

BREIFING 21st June 2020

COVID-19: MENTAL HEALTH

The National Council of Women of Victoria is mindful that mental illness is very common, affecting 20% of Australians aged 16-85 in any one year, and almost half (45%) will experience mental health problems in their lifetime. Mental illness is typically found in mid to late adolescence, particularly in Australian youth 18-24 years. There is also evidence that the number of people presenting with mental health issues has been on the increase since the commencement of the lockdown established to minimise the spread of COVID-19.

Mental Health is defined as *'a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community'*

World Health Organisation

The most common mental illnesses are depression, anxiety and substance-use disorders and these often occur in combination. Unfortunately, the stigma associated with mental health still exists but Australians are bringing the issue into the open, declaring that it is time to shatter the stigma and shame, stop judging people and change the narrative. The stigma has, in the past, led to the sufferers concealing their condition and made them unlikely to seek treatment. Research in Australia has shown that the proportion of people with mental illness accessing treatment is half that of people with physical disorders. However, the concerted efforts of the community in recent years to foster more openness and discussion, has yielded results and more positive attitudes are prevalent regarding earlier identification and services such as psychotherapy. Mental illness is being taken out of the shadows.

Data in the World Statistics 2017 reveal that depression, anxiety, eating disorders and bipolar disease are more prevalent in women, while schizophrenia, alcohol and drug disorders are more common among men. Additionally, mental health problems affect about 1 in 10 children and young people. Good mental health is of extreme importance to children, paving the way for them to grow into well-rounded, healthy adults. According to an Australian National Mental Health Survey, many young people reported that they were fearful about the act of seeking help, or even the source of help itself. There is also evidence that young people who have established relationships with health professionals are more likely to seek help in the future.

In current times, many are struggling with their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the restrictions on the ability to engage fully in leisure activities and connect with family and friends. Many people are also suffering severe financial strain due to job loss and/or wage reduction in this period causing a further increase in the number of mental health issues.

The National Council of Women of Victoria applauds the State Government for its contemporary and realistic approach to mental health issues, including its setting up of the Royal Commission to inquire into the Victorian mental health system, and looks forward to the Government's continuing support in the future. The Council believes that if the right services, helpful tools, advice and programs are offered, more individuals would be able to live a normal and productive life.