

2019 Submission - Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System

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Name



What are your suggestions to improve the Victorian community's understanding of mental illness and reduce stigma and discrimination?

"I think the community understanding of mental illness has improved a great deal from when I was first diagnosed 28 years ago. I no longer feel like I am alone in this illness. I also have found, particularly in my workplace there is an understanding and support provided to staff if they experience mental health issues and require either counselling support or leave. However these are arms length and professional relationships and the improvements I have experienced in these areas of my life, have been extraordinary. However the greatest difficulties I have experienced have been with family members. If a family member struggles with understanding and support, then that is devastating. Our most important relationships are with family and they have the biggest impact on how we deal with this illness. Even though the message is filtering throughout the community, when you are directly impacted because your family member has a mental illness you suffer as well. The issue therein is to provide services to family members so that they are better equipped to help someone within their family suffering from mental illness, The hurdle here however would be not only in providing the service, but engaging family members to enlist these services, rather than avoid them. In my experience family members prefer to ignore and not directly deal with a situation believing "if they ignore it, it will go away" or as my family said to me "we don't want to talk to you because it just seems to make you upset and cry". Leaving me feeling isolated and alone."

What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent mental illness and to support people to get early treatment and support?

"Community awareness is outstanding. However resources for help are limited. When Beyond Blue was originally introduced years ago, they had a doctor register that listed doctors in the area who had additional "mental health" training, so that someone with a mental illness could find a doctor who had an understanding of mental illness. Having suffered for many years, I have attended many doctors and had different levels of support, some of which could have had fatal results. I was originally diagnosed by an excellent practitioner and I was able to continue with that prescription for many years. On two occasions during the 26 year period my medication was changed and this occurred with varying levels of difficulty, but both times with success. However 2 years ago, having reached menopausal age the anti depressants ceased working and I crashed. Unfortunately the practitioner that had originally treated me had moved on and I have struggled to find someone who was capable of assisting me, other than to provide a repeat prescription. So when I attended my local clinic and spoke to the Dr in attendance, his response to me was "why are you sad... just be happy". He then told me that he didn't want to prescribe anything else for me and that he wanted me to see a psychiatrist who would do that. He referred me to someone in my area and also put me on a mental health plan wherein I could also attend a psychologist. During this whole period, I struggled each day to find the strength to continue to live. I had to wait until an appointment was available for both the psychiatrist and psychologist. Both of whom were

a complete disaster and an expensive exercise that didn't work. I then contacted Beyond Blue, Blackdog and Sane asking if they had a register where they had doctors that they recommended to deal with mental health. They all told me to go to my GP. Ultimately I found a psychiatrist that provided me with the assistance I needed, however I had to find him myself trawling the internet and reading bio's and information. If I didn't have the financial ability to pay for this psychiatrist I would be dead. People should be able to find a GP that deals with mental health issues and get assistance."

What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent suicide?

"It takes more than just developing depression awareness and media attention to prevent suicide. Again I will return to the lack of assistance. The lack of assistance that I've experienced eliminates hope. The analogy I would use is the recent euthanasia laws that have come into effect. When someone has been diagnosed with a terminal illness and they have no hope of life and their quality of life has been extinguished, they are permitted to chose to end their life. This is EXACTLY what people with mental illness do. When you are living a life that is dark and without hope then that is the step that you take. By not providing assistance for people with mental illness to find relief and in effect cure, then you extinguish hope and their ability to struggle and survive. Hope is vital. I have accessed the online counselling services, and they have been beneficial in assisting in the moment. What you need to understand is that when you are experiencing levels of depression that continue for days, weeks and months on end, the conversations are not enough. Your local GP is not always qualified to deal with depression and given that is your only option, it's not good enough."

What makes it hard for people to experience good mental health and what can be done to improve this? This may include how people find, access and experience mental health treatment and support and how services link with each other.

"We need to be able to access a mental health practitioner, not a general GP. We need to know how to access mental health services, not just counselling services. This is a solution focused approach that I needed in order to have hope that my illness was going to be overcome and that there was hope. Again, with hope you are prepared to undertake the steps and do what needs to be done to get through until the depressive period passes. I have had this long enough to know that that is what happens, however someone experiencing their first depressive episode, who has no hope offered to them, could understandably give up and commit suicide."

What are the drivers behind some communities in Victoria experiencing poorer mental health outcomes and what needs to be done to address this?

"I live in a capital city flooded with doctors and services. I can only imagine that this situation that I experienced would be compounded x 100 in smaller communities. This doesn't need to be an obstacle because this could potentially be provided online, linking services and practitioners."

What are the needs of family members and carers and what can be done better to support them?

"Family members and carers need more education, but this is going to be a slow process. The biggest problem is that their impact on the individual with the mental illness is the greatest both from a positive and negative perspective."

What can be done to attract, retain and better support the mental health workforce, including peer support workers?

"Funding so that they aren't overworked. Like all government resources if they are overstretched, then the service is poor and ineffective. Consideration about the best provision of these services and then adequate funding so that what is provided, is provided well."

What are the opportunities in the Victorian community for people living with mental illness to improve their social and economic participation, and what needs to be done to realise these opportunities?

"My mental illness has never prevented me from working in a professional environment and therefore having a comfortable life. I therefore am unable to comment on individuals impacted in this way."

Thinking about what Victoria's mental health system should ideally look like, tell us what areas and reform ideas you would like the Royal Commission to prioritise for change?

"More support to provide solutions for people suffering. Qualified practitioners appointed and available to provide that support for those that are looking for assistance as well as those that are not aware that they require assistance. This situation appears to be increasing in society where individuals with mental health issues who are unable or unwilling to help themselves are a danger to either themselves or others with very little intervention. "

What can be done now to prepare for changes to Victoria's mental health system and support improvements to last?

"Facilities and services need to be provided that will not be eroded due to changes in government."

Is there anything else you would like to share with the Royal Commission?

"Mental health is a growing issue and not spending the money now to address the issues that are required is only going to cost the community more in the long term. "