

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

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

"My experiences with mental health arise as a father to my beloved daughter. My submissions are made in that context and relate primarily to child and adolescent mental health issues as a consequence. I think the key to improving understanding and reducing stigma is education at primary school and early secondary school. Why can't Health and Physical Education curricula be expanded to include a third limb of Mental Health? Or alternatively, "Mental Health Ed" forms a central part of the curriculum like Sex Education does? And the focus of the curriculum should be on making it clear that a very large proportion of our community will have mental health challenges and that (1) help and support is available and (2) people can live happy and fulfilling lives with mental health challenges. And I think we need an education campaign more publicly equating mental health challenges to any other physical challenges people face- breaking bones in a football match, medium term illnesses and terminal illnesses- they all have equivalents in the mental health area and none of these carry the stigma that mental illnesses do. These campaigns should be fronted by individuals who have led (or are leading) successful and productive lives to make it clear that mental health challenges are very normal and precisely that- challenges that can be overcome. Education is also required around the distinction between a person not having good mental health and being mentally ill. The former can of course lead to the latter but it does not have to (or the impact of the latter can be mitigated by early intervention and support) ! Its like diet or smoking or alcohol use- one needs to be aware that mental illness can develop from poor mental health and getting help early for signs of mental "unhealthiness" can mitigate the risk of real mental illness developing.... Being aware of the characteristics of mental "unhealthiness"- anxiety, sleeplessness, mood changes, irritability, difficulty concentrating- and feeling comfortable to seek advice and support at an early stage is the real purpose behind the education I mention above I think. That and having our next generations grow up believing that mental health and physical health are equivalent and that there is no stigma attached to those who have challenges with their mental health. "

## **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?**

"I think the education that I mention above can be done better. The only way to eradicate or mitigate stigmas in society is to change the mindset of individuals in their formative years. If a 12 yr old child who is experiencing some form of mental "unhealthiness' does not consider there is any greater stigma attached to that than, for example, having a sore stomach, then they are much more likely to reach out for help. The other area we need to do better is working out who the first line of support should be for young people. The stigma of doctors and psychologist is, in my view, already too well engrained. I would recommend all schools have welfare officers (or equivalent) who can address both physical and mental health issues interchangeably- like the old school nurse but with more training on detecting and identifying mental health concerns that need to be

referred on for more specialist support. The initial step of making a person feel safe and unjudged in reaching out for help is key. "

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

"For youth and adolescent suicide, I think teachers need much more direct and focussed training on identifying children at risk. I fear that the distinction between a difficult and moody, hormonal teenager and a teenager with poor mental health that, if not supported, could become mentally ill (and thereby at risk of suicide) is very hard for the average teacher to detect. Further continuing professional training is needed on this in my view."

**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.**

"Others are better equipped than I to comment on this. As I said, in the context of children and teenagers, the answer has to be more support in schools and teachers that are better skilled at detecting and managing mental health issues."

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

"In my experience broken families are a key cause. When a couple separate, there needs to be some alert or trigger somewhere where the children of divorce are (though their schools or otherwise) afforded the opportunity to talk to someone about what they are feeling. This should be provided proactively in my view. I appreciate divorce is immensely personal we need to find some way to provide the victims of divorce with access to support because at present that is too contingent on the mother and father thinking about that and they of course are often too closely involved emotionally to providing the support their kids need at such a sensitive time."

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

"The doctor patient professional privilege needs to be looked at for teenagers. As parents we need information regarding how we can help (and what we should be doing more of and less of) and doctors telling parents that what their children say is confidential, although understandable, is a huge barrier to providing support particularly early on. Families need information- not to be nosey and pry into a person's feelings and thoughts- but to understand better how they can help and what they are dealing with."

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

That is obvious- pay them better.

**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?**

I have nothing to add here from personal experience.

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

"My prism of experience here is adolescent health. In that context, there is a huge gap in my view between seeing a professional once or twice a week and the extreme crisis care offered at the large hospitals (in our experience at the [REDACTED] and at [REDACTED]). That gap needs to be filled. Organisations like, in our experience, [REDACTED] need hugely increased budgets so they can better resource the demand for support. The model is right but it is just horribly under-funded. Why do things have to fester and be so unprofessionally supported to the point where my daughter needs an emergency hospital admission because her doctor is away or unavailable (or just incompetent to help her)? (My daughter's submission will deal with her personal experiences in those large hospitals but they were, in summary, completely barbaric and not befitting of a society such as ours aspires to be. I am very happy to provide verbal elaboration on this issue but I feel that my daughter, who was the victim of treatment in these places, is better placed than I to describe her experiences.)"

**What can be done now to prepare for changes to Victorias mental health system and support improvements to last?**

Spend more money where it is needed in early prevention and identification and support.

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

"I am happy to speak further to the Commission to the extent they wish me to elaborate on my thoughts. My views should be read in conjunction with those of my daughter [REDACTED] - a brave talented, loving young woman that has suffered first hand with the inadequacies of our current system."