



Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System

Formal Submission from Smiling Mind

Smiling Mind is a Victorian based not-for-profit organisation providing evidence based mindfulness programs designed to support children and young people to take a proactive approach to foster good mental health.

Our prevention focussed programs are widely used in schools across Australia, with more than 100,000 Australian teachers using our programs nationally. This submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System focusses on our experience in delivering prevention focussed child and youth mental health programs within the context of the school system.



About Smiling Mind

Smiling Mind works at the intersection of mental health and technology and we're widely known for our positive and proactive approach to mental health and wellbeing. Our mindfulness app is used by more than 4 million people from all walks of life, many seeking personal development strategies but many others under the recommendation of their mental health professional or GP. We work closely with schools across Australia and our classroom programs and resources are used by more than 100,000 educators.

Our program implementation partners in schools include the NSW department of Education with matched funding from the Buildcorp Foundation, The Federal Department of Health and Worksafe Victoria. Across these initiatives we are implementing our prevention focussed mental health and wellbeing programs in more than 850 primary schools nationally. We work closely with other school based initiatives such as those run by beyondblue and Headspace, and we know that our programs and resources provide a valuable contribution to the mental health and wellbeing of students, teachers and parents across Australia.



Our goal is to reach 5M young people by 2021 so we can help turn the mental health statistics around.

Our submission

Attached you will find a summary of our responses to the specific questions posed by the commission. We have provided a range of attachments outlining our review of the research literature and a summary of our school based wellbeing programs which we believe are world-class and have the potential to have a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of our future generations.

We would welcome the opportunity to speak with the commission or provide further information.

Kind Regards

Dr Addie Wootten

CEO, and Clinical Psychologist



On behalf of the Smiling Mind Board of Directors:



Professor Frank Oberklaid, AM



James Tutton



Jane Martino



David Sacks



Neil Thompson



Nicole Gibson



John Chambers



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A summary of our responses to the Commission's specific questions:

Below we have summarised our key points in relation to the Commission's specific questions. Our full application has been submitted via the online system.

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

There is an opportunity for Victoria to take the lead in changing the conversation about mental health, leading a public health campaign that promotes a healthy, proactive and preventative approach to support mental health and promoting the appropriate access points for those who need specialised care – just like we do for physical health conditions such as cancer where we focus on what all Victorians need to do to protect their skin and live a sun smart life, at the same time as acknowledging what services are available for those who need specialist care. This approach needs to start early in life, just like our SunSmart campaigns, so that every child understands the importance of mental health, how important it is to look after and where to seek help if needed.

2. 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?

The Smiling Mind School program is a good example of a prevention based approach with significant success. There are now more than 100,000 educators using Smiling Mind programs across Australia and internationally and independent evaluation indicates that our program is having a significant impact on the wellbeing of students and teachers.

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

Mindfulness strategies can be useful in supporting the development of a more open, compassionate and accepting approach to life's situations and emotions and can support people to learn how to manage strong emotions. There is emerging evidence to suggest that mindfulness based approaches could be useful in reducing the risk of suicide in some populations when used in a prevention based approach, however further research is required. This could be an area of focus for Victoria in exploring innovative approaches to support reductions in suicide risk.

4. 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.

Our community needs education around the importance of taking proactive steps to support good mental health – just like the sun-smart campaigns related to skin cancer awareness, we need to be supporting our community to approach mental health in a similar way. School based programs also need to be embedded to ensure that children are exposed to opportunities to learn about positive approaches to supporting good mental health early in life.

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

Smiling Mind provides digital access to our mindfulness based programs through our freely accessible app, providing access to anyone, anywhere, at any time despite geographical location. With more than 4 million people using our app we know that we provide an evidence based offering that supports thousands of people living in rural and remote communities. There is significant opportunity to grow the number of people accessing our prevention focussed programs across rural and remote Victorian communities and resourcing is our biggest barrier to engaging more people from rural and remote communities.

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

The Smiling Mind school program offers education, resources and materials designed to support parents to extend the mindfulness based programs we run in schools into their home environment and we have found that this strengthens the impact of our school based programs and also provides families with tools and resources they can use to support good wellbeing at home.

7. 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?

We need to invest in our children's mental health – if we can start life with the right support and approach to mental health then this will certainly reduce the risk of serious mental health problems later in life.

We strongly encourage the Royal Commission to prioritise preventive approaches in the primary school setting, with a focus on skills development through mindfulness that will equip our next generation with the skills and approaches that are needed for good mental health, reduce the burden on acute mental health services and result in many flow on effects both socially and economically for Victoria.