

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

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Name

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

"There needs to be a culture of sharing our struggles and being open about experiencing mental health issues. This would help reduce the stigma and discrimination around it, as the more people talk about it, and acknowledge it and the more people know people who struggle with it, it will be seen as a normal thing. However, it is hard for people to share their struggles when this stigma exists. It is interesting, the more that I open up to people about my own struggles with mental health, the more I realise that the number of other people experiencing the same things is very high. It is only once I open up to them, that they in turn open up to me. It leads me to believe that there are so many of us walking around with mental health struggles, but feeling like we have to go through it alone, and feeling like we can't share that. When, sharing it that you experience that, or have experienced it and come out of it or found a way of dealing with it would help us who are still struggling, but will also help others to see it is a normal issue that can affect anyone, and that it needs to be treated and that these people need some empathy and compassion - not discrimination or judgment. Maybe more advocates who have experienced mental health need to speak out. We have 'r u ok' day - but that is not taken seriously. It gets asked in a light hearted way, and by people you don't trust to speak to anyway. What about an 'I'm not okay' day - and that it is okay to admit that. There needs to be a serious education/awareness campaign with GPs as well. I am not sure if they get any mental health training, but whenever I have to go to them with mental health issues, they are insensitive, uncomfortable and clueless. They do not know how to talk about mental health. They do not provide an environment when somebody feels comfortable to bring mental health to them. They do not know how to approach or respond to people without judgment - and only with understanding and compassion. I know this is a huge generalisation, but I have experienced this with multiple GPs, and so have friends of mine who have tried to go to the GP with mental health issues. Here is an example: When I had to first go to the GP to ask about going on a mental health care plan, I was extremely scared, nervous and anxious. This was all new to me, I didn't know too much about anxiety and had only just realised that I might have it. When I went to the GP, I had to explain the situations where I felt anxiety and when I had had a panic attack. The GP's face during my story about experiencing a panic attack was full of shock and judgment. I have social anxiety, and my panic attack was triggered while hanging out with friends, and 1 other person I didn't know. She was so shocked, which made me feel like a freak and embarrassed and ashamed. I think GPs can't relate to mental health issues if they have never dealt with it, and I think having a panic attack being caused by a social outing with friends is much harder for them to relate to than something like public speaking. Then, after that, the GP ran through the K10 survey with me. I could see on the computer screen that the next question coming up was asking whether I ever thought about suicide. Before the GP got to this question, she paused and looked uncomfortable, then she said 'have you ever thought about offing yourself?'. So you can see how they do not know how to talk about mental health and are clearly uncomfortable. Another of my friends who had attempted suicide, and spent time in hospital after,

had to go to a GP for a psychologist referral. The GP said, don't bother with that, just go for a ten minute walk every day. There is a huge problem with GPs - and this is the only way I know how to get access to mental health care services like a psychologist, so it is a huge barrier. And also - if they act like this, it only reinforces the stigma! Maybe the GPs are a good place to start in order to truly change this. There is also a huge problem with it in workplaces. I get told that I am too sensitive, the managers have meetings telling us we should harden up. They also talk about other staff who had breakdowns and had to leave, and I hear terms that people are unstable. There is huge discrimination. I think mental health first aid training is not enough either - I completed this, and I felt like when they talked about the people experiencing mental health issues, it was as though they were subjects - not just normal people like everyone else who just happen to experience mental health issues. If you are talking about helping people with a broken leg, you know they are the same as you - just a person with a broken leg. But that does not come across when talking about people experiencing mental health issues. This could be part of the reason there is stigma - people with mental health issues are talked about as though they are different and not even normal human beings. "

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?

"It is good that you can get 6 sessions with a psychologist under the mental health care plan. It would be good if you didn't have to go back to the GP to get the extra 4 sessions. I am not sure what the point of that is. The GP doesn't do anything, they usually just talk uncomfortably about mental health and it can be stressful to have to go back there just for the extra 4 sessions that the psychologist has recommended anyway. Also, if you go to a general medical centre and don't have one GP you always see, you always end up having to retell your story each time, which can be distressing to have to go through each time - and can be a barrier to not go back. If the GPs or doctors seemed more approachable about mental health, maybe talked about it more, put up more flyers in the actual office etc., then maybe there would be less of a barrier for people to go to the GP for a mental health care plan. Also when referring to psychologists, GPs never ask for what you prefer. They might refer you to one that is very expensive and with a long waiting list. They don't ask if you prefer bulk billed, or in a certain area, or anything. Again, just adding more barriers to getting help if they are referred to a psychologist that is hard for them to see. It would be good if mental health professionals allowed clients or prospective clients to make appointments and make communication via email. I got referred to a new psychologist. The office was open Mon - Fri 9 - 5, and there was no email address. It is hard to ring and making appointments when you work full time, which is another barrier. Also, again, talking about these things over phone can be distressing. Having flexible options in which to make appointments and communicate with psychologists would be helpful and make it easier for people to actually access these services. I also tried BeyondBlue chat service when I was at a breaking point the other night - it sounded like a robot. Not a human being. This made me close right up, and close the browser. They also said right away from the outside, they can only provide brief support. Again, the word brief, it is so uninviting and cold. So I got no help from this service - it was too hard to get help, and too unapproachable. It would be better if they could speak more like human beings, and people we can relate to. This again makes us feel different to them... "

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

N/A

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.

Better GPs.

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

"In work communities: stress, politics and petty behaviour like bullying."

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

N/A

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

N/A

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?

N/A

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?

N/A

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