international evidence surrounding the impact of the pandemic across different communities and found that the COVID-19 pandemic has had significant impact on Australians' mental health and wellbeing, particularly for vulnerable groups, including young people.

While Australia remains in the midst of the pandemic, with no clear timeline or pathway out, the Think Tank members also considered the effectiveness of government policies implemented in 2021 to protect Australians' mental health.

Key insights identified by the Think Tank included:

1. Australia is facing a "shadow pandemic" of deteriorating mental health. While the pandemic experience across communities in Australia has varied, there has been a population-level deterioration in mental health which echoes experiences overseas in countries with much higher COVID-19 infection and mortality rates. For example, there is evidence that Australians are experiencing more anxiety and depression and are engaging with suicide prevention and other mental health support helplines more often than prior to the pandemic.
2. The impact of the pandemic on mental health appears to have disproportionately burdened certain sections of Australian society, including: young people; females; those in COVID-related work; people living with a disability or existing mental health issue; as well as those on low incomes, experiencing job loss or living in poor-quality housing conditions.
3. Government interventions have had mixed success during the pandemic regarding Australians' wellbeing. Interventions which provided social and economic support, including the increase in JobSeeker and Youth Allowance, and the introduction of JobKeeper, have played an important role in supporting Australians' mental health.

Some expansion of mental health investment at the State and Federal level and swift adaptation to innovative forms of service delivery, like Telehealth, may also have played an important role in protecting against the increased mental ill health risks, including suicide risks. Demand on an already-stretched service system has intensified and access to high-quality care remains inadequate.

4. The impact of social connection and disconnection in shaping the mental health outcomes of Australians are becoming increasingly clear, as more research into the impact of the pandemic is being undertaken. The difficulties that some Australians have faced in maintaining their social connections during the pandemic appears to have led to significant mental health challenges. This suggests that re-establishing Australia's social connectedness will be a vital element of a public policy response in the next stage of the pandemic

Think Tank Chair Professor Maree Teesson reflected:

"The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has had a profound effect on all aspects of society, including mental and physical health. It is evident that the effects of this pandemic are pervasive and, unless we can act, will detrimentally affect mental health now and in the future."

Directions for reform

Over the coming weeks and months, Australia's Mental Health Think Tank will release research and further concrete recommendations for reform responding to each of the areas outlined above. As it prepares those recommendations it warmly welcomes contributions from the broader community.

Members of Australia's Mental Health Think Tank

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Professor Marc Stears, Sydney Policy Lab, University of Sydney

Professor Tom Calma AO, Chancellor of the University of Canberra and Patron Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

Professor Pat Dudgeon, Centre for Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention, University of Western Australia and Director, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

Mr John Brogden, Chairman, Lifeline Australia

Professor Harvey Whiteford, FAHMS, Queensland Centre for Mental Health Research, University of Queensland

Professor Ian Hickie, AO, FASSA, FAHMS, Brain and Mind Centre, University of Sydney

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