

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

## Organisation Name

N/A

## Name

Miss Belle (Belinda) Formica

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

"(See my 'brief comments' submission, for further answers on all these questions) - Train the community, including health professionals (such as GPs) further on particularly stigmatised mental illnesses eg. Borderline Personality Disorder and Schizophrenia - Provide classes in school or an online platform for children and young people to recognise warning signs of poor mental health, what different mental illnesses are, contacts for themselves or family/friends they are worried about as well as healthy coping strategies for with anxiety eg. mindfulness training - Media needs to be more careful with how they link violent crime and mental illness, to breed fear in the community about mental illness they may not understand - Fact sheets and posters at the GP about symptoms of misunderstood mental illness - Ads on social media for information about mental health conditions "

## 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?

"- Most professionals in the mental health field are good at recognising when to ask if someone is safe and may need further help, if they are at risk of suicide - I believe there is now more support for young people in school, but when I was in primary and high school there were clear signs that I was experiencing anxiety, depression, trauma and I received no support from the school or information about where to go for help (I am now almost 26 and found out about headspace at age 23 after a breakdown). Teachers, co-ordinators, doctors, police etc all need a protocol to offer information on support systems when any signs of mental illness or distress are present - Workplaces also need a system for this. Present information in staff rooms, and have management trained on recognising when someone needs support "

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

See above and answer in 'brief comments'

## 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.

"Family breakdown, alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, trauma, stressful environments, pressure to achieve (perfectionism mindset), pressure in schools and the workplace to work as much/ hard as possible... generally, open conversations and training about wellness, taking care of your mental health, recognising symptoms of poor mental health and where to go for support need to be implemented in all areas of life (schools, universities, the workplace, social media, medical centres etc). If people are ignorant to this, how can they know when to access help until an actual mental breakdown? This is what happened to me. I wish I had known that what I was experiencing for the first 23 years of my life without professional support, was several enduring

and complex mental health conditions bred from my life experiences. Severe, complex and enduring mental health conditions require consistent, evidence based treatment. The current system does not allow for people with these types of mental health conditions to access enough of this care. There are several problems with access; high costs for sessions, long waitlists, only 10 sessions covered by medicare, limited services in rural areas. There are enough people trained in psychology, and mental illness is such a prominent issue in our society, that we must make services more accessible. Health professionals must work together more- pick up the phone and communicate, or debrief after sessions via email. I have wasted a lot of time, and therefore opportunities for recovery, by having to repeat myself in sessions as I haven't had the opportunity to continue working with the same professional, consistently. Mental illness is exhausting. It can impact every part of your life, even if you're good at disguising it. The stigma is horrendous. Talking about where problems have stemmed from (and those ways you've learnt to cope which continue to make life a struggle) is really really hard. Learning how to change, heal and grow is even harder. It takes time, courage, insight, self compassion and money. Evidence suggests it can take 20 sessions just to stabilise someone. Recovery is possible but access to treatment is vital, why is it only available to the wealthy? "

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

"I believe financial stress and poverty is a driving factor. This is linked to domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse which makes mental health issues more severe and complex, and are also driving factors. Sessions need to be affordable (ideally free), housing needs to be more affordable, and people need to know where they can go for help for a range of different issues (mental health care, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, healthcare, employment services) "

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

"I grew up with family members experiencing ill mental health. [REDACTED] also suffers from severe mental illness. Growing up, I wish I knew of any support services. This is where education in schools (educating students about mental health and staff on when to recognise at risk students), health centres and social media is so important... I knew my family was 'different' but I never spoke about it. Maybe it was tied into shame; I know it was tied into hope, hoping that everyday things would get better. Now, financial support would be so helpful. More often than not, people with mental illness are financially disadvantaged. And we need money to access avenues for recovery, so we are able to work, and afford a better quality of life with less stress about survival! I have heard horror stories of people trying to access disability pension - the process seems so anxiety inducing, lengthy and hopeless that my partner and I are yet to try. Would I go for disability pension, or for carers allowance? I am more 'able' than he is, but surely living with a variety of severe mood and anxiety disorders means I am less able than most 'functioning' members of society. Support and advocacy for accessing Centrelink would be so helpful. Funding for sessions is vital. The stress of not knowing if he or I can access support moving from the youth into the adult system has exacerbated my conditions. "

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

"I would love to study peer support as I have not only my own experience of mental illness but also

experience taking care of with those with severe mental illness. However, I would not receive government funding as I have already completed a diploma, so (if it is the same as when I last researched this), the course would cost me \$7000 or more. Free education would be beneficial to society. Instead of funding wars and building massive student debts, let's fund the health of our society. "

**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?**

"Employment agencies need to be trained in helping those with any type of disability find appropriate work. The whole structure of the Centrelink system needs to be changed to recognise that the functioning of each person with mental illness is individual and can also be episodic. Sometimes I have been able to work full time. Sometimes I can only work part time, or casual. Sometimes, not at all. There hasn't really been an option for me other than to come on and off Centrelink payments throughout my life. To qualify for disability pension you have to be unable to work 8 hours a week. There is a massive difference between 8 hours a week, and the 42 hours a week people who are 'functioning' can work, to be able to fund their lives and not merely just survive. Combined, my partner and I earn less than \$30,000 a year. This is how mental illness can affect your life financially, and why we are unable to access more than the 10 funded sessions a year, that could help us recover. [REDACTED] has lost many jobs due to his debilitating illness. There needs to be more protection for casual workers. I believe more opportunities in arts and music based projects for those experiencing mental illness would improve our social and economic participation. "

**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?**

"Complex, severe and enduring cases of mental illness require more than the current 10 funded sessions. It will be individual, but for example, 2 years of weekly DBT sessions is the current evidence based treatment that has helped people with borderline personality disorder recover. This should therefore be the type of therapy that is funded for those with BPD. Not all those with the illness will choose to engage in this, so the funding requirement would not be astronomical. And ultimately, the more people can recover for mental illness, the more people can contribute to our society so it is worth it. Not to mention, literally saving people's lives, as so many of us are suicidal because we are unable to access appropriate care, unable to work enough to survive, and live with mental distress day to day. Additionally, being discharged from the youth system has been distressing. I am unable to continue seeing a psychologist who was really helping me. It can take a long time to build a therapeutic relationship, especially when you have had life experiences than have resulted in a distrust of others. It can take a long time to talk about trauma. It can take a long time to become stabilised enough to work on your mental health, if your life has consisted of a series of traumatic events than has left you in constant fight or flight, leaping from one day to the next just trying to survive. It can take a long time to find a therapist who is trained in the areas you most need help with. Having 10 sessions to be able to do any of this is unrealistic for those of us with complex cases. Personally, I believe it would be beneficial for those of us who have found someone in the youth system to be particularly helpful to us, to be able to continue seeing them. And if this is not possible, we just simply need more than 10 funded sessions because finding the right therapist and getting onto the path of recovery takes time. "

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

N/A

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

N/A