
An annual check-in on the mental health and wellbeing of Australians



STATE OF MIND

by Smiling Mind

About Smiling Mind

Smiling Mind is a whole lot more than Australia's #1 mindfulness app.

We are the not-for-profit that is helping make future generations happier and healthier through the practice of mindfulness meditation. In fact we are aiming to reach 5 million young Australians by 2021 with our tools and resources.



Half of all mental illness has its onset by the age of 12. Furthermore, 1 in 7 Australian primary and 1 in 4 secondary students suffer from a mental illness every year.

Our evidence based, award winning school program aims to reverse these trends. Combining mindfulness training, resources and teaching tools to make mindfulness a seamless inclusion in any classroom, it is already utilised by over **195,000 teachers** and **3.8m young Australians**.

We also make mindfulness accessible to as many adults as possible through our app, which offers over **400 free meditations** and has so far helped over **5 million people's minds smile**.

Our premium workplace program is one of the world's biggest and more than 50,000 employees at companies like IBM, CSL, Reece, EY, MYOB and Metro Trains are getting the benefits.

What was once the dream of two passionate founders with a vision to support young people to develop the skills needed to support good mental health throughout their lifetime, is now a leading force globally in positive pre-emptive mental health care.

Follow us on our journey to help every mind thrive.





We acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands throughout Australia in which we work and live and pay our respects to the Elders, past, present and emerging.

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Table of contents

1 — Executive summary	08
2 — Recommendations	09
3 — Case Study	10
4 — A note from Smiling Mind's CEO	12
5 — Methodology	13
6 — Overview of State of Mind Sample	14
7 — Part 1: The National State of Mind	15
Insights	15
Detailed analysis	16
8 — Part 2: The National State of Mindfulness	28
Insight	28
Detailed analysis	29
9 — Part 3: The Impact of COVID-19 on SOM	34
Insight	34
Detailed analysis	35

1 — Executive summary

The annual State of Mind survey, delivered in partnership with The University of Newcastle and funded by nib foundation, examined Australians' experience of mental health as well as their attitudes and behaviours towards mental health – both in a general and COVID-19 specific context. This research has revealed that young Australians' mental health is the most strained in the nation.



When asked to rate general wellbeing on a scale of one to 10, Australians aged between 18 to 25 years recorded a concerning low average response of 5.8. This fell significantly below older respondents, with the highest response in the 65 years and over bracket (M = 7.1).

Younger Australians also reported higher levels of anxiety (59%), stress (60.1%) and depression (38.2%), and concerning, were least likely to know what to do to improve their mental health and wellbeing. Those in the 18–25 age group were also most likely to agree that they didn't have money to spend on caring for their mental health (41% agreed or strongly agreed).

From a geographical standpoint, mental health in rural Australia fared worse than those in metropolitan areas. A concerning 50% of rural respondents reported having experienced symptoms of depression.

The survey also showed that sleep evades many across the nation, with more than a quarter of respondents (25.7%) noting it as their biggest barrier to wellbeing. Women also reported higher levels of stress (53.6%) than male respondents (39.6%).

Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander participants reported high prevalence of anxiety (58.9%), depression (51.7%) and stress (55.3%)

In an analysis of the impact COVID-19 has had on the mental health of Australians, data revealed that the majority of respondents noted their mental health has been 'the same' since the pandemic's onset (44.6%), while nearly one third (32.6%) described it as 'a little worse', 'worse', or 'much worse'.

The majority of participants (68.7%) recognise mindfulness as a tool that can offer support to those feeling additional burden on their mental health during COVID-19, and just over half of survey respondents (53.1%) have taken additional care of their mental health during this period.

Promisingly, survey data revealed that an understanding of the importance of good mental health is high in Australia, with 87.8% of respondents noting mental and physical health are of equal importance.

2 — Recommendations

1.

Action needs to be taken to support young Australians mental health and wellbeing

- A.** This should also address the need to support young Australians to learn more about where and how to access support both in relation to mental health challenges but also to support preventative approaches
- B.** Freely accessible support services, tools and resources need to be made available now to ensure financial challenges are not a barrier for young Australians

2.

Female Australians are experiencing higher rates of psychological distress, poorer wellbeing and higher levels of mental health challenges than males. Action needs to be taken to explore how we better support females during this time given the reported impact of COVID-19 on females.

3.

Rural and regional Australians require additional support, services tools and resources designed to support improvements in mental health.

4.

Freely accessible technology enabled programs, resources and tools should be bolstered to support all Australians mental health

5.

Investment needs to be made in mental health promotion and prevention approaches to ease the burden on acute mental health services.

Meet Eva

Eva is 20 years old and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic she had two part time jobs and was studying Psychology full time at Deakin University. She lived in Melbourne with an active lifestyle and great social connections. “I’m a very social being”, she said.



The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been significant for Eva – she has lost both her jobs and has had to relocate back to live with her parents in regional Victoria. Her University studies have continued, but all remotely.

From a mental health perspective, the impact of COVID-19 has been significant for Eva. The social isolation has been a major challenge and whilst digital connection has been a priority it simply hasn’t provided Eva with the connection she craves. “I’ve felt quite isolated and lonely. Although social media has made it easier to reach friends, it’s just not the same authentic connection as real life. And with the 24-hour news cycle, I’ve actually found my phone and social media have had a negative impact on my wellbeing as it serves as a constant reminder of the pandemic.”

Eva has also seen an impact on her sleeping patterns, and she has found that she has experienced sleep difficulties. “Since I lost my jobs and moved home, I’ve had a real lack of routine which has disrupted my sleeping patterns. I’ve had a lot of trouble switching off at night as the daily news plays on my mind, and I know that I don’t have any real structure to the day ahead.”

Uncertainty is an ever-present experience for Eva and this has impacted on her wellbeing. “The feeling of uncertainty around the pandemic and the future in general has had a real impact on my

mental health, and moving back in with my parents has definitely felt like a loss of independence. I’m worried about whether I will have work to return to, and when university classes will resume in person. Going back into lockdown a second time was also really deflating, I found I was a lot more anxious and sadder.”

Eva is aware of these impacts and has been proactively trying to support her own mental health and wellbeing through physical exercise, good quality sleep (when she can), journaling and mindfulness. Actively doing these things helps her get a more positive outlook. “On some occasions where I’ve felt quite negative, writing my thoughts and emotions down in a journal helped me to get it out of my head and look at it all differently. I also practice mindfulness occasionally which can be anything from using an app for meditation or completing mindful activities.”

Considering the way we approach mental health Eva is encouraged that awareness around the importance of mental health has grown over recent years but believes that more Australians need better support in how to maintain their mental health and how to get support if they need it. She is also a big advocate of prevention.

“I think it would be great if strategies and tools were targeted for to people prior to being mentally ill and for everyone to proactively know how to look after their mental health.”

4 — A note from Smiling Mind 's CEO

2020 has felt unrelenting in the challenges it has thrown at Australians. A brutal summer bushfire season followed by a global health pandemic has had wide and far reaching impacts on all of us. It has taken a major toll on the nation's psyche, and in turn, our mental health.

This State of Mind report highlights the challenges, and opportunities, for the state of our mental health as a nation. It is clear that mental health is at the forefront of many Australians minds, and rightly so.

Now is the time for us to collectively consider how we approach mental health across our communities, our workplaces, our families and our education system. The impact of the challenges of 2020 are significant, but they also provide an opportunity for us to change, to approach things differently, just like we have the way we work and school.

The State of Mind report highlights that many Australians are starting to take proactive action in looking after their mental health – we're starting to consider the factors we require in our day to day life that influence our mental health. This is a great step forward and a path I personally hope we continue along. Technology is also playing a vital role – more so than ever before – and the opportunity for us to strengthen our mental health by harnessing the opportunities of technology is exciting. But this will take time and investment.

I hope that this State of Mind report highlights opportunities for all of us to take stock and consider mental health more broadly as well as an opportunity for all of us to discuss what we need to do individually, and collectively, to make a significant change to the mental health of Australians.



Dr Addie Wootten
CEO, Smiling Mind

5 — Methodology

The State of Mind 2020 survey was conducted in partnership with the University of Newcastle and Smiling Mind. The recruitment process aimed to collect survey data from 1,000 Australians across a representative age, gender and location sample that was closely consistent with the Australian 2016 Census sample.



The survey focused on three main areas of inquiry:

- **The National State of Mind**
This area of the survey explored topics related to general mental health and wellbeing.
- **The National State of Mindfulness**
This area of the survey explored individuals experience with mindfulness and the impact of mindfulness-based practice on mental health and wellbeing.
- **The Impact of COVID-19 on State of Mind**
This area of the survey explored the acute effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and wellbeing across the Australian sample.

The data from each of these core survey areas is presented across the following pages.

6 — Overview of the State of Mind Sample

As discussed above the State of Mind survey aimed to recruit a sample of individuals that could provide an indication of Australian's mental health and wellbeing, their perspectives on mindfulness as a tool to support mental health, and specifically for this year the impact of COVID on their mental health.

Gender Distribution of State of Mind Survey Respondents

48.5%

Male

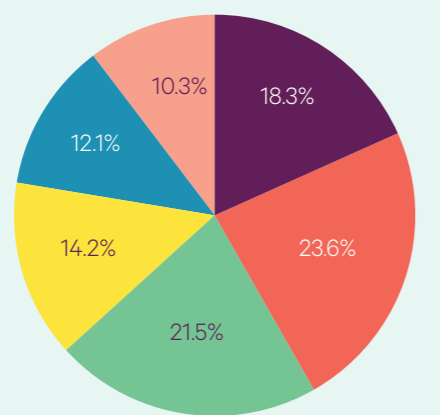
51%

Female

0.5%

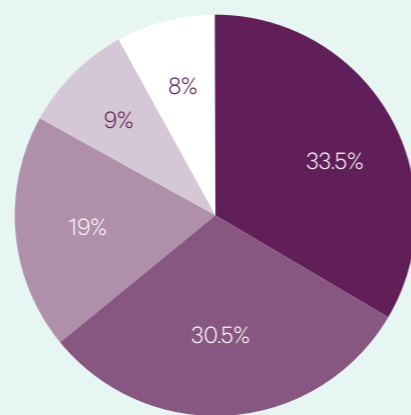
Transgender

Figure 1: Age Distribution of State of Mind Survey Respondents



■ 18-25 years ■ 26-35 years ■ 36-45 years
■ 46-55 years ■ 56-64 years ■ 65+ years

Figure 2: Geographic Location of State of Mind Survey Respondents



■ NSW/ACT ■ VIC/TAS ■ QLD
■ SA/NT ■ WA

7 — Part 1: The National State of Mind

Insights

The 2020 State of Mind survey paints a concerning picture of mental health in Australia especially amongst younger people and those living in rural locations.



Australians aged between 18 to 25 years recorded the lowest average wellbeing score (5.8). The score in this younger age group fell below the national average of 6.2 and was significantly lower than the average wellbeing response in older respondents aged 65 years and over (7.1).

Younger age groups also demonstrated a higher rate of severe psychological distress and were more likely to have experienced mental health conditions such as stress, anxiety and depression. Concerningly, they were also the least likely to know what to do to improve their mental health and wellbeing and most likely to agree that they didn't have money to spend on caring for it.

From a geographical standpoint, mental health in rural Australia fared worse than those in metropolitan areas. A concerning 50% of rural respondents reported having experienced symptoms of depression.

Differences were also seen between genders with females reporting significantly higher rates of stress, anxiety and depression.

Despite the concerning numbers the importance of managing mental health is not lost on Australians, with 87.8% of respondents agreeing with the statement that mental health was equally important as physical health.

A detailed analysis of the National State of Mind data is presented in the following pages.

Detailed analysis

Nationally mental health and wellbeing appears low and many are experiencing mental health challenges

6.2

The national average wellbeing score out of a maximum of 10

The experience of anxiety, depression, stress, or other mental health conditions was highly prevalent with:



46.9%

of respondents reporting that they had experienced stress



47.7%

had experienced anxiety



32.7%

had experienced depression



7%

had experienced another mental health condition recently

Survey respondents were also asked to complete the Kessler Psychological Disturbance Scale (K-10), a 10-item measure of psychological distress.

61%

of respondents scored in ranges that are indicative of psychological distress

- **13.0% mild psychological distress**
- **18.4% moderate psychological distress**
- **29.4% severe psychological distress**

Age was a significant factor in the experience of mental health and wellbeing across Australia

5.8

Individuals aged 18-25 reported the lowest average wellbeing, scoring 5.8 out of 10, compared to a national average of 6.2 out of 10

There was a significant difference found for the average well-being between age groups.

18–25 yr olds — 5.8/10

26–35 yr olds — 6.0/10

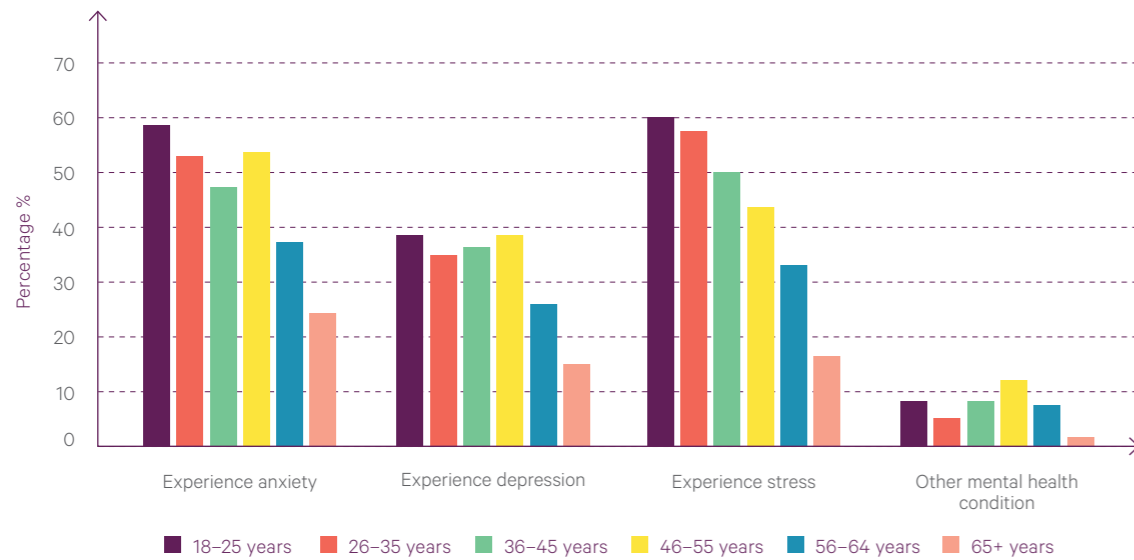
36–45 yr olds — 6.2/10

65+ yr olds — 7.1/10



A significant difference was also seen between age groups for stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions.

Figure 3: Percentage of respondents who have experienced anxiety, depression, stress, or other mental health conditions across different age groups.



→ The younger age groups (18–25 years, 26–35 years, and 46–55 years) reported significantly higher levels across all domains compared to the 56–64, and 65 and over age groups (Figure 3).



A significant difference was found between age groups in the experience of psychological distress, based on the K-10 outcomes (Figure 4).

49.4%

of the 18-25 years age group reported severe psychological distress. This group had the greatest percentage of respondents in the severe distress range

11.1%

of the 18-25 age group reported no psychological distress. This age group had the lowest percentage of respondents reporting no distress

The opposite was true of the 65+ years age group who reported a very low rate of psychological distress. There was a significant difference between the 18–25 year olds and all older age groups; and the 65+ years old's were significantly different from all younger age groups.

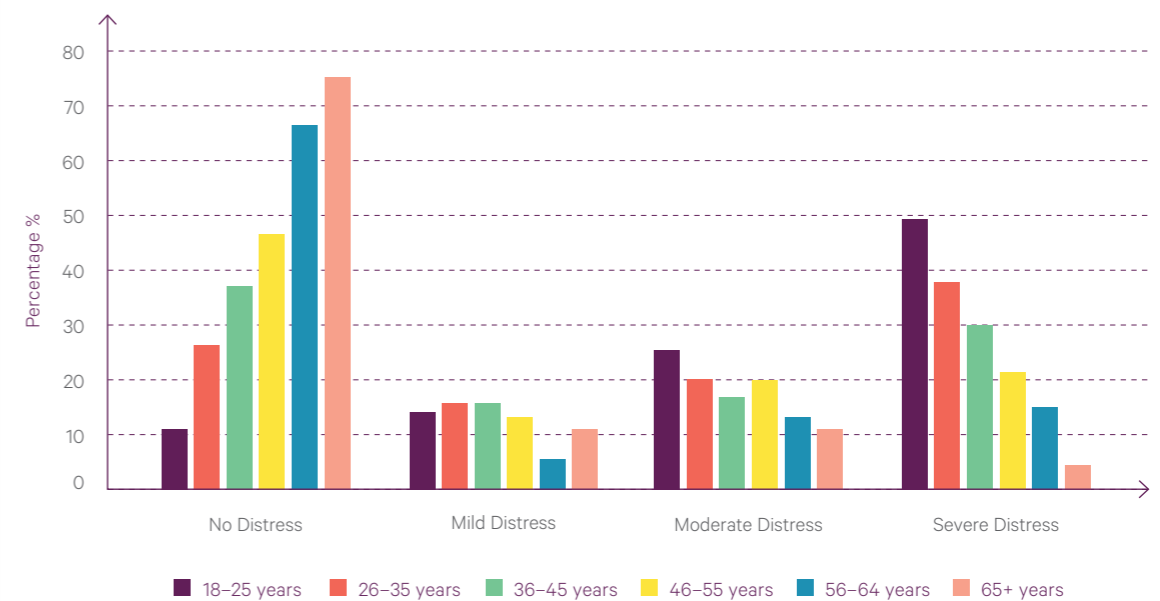
3.9%

of 65+ year age group reported experiencing severe distress

74.8%

of 65+ year age group reported experiencing no stress

Figure 4: Level of psychological distress according to the K10 based on age.





55.3%

of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander respondents reported that they experienced **stress**



58.9%

of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander respondents reported that they experienced **anxiety**



51.7%

of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander respondents reported that they experienced **depression**



Geographic location was also a significant factor

Table 1: Percentage of respondents who have experienced anxiety, depression, stress, or other mental health conditions across metro, regional and rural locations.

	Metro	Regional	Rural
Experience of anxiety	45.9%	45.9%	40.3%
Experience of depression	30%	35.7%	50%
Experience of stress	47.6%	44.3%	48.6%
Other mental health condition	6.2%	8.3%	12.5%

Significant differences were seen in the reporting rates of depression between metro, regional and rural locations. Alarming 50% of rural respondents reported having previously experienced symptoms of depression.

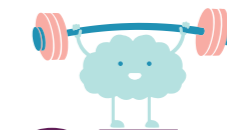
The data indicated gender differences in patterns of mental health challenges – females are reporting higher rates

Table 2: Percentage of respondents who have experienced anxiety, depression, stress, or other mental health conditions across metro, regional and rural locations.

	Male	Female
Experience of anxiety	40.5%	46%
Experience of depression	26.7%	37.9%
Experience of stress	39.6%	53.6%
Other mental health condition	6.6%	6.9%

A significant difference was seen between males and females experience of stress, anxiety, and depression. Females reported significantly higher rates than males in these domains.

Mental health was strongly endorsed as important by the majority of survey respondents



87.8%

of the national respondents agreed with the statement that mental health was equally important as physical health

A range of factors contributed to respondents experience of mental health and wellbeing

25.7%

of the national sample reported that a lack of sleep was the greatest challenge to wellbeing over the past 12 months. (Figure 5)



18.6%

Reported finances as the greatest barrier to wellbeing

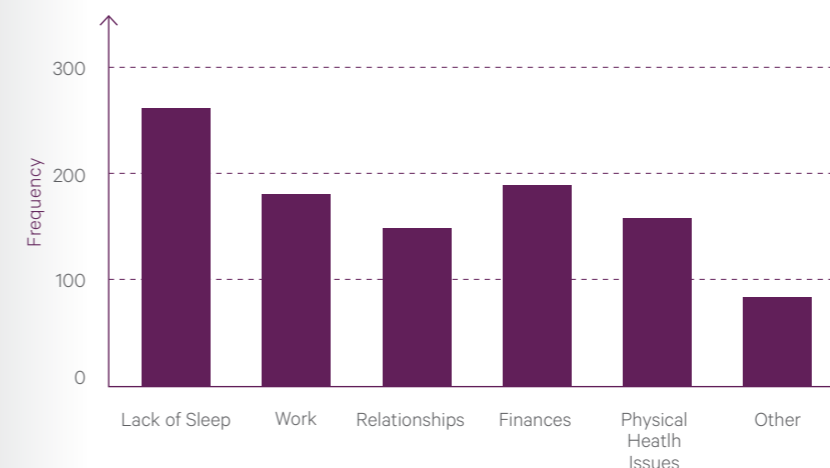


17.9%

Reported work as the greatest barrier to wellbeing

Relationships and physical health concerns were also endorsed as challenges to wellbeing, albeit to a lesser extent.

Figure 5: Frequency of the biggest challenges to wellbeing across survey respondents



Males (28.9%) reported lack of sleep significantly more than females (22.6%)

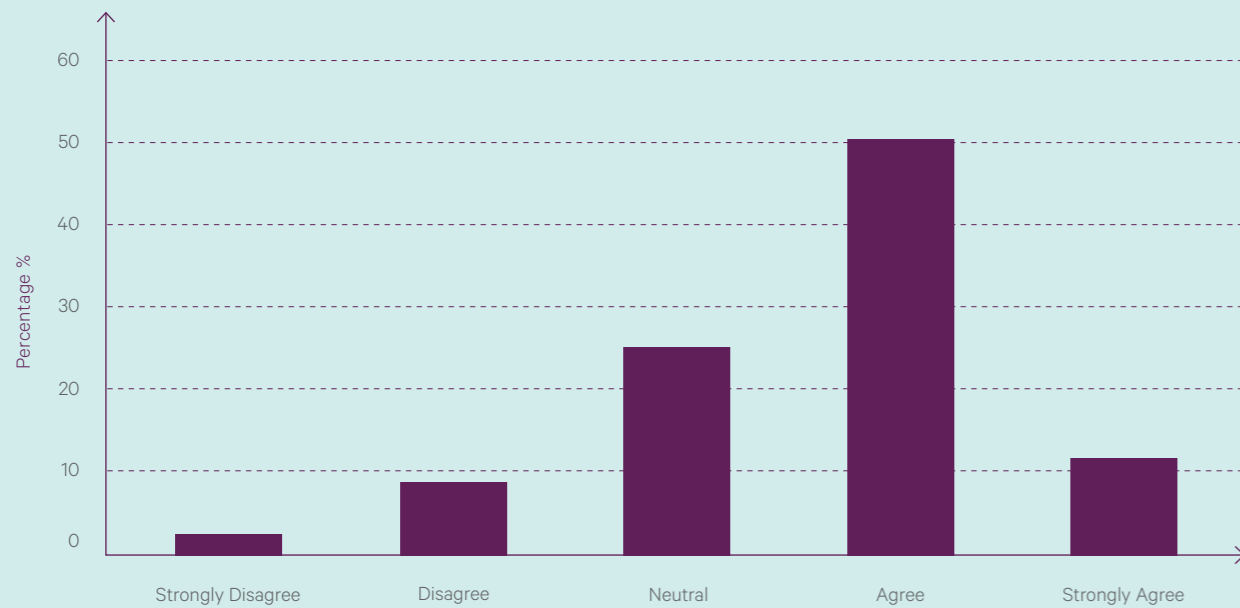
A significant difference was also seen between age groups for sleep, with 18-25 years old's reporting lack of sleep significantly more than all other ages groups.

Knowledge about how to manage mental health and support wellbeing was variable across age groups.

62.2%

of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they knew what to do to improve mental health (figure 6)

Figure 6: Overall level of agreeance with whether a respondent knows what to do to improve mental health



Additionally, a significant difference was also found between age groups (figure 7). On average, the 18–25 years age group disagreed more, while the 65+ age group agreed more that they know how to improve their mental health and wellbeing. Analysis showed that the 18–25 years age group differed significantly from all other age groups (except the 36–45 years).

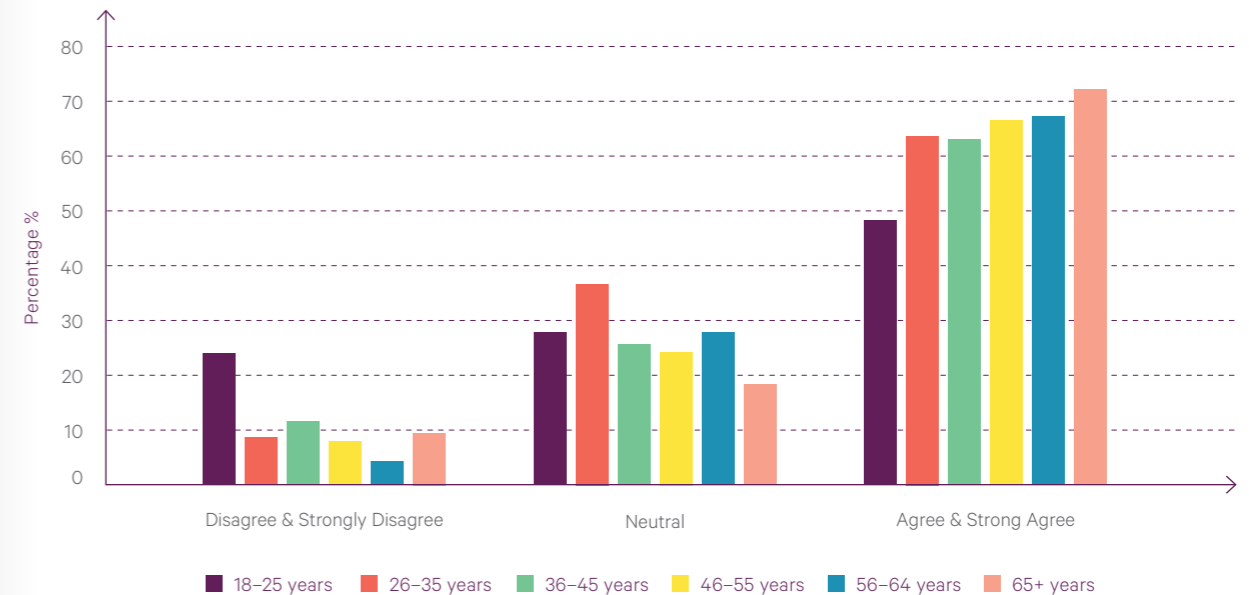
A larger percentage of the youngest Australian adults, compared to older age groups, don't know what to do to improve their mental health and wellbeing.

Females agreed significantly more than males that they know how to improve their mental health and wellbeing.

A larger percentage of young Australian adults (aged 18–25), compared to older age groups, don't know what to do to improve their mental health and wellbeing.



Figure 7: Level of agreeance as to whether a respondent knows what to do to improve mental health by age.





Finances are a barrier to accessing support for young Australians

Nationally, a roughly equal percentage of respondents do and do not have the money to spend looking after their mental health and wellbeing.

36.2%

of respondents reported that they do have the money needed to support their mental health and wellbeing

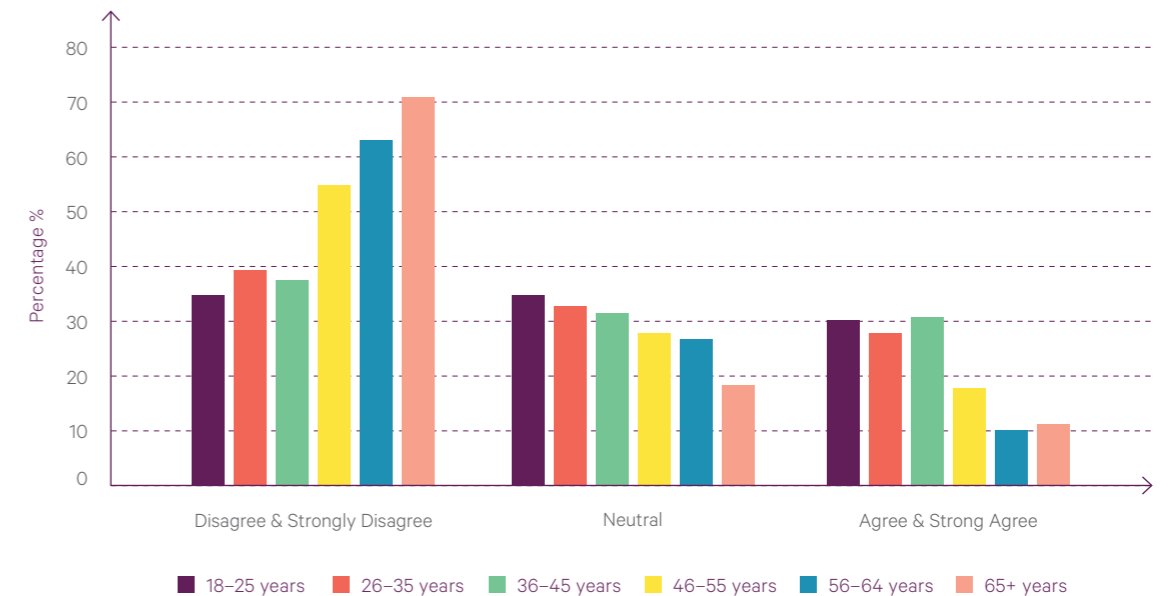
35.2%

of respondents reported that they don't have the money needed to support their mental health and wellbeing

However, the situation changed when accounting for age with a significant difference between age groups (Figure 8). Respondents aged 65+ differed significantly from the younger age groups (18–25 years – 36–45 years), indicating that a larger percentage of the 65+ age group have money to spend on their mental health and wellbeing, compared to younger Australian respondents.

Figure 8:

Do respondents believe they have enough money to spend on mental health and wellbeing, by age.



8 — Part 2: The National State of Mindfulness

Insights

Encouragingly the State of Mind survey indicates that Australians are adopting mindfulness as a preventative approach to support their mental health. Over 60% of respondents had heard of mindfulness and over one-third of the sample had previously practiced mindfulness.



Of individuals who practised mindfulness over three quarters found it to be beneficial, but some groups favoured different benefits. Males more often used mindfulness as a preventative measure, whereas, females were more likely to utilise mindfulness for to manage feelings of overwhelm. In addition, individuals aged 18-25 years were more likely to practice mindfulness for preventative reasons than any other age group.

Solid engagement in mindfulness practice amongst Australians appears to stem from a strong belief in the benefits of mindfulness. At least half of all survey respondents who acknowledge practicing

mindfulness believed that it was beneficial for managing stress, managing anxiety, improving resilience, enhancing focus and attention, and helping individuals feel more relaxed and calmer.

A detailed analysis of the National State of Mindfulness data is outlined below.

Detailed analysis

Australians have heard about mindfulness and many use mindfulness to support their mental health

63.5%

of respondents had heard of mindfulness

Significantly more female than male respondents reported having heard of mindfulness before



70%

of female participants



56%

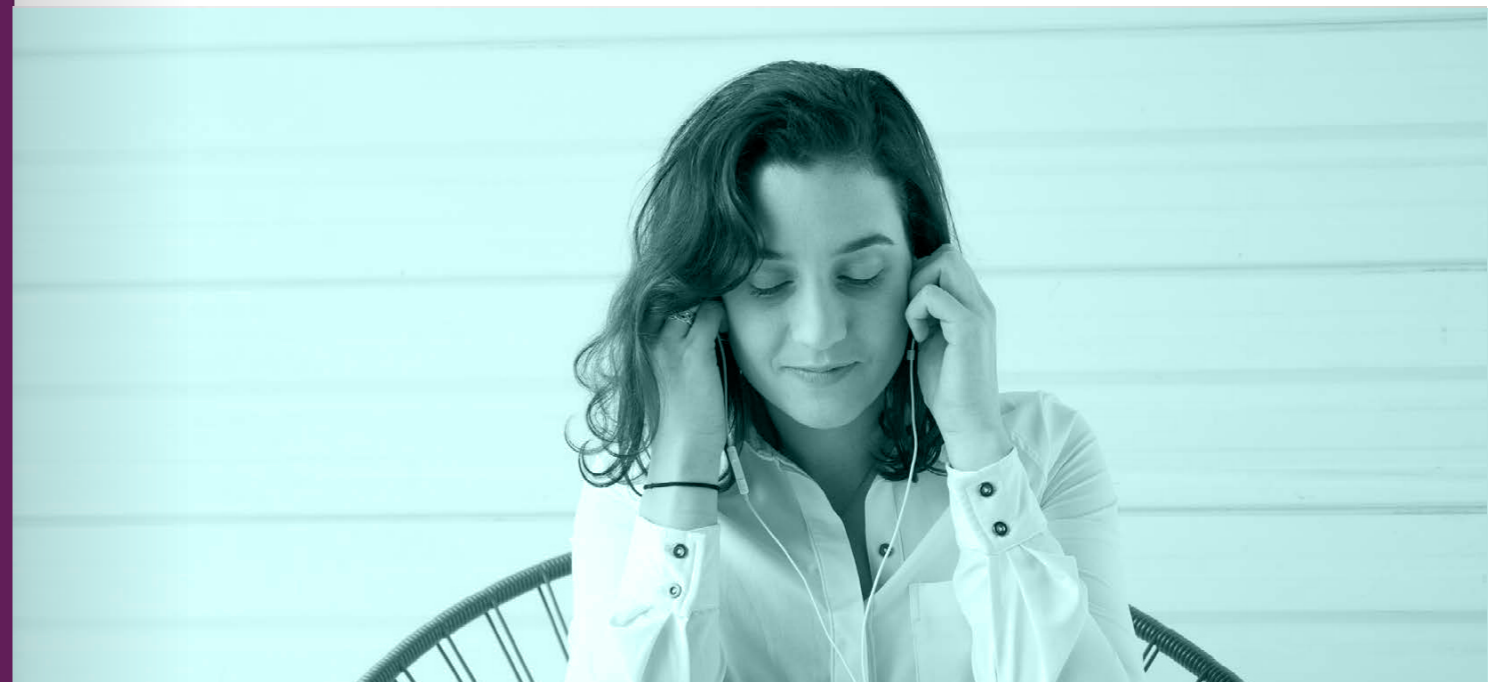
of male participants

57.1%

of respondents that had heard of mindfulness and had practiced mindfulness

76.7%

of these respondents said they had found it beneficial



Do Australians use mindfulness as a preventative or reactive approach?



Mindfulness was used in a variety of ways to support mental health.

27.7%

of respondents reported that they practiced mindfulness as a preventative measure

39.2%

Practiced when overwhelmed

33.1%

Practiced as both a prevention and when feeling overwhelmed

A significant difference was found between males and females (Figure 9) whereby a larger percentage of males practice mindfulness as a preventative measure than females

36.2%

of males practice mindfulness as a preventative measure

21.5%

of females practice mindfulness as a preventative measure

34%

of males practice when they are feeling overwhelmed

43.4%

of females practice when they are feeling overwhelmed

Figure 9: Reasons for practicing mindfulness based on gender

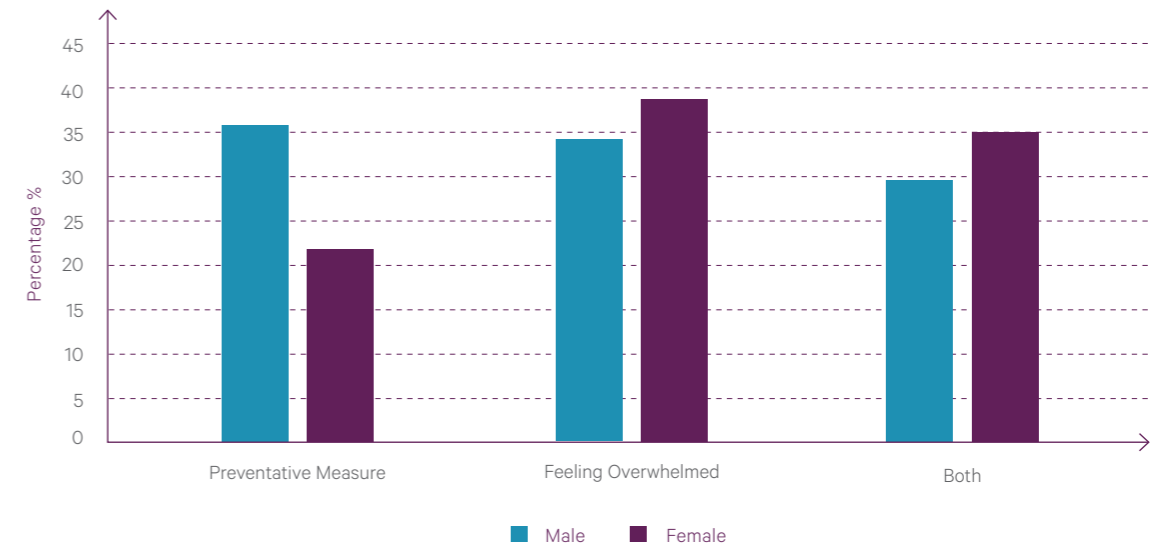
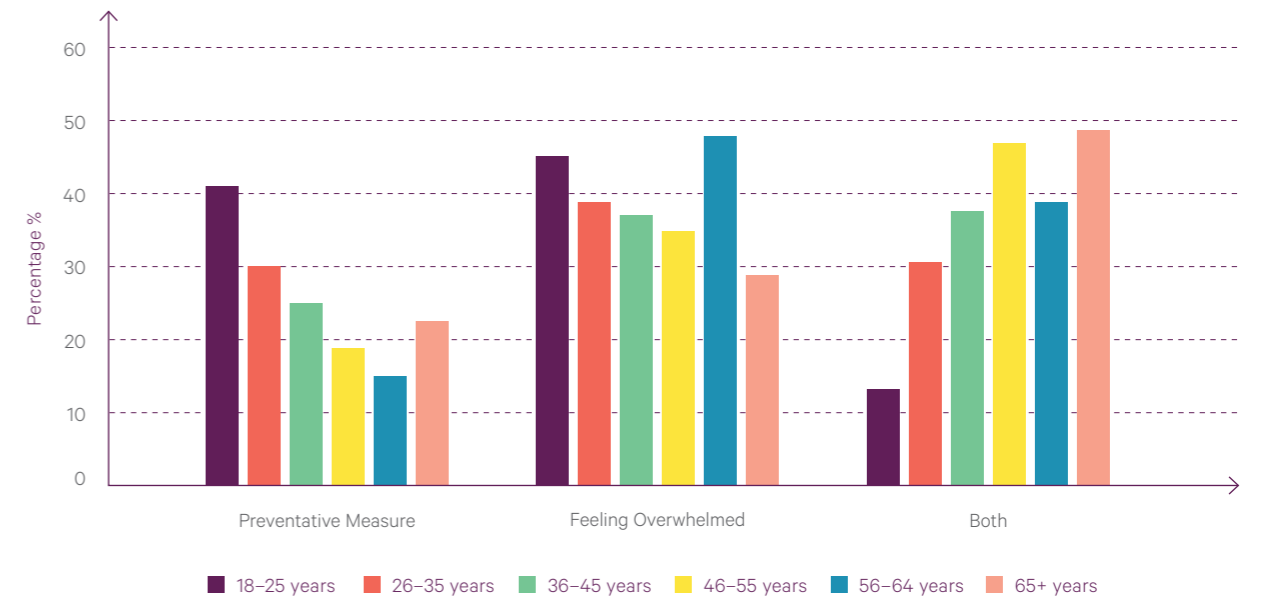


Figure 10: Reasons for practicing mindfulness based on age



→ A significantly higher percentage of 18–25 years (41%) indicated that they practice for preventative reasons (Figure 10), in comparison to the other age groups (average of 19.6%).

Overall, respondents agreed that mindfulness helped better manage stress and anxiety, improve resilience, creativity, focus and attention, sleep and work and feel more relaxed and calm.



65.3%

Help better manage stress



60.3%

Help better manage anxiety



55%

Improve resilience



47%

Improve creativity



56.7%

Improve focus and attention



45%

Improve sleep



43.6%

Improve work



63.6%

Feel more relaxed and calm

Regional and rural Australians appear to be less convinced of the benefits of mindfulness than their metro counterparts. Metro locations had significantly higher percentages of individuals who agreed that mindfulness could help them, than in rural locations.

67.8% vs 34.7%

Metro

Rural

Help them feel calm and relaxed

47.5% vs 26.1%

Metro

Rural

Help improve their sleep

47.1% vs 21.7%

Metro

Rural

Help improve their work



9 — Part 3: The Impact of COVID-19 on State of Mind

Insight

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it unprecedented challenges to the way we live our daily lives and as result it has tested Australian’s mental resilience in a multitude of the ways.



This fact is evident in the State of Mind survey data with almost one-third of survey respondents indicating that their mental health has been worse since the onset of COVID-19 and over half of respondents indicating that they regularly feel upset when reminded of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some geographic locations were more impacted than others. Respondents from metro locations were significantly more likely to feel regularly upset as a result of thinking about COVID than rural respondents which is perhaps unsurprising given the threat of the virus and the impact of restrictions have been more severe in metro locations

Additionally, Victorian respondents rated the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health and wellbeing as significantly more detrimental than South Australia, Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern

Territory, which again is unsurprising given that Victoria has been at the epicentre of the second wave.

Interestingly, and in line with the data outlined in Part 1, older individuals appear to be coping better with the pandemic from a mental health standpoint than younger age groups. This comes as somewhat of a surprise given that evidence pertaining to the virus indicates that older individuals are most at risk.

Encouragingly over 50% of individuals surveyed had taken steps to take care of their mental health since the onset of COVID and almost 70% believed that mindfulness could be used to support their mental health during this time.

A detailed analysis of the Impact of COVID-19 on State of Mind data is outlined below.

Detailed analysis

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of Australians cannot be underestimated

32.6%

of survey respondents indicated that their mental health had been worse since COVID

A greater percentage of females rated their mental health as worse on average than males.



37.3% Females



27.8% Males

The emotional toll of the pandemic is considerable with respondents, nationally, indicating that they have felt occasionally, very frequently or always upset when reminded of COVID-19.

51.4%

of respondents felt upset when reminded of COVID-19

Figure 11: Feelings of being upset as a result of COVID based on location.



Respondents from metro locations were significantly more likely to feel regularly upset as a result of thinking about COVID than rural respondents.

Younger age groups (18-45 years) reported being more regularly upset in relation to COVID-19 than the 65+ age group.

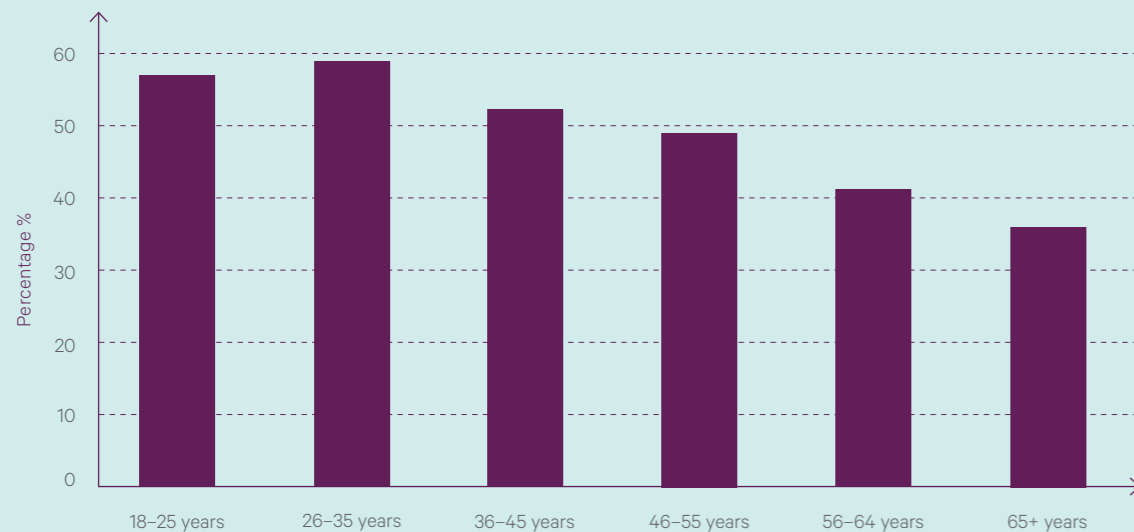
Survey respondents were asked to rate how much impact COVID had on their current mental health and wellbeing on a scale of 1-10.

**1 = No impact at all.
10 = Significant detrimental.**

54.6%

of respondents scored between 5-10. This suggested that greater than 50% of respondents, nationally, believe that COVID has had a moderate to significant detrimental impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

Figure 12: Impact of COVID on mental health and wellbeing based on age.



Victorian respondents rated the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health and wellbeing as significantly more detrimental than South Australia, Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

→ A significant difference was also found between age groups. Individuals aged 65+ rated the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health and wellbeing as significantly less detrimental than the four youngest age groups (Figure 12).

Many survey respondents have taken additional actions to care for their mental health and well-being during COVID.

53.1%

of respondents indicated that they have taken additional care of their mental health and wellbeing since the COVID pandemic.

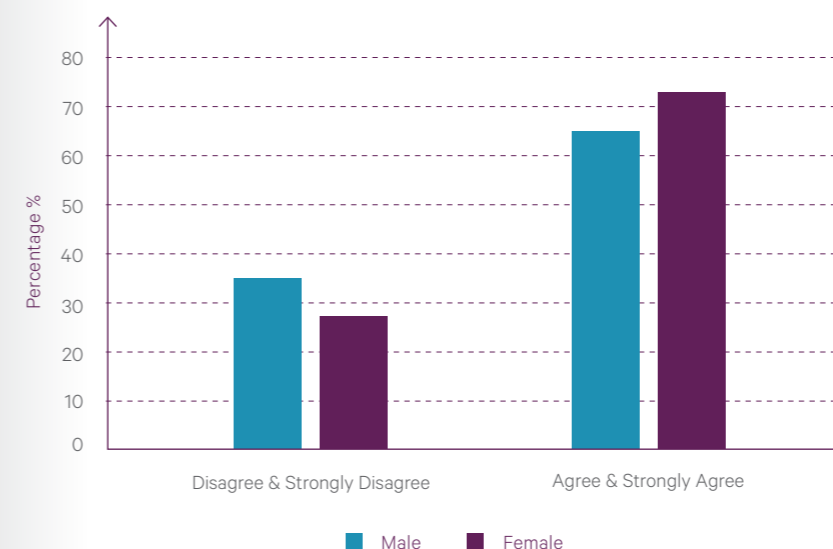
→ Females were significantly more likely to take additional care of their mental health and wellbeing during COVID than male respondents.

Has mindfulness supported Australians to manage their wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

62.3%

of the national respondents agree, and an additional 6.4% strongly agree that mindfulness could support their mental health and wellbeing during COVID.

Figure 13: Belief about how mindfulness could support mental health and wellness during COVID-19 pandemic based on gender.



A significant difference was also seen between males and females beliefs about how mindfulness can support mental health and wellbeing. Females were significantly more likely to agree that mindfulness can support their mental health and wellbeing during COVID.

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Smiling Mind is a 100% not-for-profit organisation that works to make mindfulness meditation accessible to all.

Visit us online or download the free app to get started.

