

# PREVENTION UNITED

Joining forces to prevent mental health conditions

Inquiry into the opportunities to improve mental health outcomes for Queenslanders.

Submission to the Mental Health Select Committee.

February 2022

[preventionunited.org.au](http://preventionunited.org.au)

## About Prevention United

Prevention United is one of Australia's leading mental health promotion charities.

We work with individuals, families, organisations, and communities to foster their strengths and reduce their exposure to the risk factors that lead to poor mental health and wellbeing.

Our activities are organised into three work streams.

- **Advocacy and awareness** – Prevention United raises awareness about the benefits of promoting mental wellbeing and preventing mental health conditions. We also advocate to governments throughout Australia to increase their investment in mental health promotion initiatives, and to introduce social policies that can promote our collective mental health and wellbeing.
- **Programs and resources** – Prevention United provides up-to-date information on the ways individuals, families and communities can promote and protect their mental wellbeing. We also offer wellbeing and prevention programs that enable people to look after their mental health, and reduce their risk of experiencing depression, anxiety disorders or other mental health conditions.
- **Capacity building** – Prevention United works to build the capability and capacity of Australia's mental health promotion system through evidence reviews, practice guidelines, strategic advice and training and consulting services that support organisations to increase their own focus on wellbeing and prevention.

## It's time to re-think our approach to mental health and wellbeing.

Despite record investment in mental health over the last two decades, the prevalence of mental health conditions is rising not falling, our services are swamped, wait times have blown out, and mental healthcare costs are escalating. We simply can't keep up with demand.

COVID-19 has made matters even worse. Over the last two years we've seen a major decline in mental wellbeing across the Australian community, and a sharp rise in psychological distress.

We've also seen an unparalleled increase in the number of people experiencing depression and anxiety disorders for the first time. Within Australia, the prevalence of anxiety and depression each rose by over 11% in 2020.<sup>1</sup>

More and better mental healthcare services are of course desperately needed to keep pace with the rise in demand, but investing in downstream services is not enough to solve this mental health crisis. Our current reactive approach is unsustainable, and we urgently need a new, more proactive strategy.

Mental health conditions are not inevitable, and the onset of many common conditions can be prevented, or at least substantially delayed, by addressing the underlying risk and protective factors that contribute to these conditions.

Put simply, we need to start implementing programs to keep people mentally healthy, rather than just waiting for people to experience significant mental health challenges before we step in to help.

We already have an outstanding track record in prevention when it comes to physical health. As a nation we've eradicated smallpox, eliminated polio and controlled HIV. We've also reduced the prevalence of cigarette smoking and dramatically reduced the incidence of heart attacks, strokes, certain cancers and road deaths. Over the last two years we've also tackled COVID-19 head-on and averted tens of thousands of deaths through the use of evidence-based, public health responses.

We now need to apply this same preventive mindset in mental health.

Success requires strong leadership, excellent planning, a suite of safe and effective interventions, high-reach delivery systems, a skilled wellbeing and prevention workforce, reliable data and monitoring systems, a research and development pipeline, and dedicated funding for prevention.

Reducing the incidence of new onset mental health conditions won't occur overnight but it can be done if we take the same sustained and systematic approach to wellbeing and prevention in mental health that we've taken for so many physical health conditions over many years.

It's time to re-think our approach to mental health and make wellbeing and prevention a central part of mental health policy moving forward.

## We need mental health promotion + mental healthcare

### What is mental wellbeing?

Mental wellbeing is more than just the absence of mental ill-health. It's about feeling good emotionally while being able to recognise, express and manage negative emotions effectively. It's also about functioning well psychologically and socially. It's about:

- Feeling good about oneself, managing stress, fulfilling responsibilities and being productive.
- Connecting with and relating well to others and feeling a sense of belonging.
- Having a sense of hope, purpose and meaning in life.

High levels of mental wellbeing are associated with better learning, increased creativity, greater productivity, better quality relationships, more pro-social behaviours, positive health behaviours, better physical health, and longer life expectancy. High levels of mental wellbeing are also linked to a reduced risk of mental health conditions and enhanced recovery from mental health challenges.

We all have a level of mental wellbeing which varies dynamically in response to a range of biological, psychological, social and economic risk and protective factors. We therefore all have a stake in ensuring that governments implement programs and social policies that promote and protect our individual and collective mental wellbeing.

Indeed, good mental health policy is not only about supporting individuals who experience mental health challenges – it's also about promoting and protecting the mental health of the community as a whole. Achieving this requires a dual track focus on mental health promotion and mental healthcare.

### What is mental health promotion?

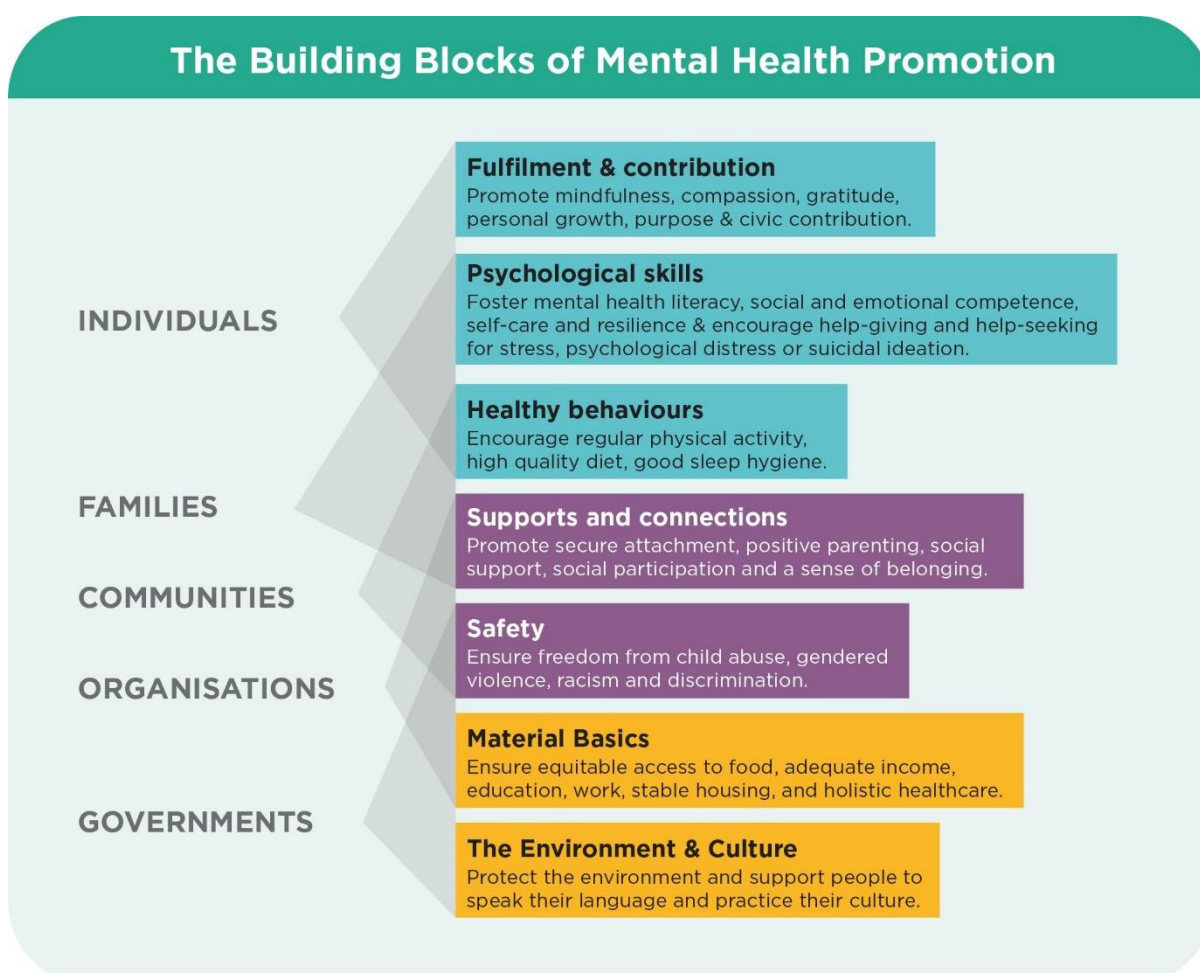
Mental health promotion is the 'mental health' component of health promotion. It is "the process of enabling people to increase control over their mental health and its determinants, and thereby improve their mental health." Mental health promotion focuses on helping people to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to promote and protect their own mental wellbeing, while simultaneously working to create positive changes in our shared social environments that promote our collective mental wellbeing. It focuses on three main outcomes:

- promoting high levels of mental wellbeing
- preventing the onset of mental health conditions like depression and anxiety
- building mental health literacy to promote self-care, destigmatise mental health conditions and encourage help-seeking and help-giving.

Mental health promotion is different from, but complementary to mental healthcare. It focuses on modifying the underlying root causes of mental ill-health rather than managing specific conditions. It targets whole groups and communities and is undertaken in a range of settings such as online, the home, schools, workplaces, and neighbourhoods, rather than just through mental health services alone. The table below provides an overview of these critical differences.

A robust mental health system needs to include a both elements, and cover the entire continuum from wellbeing, prevention, early intervention, recovery support and suicide prevention. At present, Queensland's response, like most jurisdictions, is heavily skewed towards mental healthcare, and this needs to be rebalanced so that more emphasis is put on keeping people well and preventing mental health conditions from occurring in the first place, as well as on continuing to support people's recovery from mental ill-health.

Mental health promotion	Mental healthcare
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on upstream causes (risk and protective factors).</li> <li>• The emphasis is on wellbeing and prevention.</li> <li>• Targets groups, communities, and whole populations.</li> <li>• Benefits 100% of the population.</li> <li>• Uses public health informed interventions in health and non-health settings including schools, workplaces and online.</li> <li>• Delivered by workers trained in health promotion/mental health promotion and frontline workers in schools, workplaces, sports clubs, local government and other non-health settings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on conditions and their consequences.</li> <li>• The emphasis is on assisting individuals experiencing mental ill-health.</li> <li>• Targets individuals and families.</li> <li>• Benefits people with a mental health condition who access mental healthcare services (typically 11% of the population in a given year).</li> <li>• Uses medical, psychological and psychosocial interventions through digital, primary, secondary and tertiary health and mental health services.</li> <li>• Delivered by mental healthcare professionals and peer workers or through digital channels.</li> </ul>



## Our calls to action

### **1. Develop and implement a Wellbeing and Prevention Framework to guide action and investment in mental health promotion in Queensland.**

Promoting and protecting the mental wellbeing of the whole community is different to supporting individuals experiencing mental health challenges through mental healthcare services. Mental health promotion efforts require a public health-informed approach to teaching people the social, emotional and self-care skills they can use to build resilience and enhance their mental wellbeing. They also require a focus on implementing evidence-based programs and public policies that strengthen families, create safe, cohesive and inclusive communities, and tackle the underlying causes of mental ill-health like child maltreatment, domestic violence, bullying, racism, discrimination, loneliness and social disadvantage. Achieving this requires a blueprint.

While *Shifting minds: Queensland Mental Health Alcohol and Other Drugs Strategic Plan 2018-2023* include some emphasis on wellbeing and prevention it remains quite high level.

The Western Australian Mental Health Commission has developed a detailed Primary Prevention Plan and it is now in the process of producing a new [Wellbeing Framework](#) that will extend and complement this Plan.

Victoria is following suit, and is developing a new Statewide Plan for the Promotion of Good Mental Health and Wellbeing and the Prevention of Mental Illness (Statewide Plan) that will outline its proposed actions and investment in mental health promotion, as opposed to mental healthcare.

We believe all jurisdictions – including the Queensland – should have a bespoke Wellbeing and Prevention Plan in place. Mental health promotion can't happen by chance, and proper planning is essential.

### **2. Invest a minimum of 5% of the Queensland mental health budget on supporting wellbeing and prevention initiatives in mental health.**

The promotion of mental wellbeing and the prevention of mental health conditions cannot become sustainable without a dedicated funding stream. This funding can be well-justified on a demand reduction, return-on-investment basis; but while increased wellbeing and prevention funding will eventually reduce the demand on the mental healthcare system, we do not support the shifting of resources away from mental healthcare and towards mental health promotion, but rather we advocate for increased spending on both.

The Western Australian government has committed to ensuring that the proportion of the WA Mental Health Commission's budget dedicated to promotion and prevention should increase to 5% by the end of 2025. We believe all jurisdictions – including the Queensland – should work towards this goal and we encourage the Queensland Government to invest a minimum of 5% of the Queensland mental health budget on supporting wellbeing and prevention initiatives in mental health.

## The cost of inaction – the economics of prevention.

Mental ill-health creates an enormous economic toll and presents a major risk to our COVID recovery.

According to the Productivity Commission mental ill-health and suicide costs around \$200–\$220 billion per year.<sup>2</sup> But even this probably underestimates the true cost of poor mental health which can range from low mental wellbeing, through to stress and subthreshold mental health conditions, and not just full-blown clinical disorders, which the Productivity Commission estimates are based on.

Every percentage point we move away from optimal mental wellbeing and towards mental ill-health on the mental health continuum impacts us personally and also impacts the economy through:

- Poorer school attendance and engagement, early school leaving, and poorer academic outcomes.<sup>3</sup>
- Reduced productivity from lower labour force participation, and increased absenteeism and presenteeism at work.<sup>4 5 6</sup>
- Increased mental healthcare costs which may extend over several years or even decades.
- Other healthcare costs that result from the development of co-morbid alcohol or other drug difficulties and chronic disease brought on by mental ill-health.
- Social services costs resulting from unemployment, homelessness, and psychosocial disability.
- Justice system costs from the increased risk of relationship breakdown and divorce, and youth criminal offending due to comorbid mental health and AOD difficulties.

By contrast, high levels of mental wellbeing are a major driver of personal and social prosperity.

High levels of mental wellbeing are linked to better learning, increased creativity, higher productivity, better quality relationships, more pro-social behaviours, higher civic engagement, greater adoption of positive health behaviours, better physical health, and longer life expectancy. Mental wellbeing is a driver for these outcomes and not just a result.

High mental wellbeing leads to higher employee engagement, job performance, and organisational productivity.<sup>7</sup> One study found that an increase of one point on the Psychological Wellbeing Scale was associated with an 8.8% increase in productivity at work.<sup>8</sup>

High mental wellbeing also lowers government costs. A Danish study found that each one-point increase in mental well-being on the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale in 2016 was associated with US\$43 less in healthcare costs, and US\$23 less in sickness benefit transfers per person in 2017. For a theoretical population of 50,000 people that would amount to \$2m less in healthcare costs, and about \$1m less in sickness benefit transfers.<sup>9</sup>

As we continue to grapple with the effects of COVID-19, a reactive focus on mental ill-health is no longer tenable. We need to get on the front foot and start focusing on keeping people mentally well and preventing mental ill-health from occurring in the first place, and every government has a role to play.

## References

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