

‘Mental Health is Everyone’s Business’

A response to the 2019 Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health

Executive Summary

As a for-purpose organisation that is committed to individual and community flourishing, Korus Connect made a submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System.

As human beings are multifaceted, the best mental health system is one that regards people holistically, with reference to their psychological, social, cultural and spiritual dimensions.

This empowers communities to share the responsibility of supporting each other’s mental health and places mental health within a paradigm of overall health and wellbeing.

A proactive, positive and informed approach to the wellbeing of all, including their mental wellbeing, enables mental health to be everyone’s business.

Key Points

1. A HOLISTIC APPROACH

To best understand mental illness, it is essential that a holistic approach to its understanding is taken which considers the psychological, social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of a person.

Such an approach empowers members of communities to assist in the prevention and minimisation of mental illness, especially where it is non-medical factors that contribute significantly to the onset and development of that mental illness. If a holistic paradigm is adopted then no aspect of a person’s wellbeing profile is overlooked. Such a paradigm acknowledges that people live and respond within multi-faceted contexts, informed by layers of conscious and unconscious attitudes, beliefs and values. It also acknowledges that we respond as a whole person, not just as a mind, nor emotions nor any one segment of our personhood. There is a danger in over-medicalising our responses to mental health; that medical and medicinal solutions are prioritised over personal, social and spiritual solutions.

We are primarily **beings** and as such, our sense of who we are, our sense of connectedness, our understanding of our capabilities and our ability to experience a sense of contentment all need to be addressed as part of our response to a person’s mental health.

Research supports the significant role that spiritual/religious beliefs and activity, enacted within supportive faith communities play as a protective factor in mental health and wellbeing (WHO, 2001; Search Institute, 1997; Spencer et al, 2016; Pew Research, 2019; Chen and VanderWeele, 2018). This is recognised in some sectors of our community; for example in the armed services, in aged care and in hospitals through the provision of spiritual care services including faith-based Chaplains. Similar recognition needs to be afforded to similar initiatives in our community.

Such recognition is not a denial of the secular nature of our society but rather is a supporter of it; in our multicultural and pluralistic society there are many who value a religious/ spiritual perspective on life as it provides meaning, purpose and hope to their lived experience, a basis for their ethical framework and a strong sense of belonging to their community. Those who do not wish to participate in such an approach to life need not feel that they are treated differently for their choice, but neither that their choice is the only valid expression of life in a secular state. We would do well to support such

a holistic approach to wellbeing (including mental wellbeing. This is not to diminish the efficacy and impact of other approaches and supports of the mental wellbeing of all Victorians.

2. A PROACTIVE APPROACH

To reduce stigma, mental health needs to be framed positively similar to one's physical health care. For example, in the same way people proactively invest in their physical health through self-nurturing (rest/life balance, exercise (walking, gym, stretching, healthy eating, sun exposure and GP check -ups etc. – a positive mental health journey also needs to be framed as a positive and routine part of one's health. It would be fitting to suggest a mental health care plan is adopted by 'all Victorians'.

A positive health campaign needs to encourage the community be more informed, intentional, proactive and engaged in reaching their full potential as emotional, social and spiritual beings. This could be as simple as encouraging people to invest in their friendships and relationships, to turn aside from their phones and other connected devices for a self-selected period - for the better mental health of all parties.

3. A SHARED APPROACH

There will be a better understanding of mental illness and reduced stigma if psychosocial wellbeing is perceived to be everyone's responsibility. For example, the RUOK initiative has successfully achieved a collective response by a simple mandate, which is: We inspire and empower everyone to meaningfully connect with people around them and start a conversation with anyone who may be struggling with life, in conjunction with an easy to follow response plan: 1. Ask R U OK? 2. Listen 3. Encourage action 4. Check in. Similarly, Chaplains and Community Connectors (community-based pastoral care workers have achieved positive social impact by recognising that collaborative partnerships with existing community groups and local experts effect positive social impact.

4. A COMMUNITY-CENTRED APPROACH

It is evident that the Victorian Government needs to place a greater emphasis on decreasing the prevalence of mental issues, loneliness, and suicide by focusing on positive, effective and community-centric initiatives. Such an approach would run in tandem with professional psychological support and skilled community services. Chaplains and Community Connectors are well placed to be a conduit for frontline community-based pastoral care, identifying risk factors, individual needs and managing local referrals.

Proactively finding ways to mitigate mental health risk is reinforced in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry (2018 where it states:

To improve the population's mental health, risk factors and social determinants must be addressed, in addition to effectively treating those who are living with mental illness.

5. A MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH

- a. New norms and cultural awareness
Victorian leaders need to raise awareness about mental health being a critical personal matter that needs to be addressed with vigilance. Mental health needs to become an open and continuous conversation built into the core operations of schools, workplaces and family life. Ultimately, this will lead to happier and healthier communities and reduce the burden of mental health illness on the State's resources.
- b. A regular mental health audit
Similar to other health screening, mental health could be checked regularly (for example, every 12-24 months in such places as schools, workplaces, and residential centres. We need bipartisan advocacy and support to roll out a positive response through the health, education and welfare systems.

c. A localised response

Local councils, in partnership with local organisations have a key role to play in tackling mental health – particularly promotion, prevention and early intervention. Building on local relationships, relying on local corporate history/expertise and working collaboratively at a local level will transform communities. Ongoing training for all involved with the community will ensure a proactive, well-informed response to mental health.

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