



3.12 Mental health

Good mental health is a state of wellbeing in which an individual realises their own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to their community (WHO 2014). A considerable proportion of the Australian population will experience a mental illness at some time in their life (see Chapter 3.13 'Eating disorders'; Chapter 4.7 'Illicit drug use'; Chapter 5.4 'People with disability').

The terms 'mental illness' and 'mental disorder' are often used interchangeably and describe a wide range of mental health and behavioural disorders which vary in duration and/or severity. The effect of mental illness on the individuals, families and/or carers concerned can be severe and its influence on society as a whole is far reaching. Social problems often associated with mental illness include poverty, unemployment or reduced productivity, and homelessness. People with mental illness may also experience isolation, discrimination and stigma.

How common is mental illness?

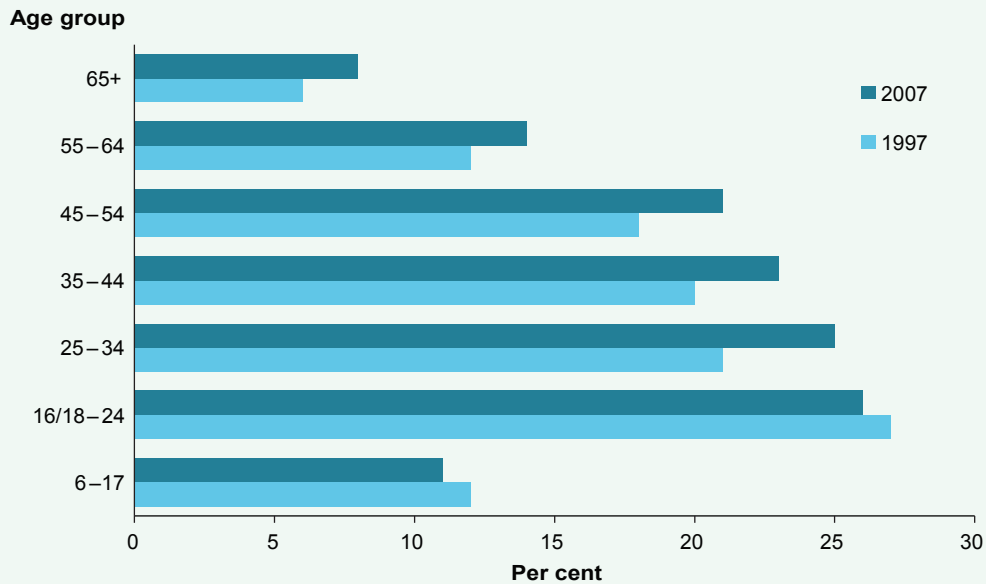
Australia's National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing is a program of three targeted mental health epidemiological surveys. Together, these surveys provide a detailed view of the prevalence of mental disorders in Australia:

- The adult component of the National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (conducted most recently in 2007) estimates that around 8.5 million (45%, based on the estimated 2015 population) Australians aged 16–85 will experience a high prevalence mental disorder, such as depression, anxiety or a substance use disorder in their lifetime. Around 20% of the population experienced a common mental disorder in a 12-month period. Of these, *Anxiety disorders* (such as social phobia) were the most prevalent, affecting 1 in 7 (14%) people, followed by *Affective disorders* (such as depression) (6.2%) and *Substance use disorders* (such as alcohol dependence) (5.1%) (ABS 2008). The age distribution of high prevalence mental disorders in 2007 was similar to that found 10 years earlier from the same survey (conducted in 1997/1998, depending on the age group) (Figure 3.12.1).
- The National Survey of People with Psychotic Illness (conducted most recently in 2010) showed that almost 64,000 people with a psychotic illness are in contact with public specialised mental health services each year (Morgan et al. 2011). The survey did not cover private service providers, such as private psychiatrists, psychologists and private hospitals.
- The Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (conducted most recently in 2013–14) estimates that 560,000 children and adolescents aged 4–17 (almost 14%) experienced a mental disorder in the 12 months before the survey (Lawrence et al. 2015).





Figure 3.12.1: Per cent of Australians with high prevalence mental disorders, by age group, 1997 and 2007



Notes

1. For the 6-17 age group, the data are for 1998 and 2013-14.
2. For the 16-18 to 24 age group, the 1997 data relate to people aged 18-24 and the 2007 data to people aged 16-24.
3. Prevalence data from the National Survey of People with Psychotic Illness are not included in this figure.
4. Some caution should be exercised in comparing findings from the two adult surveys because they sampled from slightly different age ranges and used somewhat different approaches to gauge the presence of mental illness in the past 12 months. It may be that these differences in method account for the small increase in overall prevalence over time.

Sources: Department of Health and Ageing 2013; Lawrence et al. 2015; Table S3.12.1.

Impact

While the National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing provides valuable insights, the severity and duration of a mental illness are critical factors in understanding its impact on individuals, families and society as a whole. Severe and persistent mental illnesses, such as psychotic disorders, have a relatively low prevalence but have a substantial impact on individuals, their families and society due to the ongoing and sometimes extensive care needs required to support the individual. Mental and substance use disorders contributed 12% of Australia's total burden of disease in 2011, making it the third highest burden disease group.

A person experiencing poor mental health may not meet the diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder (Slade et al. 2009), but their condition may still have a negative impact on their life. Poor mental health may also be associated with suicidality—the collective term for suicidal ideation, suicide plans and suicide attempts. While suicidality is more common in people with mental disorders, it is not confined solely to this group (Slade et al. 2009).



People who experience suicidal ideation and make suicide plans are at increased risk of attempting suicide. At some point in their lives, 13% of Australians aged 16–85 have experienced suicidal ideation, 4.0% have made suicide plans and 3.3% have attempted suicide (Slade et al. 2009). Between 2007 and 2016, an average of around 2,600 Australians died by suicide each year (ABS 2017). Suicide and self-inflicted injuries contribute to 2.5% of Australia's total burden of disease (see Chapter 7.3 'Suicide prevention services').

What is missing from the picture?

Given the passage of time since the last adult survey of mental health was conducted, it would be appropriate to consider cost-effective methods to update prevalence information on Australian adults.

There is also a lack of information on the activities of non-government community mental health organisations being used to support Australians with mental health issues. These services (both not-for-profit and for-profit) focus on wellbeing, support and assistance for people who live with mental illness rather than the assessment, diagnosis and treatment undertaken by clinical services.

Where do I go for more information?

More information on mental health in Australia is available in *Mental Health Services in Australia* or *Australian Burden of Disease Study: impact and causes of illness and death in Australia 2011*.

If you or someone you know needs help please call:

Lifeline 13 11 14

beyondblue 1300 22 4636

Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800

References

ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2008. National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing 2007: summary of results. ABS cat. no. 4326.0. Canberra: ABS.

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