

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?

"1) Firstly to recognise stigma and discrimination as a social issue (akin to racism / sexism or any other type of "ism") and a very large part of "the problem": a) Imagine if we treated the common cold / flu with such stigma & discrimination - health outcomes would be catastrophic. Mental illness is also, to some degree, contagious - in that a major contributing factor is stress, and mentally ill people do often act and behave in ways that can cause others to become stressed / distressed. And, generally - as with all illness - the earlier that people seek help the better the outcomes. Prevention & early intervention are - by far - the best strategies both for the individuals concerned, and society as a whole. Stigma and discrimination greatly discourage people from seeking help early, thus contribute greatly (in my view) to the growing mental health problem - both for the individual (in terms of the growth / worsening of their mental illness) and society (in terms of more individuals with worsening conditions going untreated). b) Also there is a significant amount of stress that comes with being on the receiving end of stigma & discrimination - and stress exacerbates mental illness. So stigma & discrimination exacerbate the problem by: hurdle a) discouraging those who need help from seeking it and, hurdle b) increasing the stress on - and thus adversely impacting - those who overcome the first hurdle (hurdle a) and actually seek help. It is a big issue, a "double whammy" Perhaps an advertising campaign showing what would happen were we to treat the common cold / flu with the same stigma & discrimination that we do mental illness. Imagine the "shame" of having to get a flu shot, trying to make sure that your employer / colleagues / friends / loved ones don't find out. Imagine the health consequences of such a scenario. This is a society-wide issue. Stigma & discrimination is something society needs to: a) own as a contributing factor, and b) address - if it wants to have a positive impact upon mental health & reduce mental illness (not to mention racism, sexism, ageism - & the myriad other ways the people stigmatise and discriminate against their fellow human beings. We all need a much more open, inclusive, tolerant and respectful society) 2) this is much more complicated, and i find much more difficult to explain. But i do think that what often happens as soon as someone identifies as having a mental health issue or begins seeking help, other people then seem to think - often very conveniently for themselves - that they can then dis-regard, or dismiss the concerns, thoughts, views and opinions of the "mentally ill" person as a "symptom of their mental illness" as opposed to realising they have no right to do that, and that treating people with such dis-regard is very stressful for the person receiving such treatment and will usually only make things worse, not better. Ie seeking help is again often not actually helpful, and often infact seems to come with significant downsides. Late stages of mental illness & severe / acute episodes / attacks can cause people to "lose their grip on reality", but people in their ignorance (and often for their own great convenience) generally seem to apply this to any stage of "mental illness". Again, imagine if we did this with cold/ flu patients. Similar to mental illness - severe episodes can cause delirium, but generally people suffering from cold / flu should definitely have their views, thoughts, concerns and opinions respected, and may often have important information / insights

that may help with actually treating the condition / causal factors. As with early mental illness - dismissing their concerns, views, opinions, and thoughts would only have negative consequences. Again, imagine the social and health consequences of treating people suffering from the flu as if they were "crazy".

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?

"WORKING WELL - in terms of treatment (and prevention in the sense of preventing condition from remaining untreated and worsening), in my experience: 1) Counselling via a mental health plan - very important to have a health professional spend some time and help me unpack and understand the causal and contributing factors / triggers. Great that GP's can recognise and refer to this service. I am beginning to understand the challenges I face, and just having someone spend the time to listen has helped me get to this point. I am pretty sure that I would be far worse off without having had access to this service. 2) Acute mental health service - referral and talking with a mental health nurse regarding the different medication options has greatly increased my understanding, and resulted in me even considering taking medication. Very troubling idea for me to even consider the idea of taking some chemical that may impact my mind. I am very grateful for having had the opportunity to spend some time talking with someone very knowledgeable about the different medications, to help me understand my options - how they work, their likely impacts and side effects, and provide me with her considered and sincere opinion. I am still touched by the care and sincerity of her consideration. Without that I would not even be considering taking medication. 3) general / philosophical point: Anything that facilitates connection and better understanding between people. Anything that combats the increasing isolation / loneliness / stress / fragmentation of today's world. Increasingly trivial, superficial and short term interactions between people, who are increasingly isolated to their own siloes / echo-chambers via their "social media". This reduces tolerance, empathy and understanding and connection with / to "other" people ("other" in the sense of "different"). Worth repeating (from previous point) - We all need a much more open, honest, inclusive, respectful and tolerant society (this would contribute to a wealth of positive social outcomes, not just mental health) NEEDING IMPROVEMENT: 1) Reducing the stigma & discrimination - as (extensively) discussed in the previous point. That is, & continues to be, the most significant "double whammy" hurdle that I (still) struggle with today. Significant downsides, and possible ongoing negative consequences for my life going forward if I do disclose / be open & more pro-active in seeking help. 2) Particular concern of mine (and I am very sure that I am not alone in this) is with regard to employment. Seems that some employers think that they can ask about "mental health conditions". It would be very helpful if this was clarified / made illegal - unless necessary for the industry, or specific with regard to mental illness conditions. ie understandable, perhaps, if someone has a severe / acute DIAGNOSED mental illness & the questions are specific / relevant & justified - not if they are vague / general (& discriminatory) in nature. Perhaps legislation saying it is not possible to discriminate against someone with a mental illness (unless appropriate to situation - EG airline pilots, various jobs & situations & depending on type and severity of diagnosed illness). 3) also I think very significant is - workplace culture / management / HR (& IR). People spend significant amount of time at work, and it has a significant impact on their health & wellbeing. Frustrating that often workplace policy / procedures and "values" sound very good, but not much effort or effective implementation. Stress / IR / financial stress - we need to improve workplace culture, conflict resolution and cooperation. We need a more collaborative culture between "management" and the workforce. It is frustrating that this is not more acknowledged / stressed / talked about as I'm sure it would not just have a significant positive impact on mental health but also the productivity of organisations (&

staff retention). Perhaps some grants / partial funding or tax incentives for activities / training that are shown to positively impact workplace culture (= improve productivity, staff retention & engagement and reduce stress hazards / adverse mental health outcomes). "

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.

"In terms of "what makes it hard for people to experience good mental health?" I think a significant role is played by broad cultural and social issues, particularly: an increasingly fragmented / divided society, poor examples set by "leadership" exploiting fears for political gain, division, the focus on the "individual", and "us VS them" thinking. All increase anxiety, stress and division within our society - leading to adverse mental health outcomes. It is widely acknowledged in the arena of sexual politics (thanks largely to feminism in general and recently the "me-too" movement) the direct impact that attitudes, language, discourse and example set by leaders of culture (including political leadership) have upon the treatment of women. This applies to any group in society. Again, we would all benefit from a much more open, honest, inclusive, respectful and tolerant society (& not just in terms of mental health outcomes). Political / cultural leaders media etc all need to play their part (hence the need for strong anti-discrimination & anti vilification / hate speech laws) Also I think the issue of "screen-time" is significant. Both because of it's impact upon the human mind (and the developing human mind in particular), and the increasing amount of influence "social media" (with all its algorithms) has upon limiting the exposure of people to things that they are not familiar with / do not like. I am concerned that we adversely impacting the development of human minds and are reducing our capacity for empathy and our ability to understand "the other". Reducing understanding and tolerance and increasing division I think isn't just conducive to negative mental health outcomes, but is a negative mental health outcome. "

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

N/A

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