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



# STATE OF MIND

by Smiling Mind



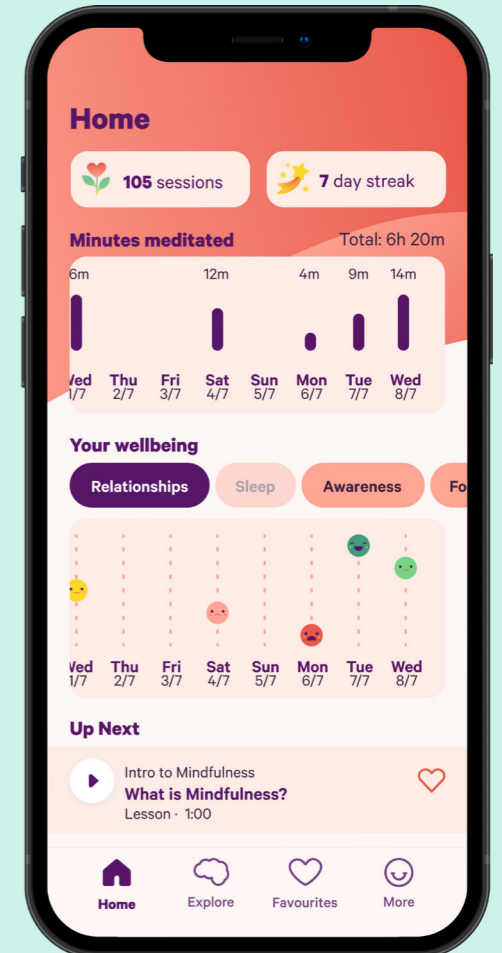
### About Smiling Mind

**Smiling Mind is a not-for-profit organisation pioneering the use of technology to support the mental health and wellbeing of Australian children and their families. We exist to help every mind thrive.**

Half of all the mental health conditions we experience at some point in our lives will have started by age 14<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, 1 in 7 Australian primary<sup>2</sup> and 1 in 5 secondary students<sup>3</sup> suffer from a mental illness every year.

Smiling Mind now supports more than 6.5 million people through our mindfulness App — but what we do is so much more than an App.

With support from the Australian Government, NSW Government and Victorian Government as well as private philanthropists, we're working with thousands of schools across the country to embed a proactive and positive approach to mental health and wellbeing in classrooms. With more than 230,000 teachers subscribed to our digital tools, we know there is a very real need for our service and we're having a significant positive impact.



Independent research has demonstrated our programs can have profound benefits for children, parents and teachers, with significant improvements demonstrated in: sleep quality, overall wellbeing, reductions in psychological distress, improvements in resilience, self-awareness, emotion regulation and social and relationship skills<sup>4-7</sup>.

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 you can access from anywhere.



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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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State of Mind 2021 Report. Melbourne: Smiling Mind

## 1 — Executive summary

Australians have never experienced anything like the last twelve months. We are a dynamic and resilient nation, but the combined health, mental health and economic crises of the past year have tested us like few times in our history. Every Australian is, in their own way, living through an extraordinary moment, and it has had a profound impact on our mental health.

The Smiling Mind State of Mind survey is a comprehensive analysis of Australia's collective wellbeing during this extraordinary moment, and it is a demonstration of how our national psyche has changed over the past twelve months.

What is revealed in this survey is that, after the most disrupted, isolated and uncertain year most Australians have ever experienced, **we are more depressed, anxious and stressed than at the same time in 2020**. Significantly, our findings indicate 78% of Australians experienced poor mental health over the past year.

We find that **the “hidden epidemic” of mental ill-health, consistently forecast by experts during the pandemic, disproportionately impacts women, First Nations Peoples and LGBTQI+ Australians**, who are experiencing higher levels of psychological distress when compared to the broader population.

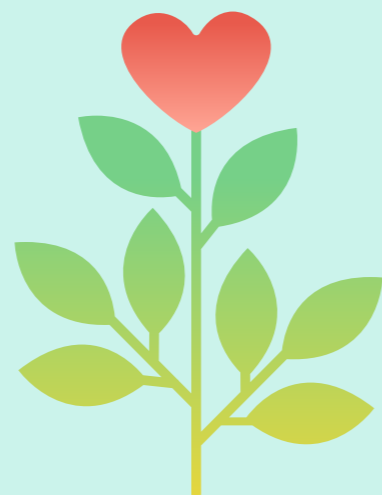
Most concerning of all is that **children and young Australians are facing significant mental health challenges as a result of the pandemic**. The State of Mind survey finds 41% of parents believe the pandemic has had a negative impact on the mental wellbeing of their children, with 43% of young Australians (18-25) also indicating declining mental

health as a result of the pandemic. While nearly nine in ten parents (87%) agreed that their child's mental health was just as important as their physical health, **fewer felt confident in addressing their children's mental health needs (64%) and even less found it easy to access resources (52%)**.

There is a “silver lining”, however. **Awareness of the importance of maintaining good mental health is at an all-time high**: mental health is the country's top non-COVID-19 health concern, with Australians overwhelmingly considering it to be as important as physical health (89%) and 4 in 5 adults apply at least one strategy to proactively improve their mental health and wellbeing (81%). There remains much work to be done, but these results indicate our willingness to develop skills that maintain good mental health are at an all-time high.

Most encouragingly, those who reported developing skills like working on their strengths, developing emotional awareness and practicing mindfulness meditation, **also achieved a higher overall wellbeing score (7.1) relative to the general population (5.7)**.

Further, with the overwhelming majority of people who developed skills that improve their mental health also achieving positive health benefits (92%), including sleeping better, feeling more relaxed and more calm, we have an opportunity to improve resilience so that people are better prepared to cope during the COVID-19 pandemic and for any and all challenges that lie ahead by immediately engaging Australians in strategies and interventions to improve their mental health.



## 2 — Recommendations

### 1.

**Australian children, young people and adults must be supported to proactively look after their mental health, with the equivalent emphasis on mental health promotion as seen with physical health.**

- a. Investment is required from governments to ensure universal access to resources which develop mental health skills for all Australians.
- b. A national mental health promotion campaign to educate and advise all Australians about how to take care of their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic is urgently needed.

### 2.

**Parents and carers need easy access to evidence-based tools and resources to ensure they can support their children's mental health and wellbeing.**

- a. Education and training for parents and carers is urgently needed, so they understand how they can support their children's mental health during lockdowns and beyond.
- b. Better access to practical advice and strategies, as well as clear and accessible pathways to specialist care, is urgently needed to support parents during the pandemic.

### 3.

**School-based social and emotional learning programs must be scaled up to ensure children and young people are developing the skills they need to support wellbeing and resilience.**

- a. Investment is required to ensure teachers have access to high quality evidence-based training and resources that can be effectively implemented in classrooms at scale.
- b. Investment is required to ensure all schools have access to these programs, irrespective of geographic location or resourcing constraints.



### 3 — A note from Smiling Mind 's CEO

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As the COVID-19 pandemic stretches into the second year, supporting the mental health of Australians has never been more important. The impact of the pandemic continues to take its toll on all of us with ongoing disruptions to family, work and school life.

This year, the State of Mind report highlights the significant impacts the pandemic has had on our mental health. It shines a light on the fact many Australians are struggling – with adults reporting higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression and overall psychological distress than last year, and parents reporting a significant impact of the pandemic on their children’s mental health and wellbeing.

Outside of the physical impacts of COVID-19, mental health has been identified by respondents as the most pressing health challenge for Australians, and a growing number of Australians believe their physical and mental health are equally important. This strong endorsement for the importance of our mental health is encouraging, indicating that

it is no longer something which remains hidden, and more and more conversations are being had about mental health.

Pleasingly, the State of Mind report also highlights the growing number of Australians taking a proactive approach to support their mental health, and after 18 months of the pandemic it’s evident these practices are starting to become healthy routines. Most encouraging is that the data also suggests those who are taking proactive action to support their mental health are reporting better mental health experiences.

This year, while the experience of significant mental health challenges is clear, the evidence presented by the State of Mind report suggests this pandemic does have a silver lining for mental health. It is forcing many of us to pause, take stock, and consider what we need to do to feel mentally well. While we may have a long road to go to rebuild our mental health system, Australians are now ready, willing and able to take a different approach to their mental health.



Dr Addie Wootten  
CEO, Smiling Mind

## 4 — Case study

### Meet Nick

Nick is a 23-year-old recent law graduate and artist. Despite his positive outlook and proactive approach to supporting his wellbeing, Nick says the pandemic has **“definitely taken a toll on my mental health”**.



Before the pandemic struck, Nick was finishing off his law degree and working as a retail manager in the Melbourne CBD. He currently lives in a share-house in inner Melbourne with his three housemates and says he “loves to socialize and hang out with friends”.

Like many young people, the pandemic has had a significant impact on Nick’s day-to-day life. He rates his wellbeing in 2021 as a six out of ten, describing the last year as “difficult” with many of the activities he derives enjoyment from being taken away such as work and socialising”. Nick extended his degree last year as he found it difficult to motivate himself and did not enjoy online learning. He has been unable to work during the lockdowns in his part-time job as a retail manager.

Nick states that the pandemic has taken a toll on his mental health and has brought a lot of “sadness to his day-to-day life...COVID-19 has increased the amount of time I have felt anxious and sad,” he says, “it has certainly exacerbated my emotions.” Overall he has found it “devastating”, especially when planning for the future as the ongoing lockdowns “slowed down” his degree and “stunted” his job prospects by preventing networking, making it difficult for him to prepare for life after completing his studies.

With many of his friends living beyond five kilometer limits and so unable to meet in person, Nick has had to rely on technology, which is “simply not the same” and as a result, he explains, “lots of my relationships have gone into hibernation, as we are not creating new memories or improving our relationship in any way, it feels as though they are languishing”. Although Nick lives close to his family, the last year has been difficult. This is the first year Nick has spent living out of home, so without being able to visit his family and spend time with them, it’s been hard.

Prior to lockdown, Nick described himself as having a “really good sleep routine, getting up and going to bed at the same time each night.” However this year he has found his sleep has been “greatly affected.” “The quality of my sleep, especially this year, is much lower,” he says. In the last year, he has found himself experiencing nightmares and often waking up to racing thoughts throughout the night.

Despite the impacts beyond his control, Nick takes a proactive approach to supporting his mental health. Although last year he says he was “more motivated to use the time at home productively through applying for jobs,” Nick says, “now I just try and focus on the small things that bring joy.” He exercises regularly by going for bike rides and makes it a priority to stay in contact with friends. He loves to make art and says taking the time to be creative helps him “process feelings and thoughts.”

Nick remains positive and hopeful for the future and looks forward to seeing friends, returning to work, and hopefully attending his university graduation. He has several art gallery exhibitions planned and plans to also commence his practical legal training next year.

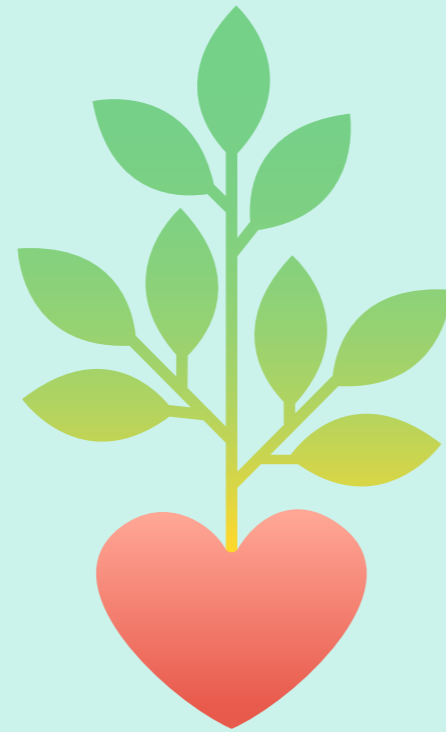
**“I am aware of the rise of mental health issues in younger generations and don’t think there is enough support for us from the government. I also don’t think there is enough talk about it and I’m always an advocate for normalising it through conversation.”**

## 5 — Research context

### Background

The annual State of Mind survey examines Australians’ experience and attitudes toward mental health and wellbeing, as well as the strategies and interventions used to promote positive mental health in our day to day lives – both in general and in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The State of Mind report explores the experiences of Australians at a national level, but also seeks to understand the experiences of a number of groups, including: young people, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders, the LGBTQI+ community and parents.

Smiling Mind appreciates the importance of understanding the Australian population as well as key groups experiencing diverse mental health and wellbeing needs. Throughout the report we acknowledge the current state of mental health and wellbeing, as well as explore the various means of promoting positive mental health and improving resilience within Australia.



### Key year-on-year methodological differences

The 2021 State of Mind questionnaire was based on the questionnaire that was used in 2020. As an iterative study and in response to the landscape of mental health in Australia, the 2021 questionnaire has been revised. Questions have been added to provide further insight into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, and provide further understanding of the strategies, tools and interventions used to address mental health.

In terms of data collection methodology, an identical approach was taken to 2020 in which a nationally representative online panel was utilised to survey Australians. However, a key difference was in sample size, in 2020 the Mind Survey consisted of n=1000 respondents, and in 2021 a sample of n=2000 respondents were obtained – nationally representative of the population in terms of age, gender, and region.

### Participation

A nationally representative sample of Australians was obtained via an online panel in July 2021, and consisted of n=2000 respondents. Within the sample, n=1000 were female, n=979 were male and n=21 identified as other. In terms of region, n=1371 were from metropolitan areas, and n=629 were from regional areas in Australia.

The sample also consisted of n=134 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, n=334 from the LGBTQI+ community, and n=496 Culturally and Linguistically Diverse respondents (CALD).

Please see Table 1 below for additional sample characteristics.

**Table 1:** Demographics

Group	% proportion	n-value
<b>Gender identification</b>		
A woman	50%	1000
A man	49%	979
Other	1%	21
<b>Age</b>		
18 to 25 years	19%	370
26 to 35 years	24%	474
36 to 45 years	21%	424
46 to 55 years	14%	279
56 to 64 years	12%	243
65 years or older	11%	210
<b>Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander</b>		
Yes	7%	134
No	93%	1839

<b>LGBTQI+</b>		
Yes, LGBTQI+	17%	334
Non-LGBTQI+	83%	1666
<b>Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD)</b>		
Yes, CALD	25%	496
Non-CALD	74%	1473
<b>State/Territory</b>		
NSW	32%	643
VIC	25%	493
QLD	20%	405
SA	8%	160
WA	10%	205
ACT	2%	38
TAS	2%	38
NT	1%	15

### Research aims and objectives

The 2021 State of Mind survey sought to extend upon previous iterations of the State of Mind survey, as well as explore new areas of research. The aims of the current study were to:

- Understand Australians’ experience of, and attitudes toward, mental health and wellbeing
- Explore the enablers and barriers to improving mental health and wellbeing

- Understand exposure to, and experience of, strategies and interventions used to address mental health and wellbeing
- Examine parental attitudes towards the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people



## 6 — Research design

### How to interpret this report

#### Significant differences and confidence intervals

Results were analysed to identify differences between the 2020 and 2021 results (where applicable) and between sub-groups. Where stated, results are statistically significant at a 95% level of confidence. A 'significant difference' means we can be 95% confident the difference observed between the two groups reflects a true difference in the population of interest and is not a result of chance.

Both statistically significant differences and non-statistical differences have been reported in this document. Where significant differences are not reported, the reader is encouraged to make a judgement as to whether the differences are 'meaningful' or not.

Where significance testing has occurred between pairs such as Metropolitan vs. Regional, this has been undertaken as an independent sample test.

However, where significance testing has occurred between more than two categories within a group (e.g. 18-25 year-old, 26-39 year-old and 40+ year-old), the significance testing used tests one category against the average of the others that are not in that category combined. Such a test is ideal for multiple comparisons as it reduces the likelihood of displaying a significant difference where one does not exist. Statistically significant differences within charts and tables are displayed using arrows.

#### Glossary of terms

Throughout the report several abbreviations have been used, including;

- **CALD:** Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
- **K-10:** Kessler 10 item Psychological Distress Scale
- **LGBTQI+:** lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender diverse, intersex, queer, asexual and questioning

#### Sampling and generalisability of results

A national sample of n=2000 respondents were collected via an online panel. Gender, age and location quotas were implemented in order to ensure the sample was representative of the population. The age, gender and location quotas were based on the ABS's 2016 Census data.

The sample size has a margin of error +/- <3% at 95% confidence. This means that should the study be repeated, a result of 60% could fall between the range of 57% and 63%. It is worth noting that the margin of error decreases at a slower rate when surpassing a sample size of n=1000. For instance, a sample size of n=3000 would only decrease the maximum error by +/- 0.4% from n=2000. As mentioned above, significant differences between groups occur when each group's margin of error does not overlap between group scores.

#### Rounding

Where proportions exceed 100%, the reader should note this is due to rounding, or as a result of a multiple choice question.

#### Base sizes

While the majority of questions were asked of all participants, base sizes may vary throughout the report due to questionnaire logic, where particular questions were only asked to a specific cohort.

#### Use of scales and subtotals

Several questions in the 2020 and 2021 questionnaire use a 0-10 scale to measure levels of agreement or importance. These items are reported at an average out of 10. For scales using a 5-point Likert scale, importance or agreement is dictated by a score of 4 (agree) and 5 (strongly agree).

## 7 — What are Australians' experiences with mental health and wellbeing?

### What are Australians' experiences with mental health and wellbeing?

#### What is the prevalence of mental ill health?

Four in five Australians reported experiencing stress, anxiety or depression in 2021, showing a significant increase from 2020. At higher risk of experiencing poor mental health were young Australians, women, First Nations and LGBTQI+ people.

#### When asked whether they had experienced stress, anxiety or depression:



**62%**

Reported experiencing stress



**57%**

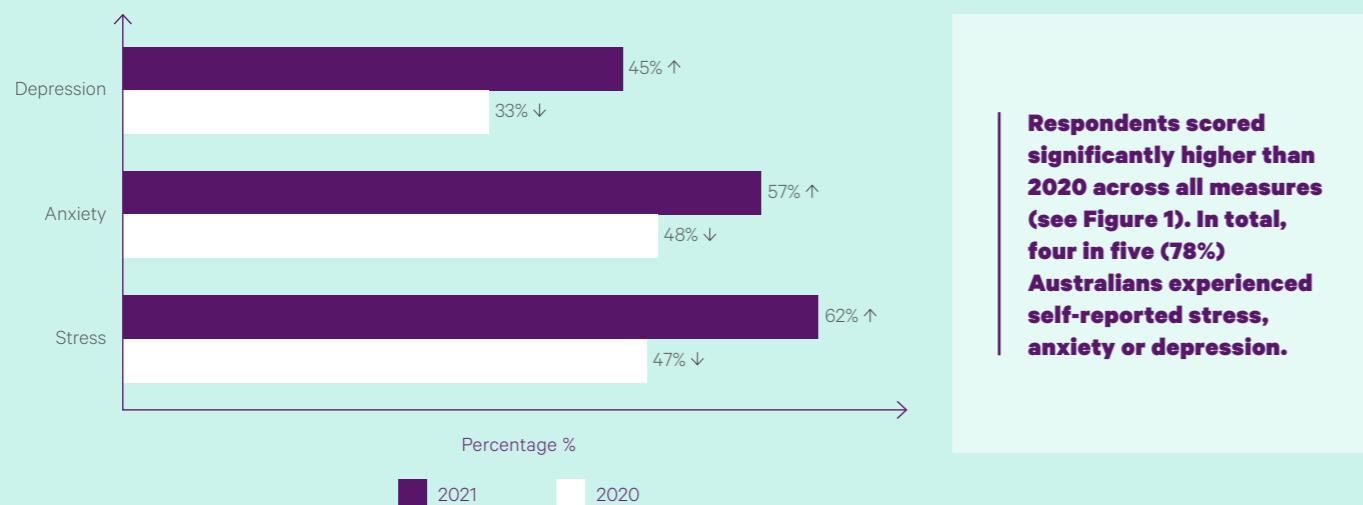
Reported experiencing anxiety



**45%**

Reported experiencing depression

**Figure 1.** Frequency of the biggest challenges to wellbeing across survey respondents



Q5. Do you experience any of the following...? (2020, n=1000; 2021, n=2000). ↑/↓ arrows indicate significant differences

Note: Modality of response items were altered in 2021 from the 2020 questionnaire. In 2020, a yes/no response was provided, in 2021, a multiple select response was presented.

### Over half (53%) of Australians experienced high or very high levels of psychological distress.

To determine psychological distress among the Australian population, the Kessler 10-item (K-10) scale for psychological distress was utilised<sup>8</sup>. K-10 scores are assigned to four categories across; low psychological distress (scores between 10-15), moderate psychological distress (scores between 16 and 21), high psychological distress (scores between 22 and 29) and very high psychological distress (scores between 30 and 50). The K-10 has been shown to be an effective measure of risk of experiencing a mental disorder within the population<sup>9</sup>. Likelihood to experience a mental disorder utilises the same categories, ranging from risk of experiencing no disorder, through to risk of experiencing a severe mental health disorder.

On average, the population scored 23.2 on the K-10 measure of psychological distress, indicating a likelihood of experiencing a mild mental health disorder<sup>8</sup>. Below we outline the highest risk groups experiencing distress.



#### High risk groups: the groups experiencing high to very high psychological distress



**56%**

of Women



**59%**

of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse people



**71%**

of Single parents



**76%**

of Young people (aged 18-25 years)



**76%**

of the LGBTQI+ Community



**79%**

of First Nations People

Q22. 1-10. K-10 Scale for psychological distress (2021, n=2000)

### Subgroup differences

In line with previous research<sup>10</sup> women scored significantly higher than men across the following.



**70% vs 54%**  
Women Men



**66% vs 47%**  
Women Men



**50% vs 39%**  
Women Men

Similarly, psychological distress (K-10) was significantly higher for women when compared to men.



**24.3**

Women



**21.9**

Men

First Nations respondents and LGBTQI+ respondents both scored significantly higher on psychological distress than the average (28.7 and 28.3 respectively) and were approaching a heightened risk of exhibiting a severe mental health disorder.

**28.7**

First Nations respondents

**28.3**

LGBTQI+ respondents

Regional Australians showed significantly higher anxiety and depression than metropolitan Australians.



**62% vs 55%**

Regional Australia

Metropolitan Australia



**50% vs 42%**

Regional Australia

Metropolitan Australia

Young Australians (18-25) scored significantly higher in psychological distress than other age groups.



**28.0**

Young Australian (18-25)

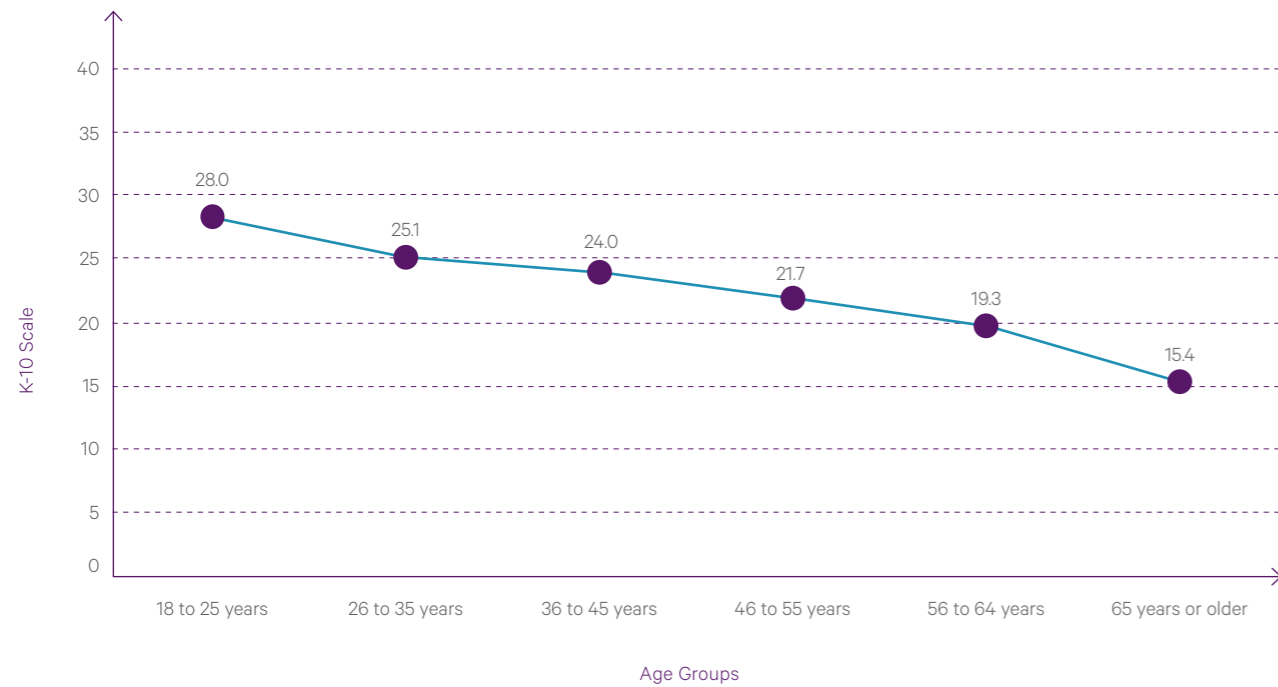


**22.1**

Other age groups

**There was a downward trend of psychological distress as age increased (see figure 2).**

**Figure 2.** Age and psychological distress



Q22. 1-10. K-10 Scale for psychological distress (2021, n=2000)

## Implications

- The COVID-19 pandemic has had a demonstrably negative impact on the nation's mental health over the past twelve months, with the incidence of mental health issues increasing across the general population between July 2021 and September 2020.
- The experience of mental illness has not been equally shared across the country. Findings show a particularly high prevalence of stress, anxiety, depression – and subsequently an increased risk of experiencing a psychological disorder – among young people, LGBTQI+ and First Nations Peoples.
- Increased support should be directed towards the most vulnerable groups identified in the State of Mind report: young people aged 18 to 25, those within the LGBTQI+ community, our First Nations Peoples and people living in one-parent family households.
- In terms of prevalence and reaction to mental health concerns, we provide further exploration of the strategies and interventions currently used by Australians to alleviate symptoms of poor mental health on page 23.

## What is the impact of COVID-19 on mental health?

While negative mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are widespread, with Victorians, young people, parents and First Nations peoples particularly affected, there is also evidence that Australians have become more resilient in the face of the virus.



### The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health:

**34%**

One in three (34%) respondents agreed that since COVID-19 their mental health had declined.

**35%**

Similarly, over a third (35%) indicated that they were still struggling with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their mental health.

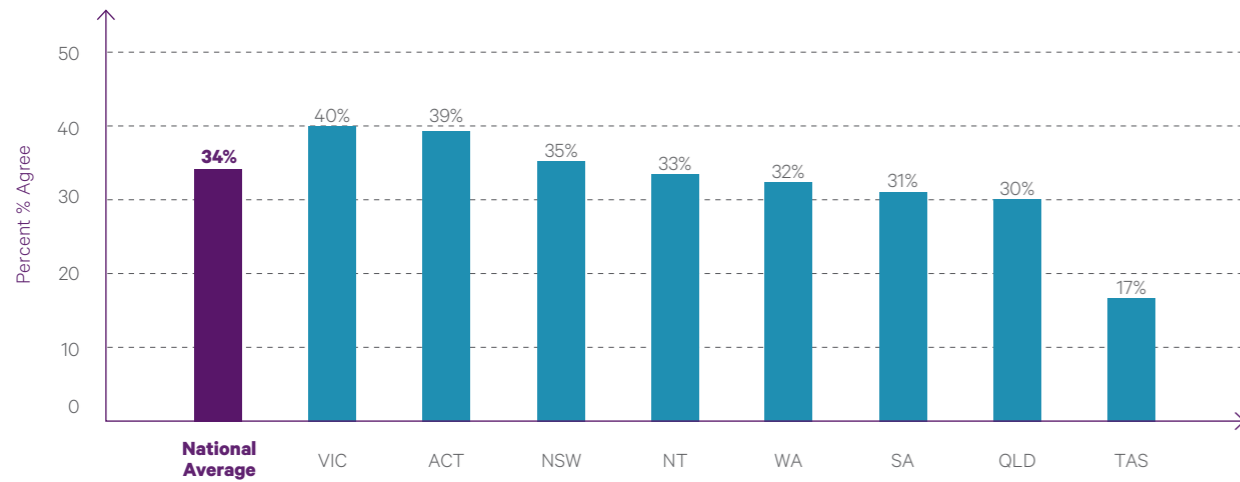
**41%**

The impacts of the pandemic on mental health were even more paramount when it came to children, with two in five (41%) parents indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of their children.

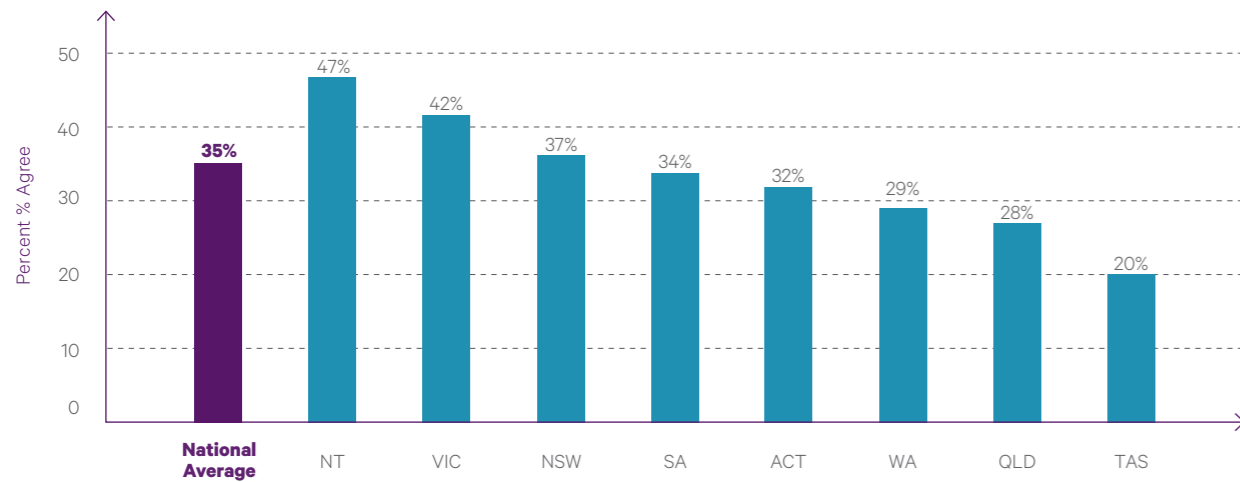
**Despite this, one in three (34%) respondents stated that the pandemic had made them more resilient and able to address their mental health needs. These individuals were also significantly more likely to have utilised at least one strategy or intervention (89%) to address their mental health needs, when compared to those whose resilience was not impacted by COVID-19 (77%).**

**Figure 3.** The effect of COVID-19 on Australians by state

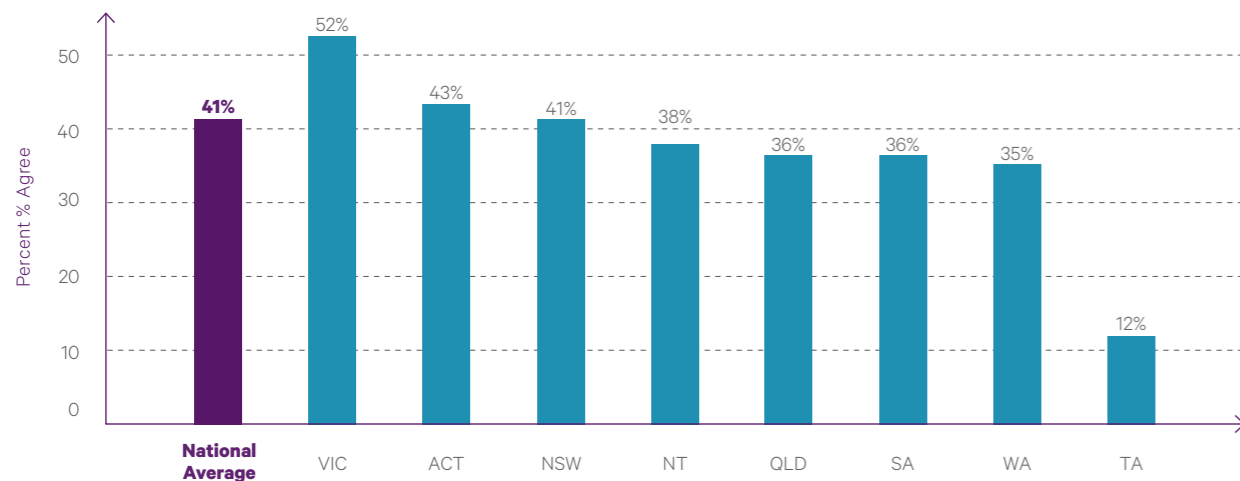
**3.1** Compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic, my mental health and wellbeing declined



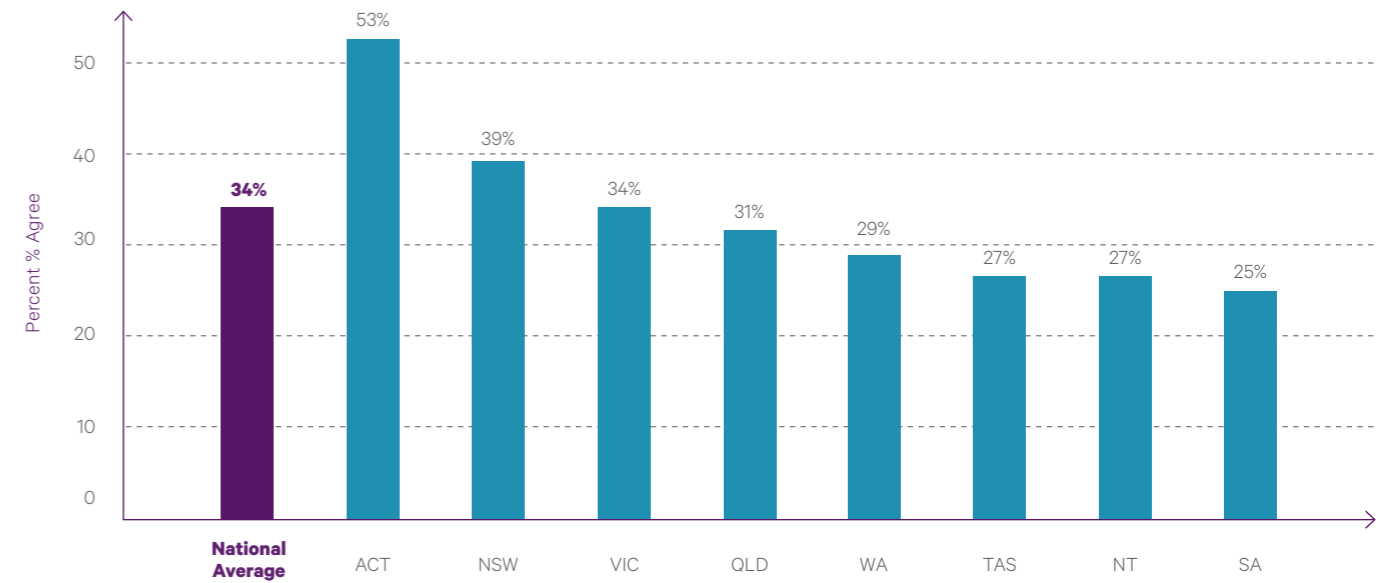
**3.2** I am still struggling with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic



**3.3** The COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of my children



**3.4** The COVID-19 pandemic has made me more resilient and able to address my mental health needs



Q23. Thinking about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements...? (n=2000)

**Subgroup differences**

Over two in five (43%) young people (aged 18-25) indicated their mental health and wellbeing had declined since the COVID-19 pandemic began, scoring significantly higher than the average of all other age groups (32%).

**43% vs 32%**

Young people (aged 18-25)

All other age groups

Similarly, young people (41%) were significantly more likely to still be struggling with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to all other age groups (34%).

**41% vs 34%**

Young people (aged 18-25)

All other age groups

The COVID-19 pandemic was particularly impactful for First Nations people, who scored higher than non-First Nations people across:



Their mental health declining since the pandemic began

**49% vs 33%**

First Nations people      Non-First Nations people



Being more resilient and able to address their mental health needs

**45% vs 33%**

First Nations people      Non-First Nations people



Still struggling with the pandemic

**47% vs 34%**

First Nations people      Non-First Nations people

By state, Victorians fared more negatively than all other states:

**42%**

were struggling with the pandemic

**40%**

mental health declining since the pandemic

**52%**

for parents, the pandemic having a negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of their children

\*See figure 3 for comparisons

## Implications

- The negative mental health impacts of COVID-19 are demonstrated in these findings, which indicate Australian adults and children are experiencing declining mental health and wellbeing in the middle of the pandemic.
- Of particular concern is the high proportion of parents citing a decline in their children's mental health as a result of the pandemic. Further action should be taken to build the capacity for parents and carers to develop skills that support their child's (as well as their own) mental health.
- A "silver lining" has also been identified, in that a relatively large proportion of Australians reported a higher degree of resilience in 2021 compared to 2020. While the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly been a challenge for the entire population, it is clear that Australians are receptive to preventative measures to support their own and their families mental health during this challenging time.
- These "resilience-building" results are in line with an uptake in the use of preventative mental health tools, strategies and interventions. To counteract the negative mental health effects of the pandemic, Australians are actively seeking out and applying approaches to maintain positive mental health and wellbeing.
- Evidence of concurrent decline in mental health as well as greater resilience achieved by those who have preventatively applied tools and strategies to cope during COVID-19 indicates that a national mental health promotion campaign to educate and advise all Australians about taking care of their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic is urgently needed.



## The wellbeing of Australians

While psychological distress is particularly high, Australians also reported substantially higher levels of wellbeing in 2021 compared to 2020.

Unlike specific indicators of poor mental health, such as stress, anxiety and depression, wellbeing as a construct is a holistic measure of contentment. Wellbeing incorporates low levels of psychological distress, positive mental and physical health, and other factors associated with a positive quality of life.

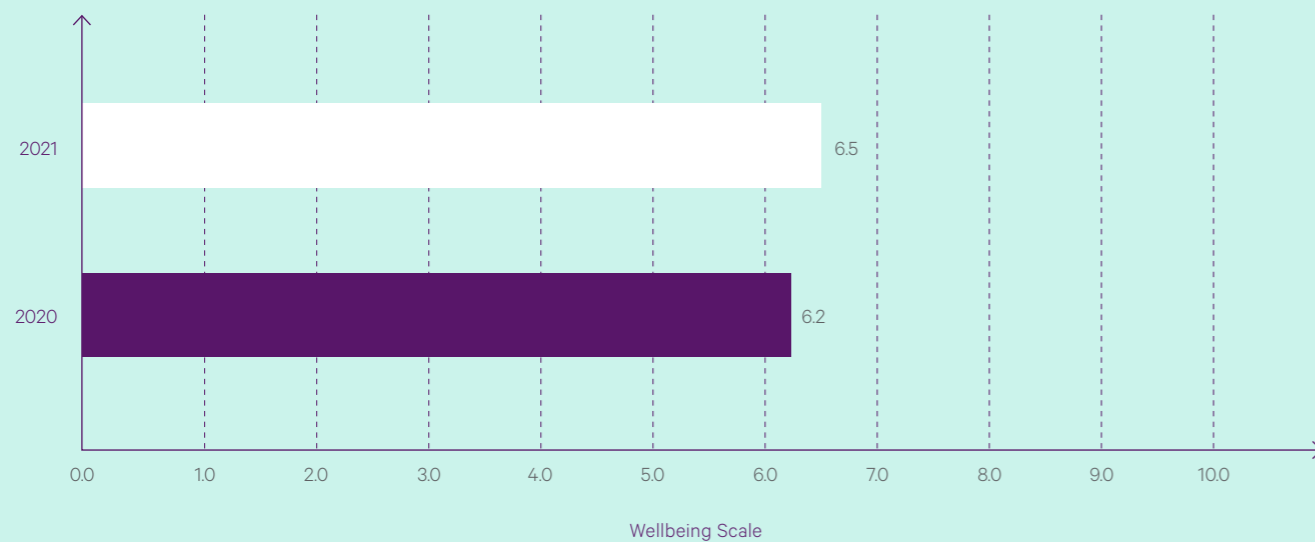


**To determine the wellbeing of Australians, respondents were asked how they would rate their wellbeing over the past month on a scale from 0 to 10.**

The state of wellbeing in 2021 increased significantly when compared to 2020, with an average of 6.2 in 2020 compared to 6.5 in 2021. Less than one in ten (8%) respondents scored their wellbeing as 'excellent' or a 10 out of 10.

**6.5 vs 6.2**  
2021 vs 2020

**Figure 4.** Year on year comparison of wellbeing



Q4. How would you rate your current level of wellbeing over the past month? (2020, n=1000; 2021, n=2000)

## Subgroup differences

Men were found to have significantly higher levels of self-reported wellbeing (6.9) when compared to women (6.1).

**6.9 vs 6.1**  
Men vs Women

Those over the age of 64 scored highest in wellbeing (7.5), scoring significantly higher than young people aged 18 to 25 (6.3).

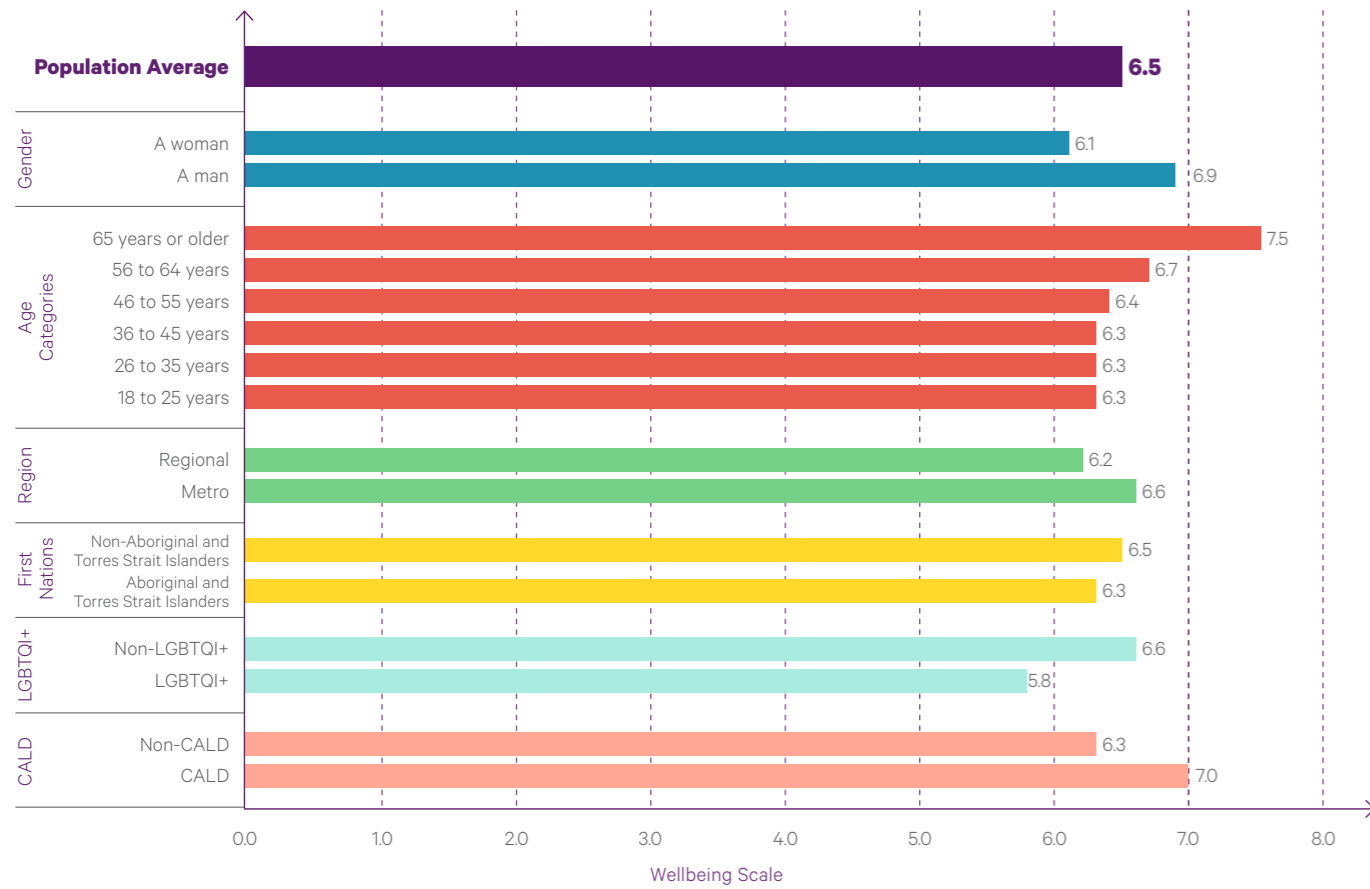
**7.5 vs 6.3**  
Aged 64 and over vs Aged 18 to 25

Respondents within one parent families had significantly lower levels of wellbeing (6.0) when compared to the average of all other household structures (6.6).

**6.0 vs 6.6**  
Respondents within one parent families vs Average of all other household structures



**Figure 5.** Comparison of group wellbeing scores against the population average



Q4. How would you rate your current level of wellbeing over the past month? (base n=2000)

### Implications

- In response to COVID-19, greater attention has been placed on the importance of maintaining good mental health and wellbeing.
- Despite higher levels of psychological distress, anxiety, depression and stress having been reported, that the Australian population reported greater overall wellbeing in July 2021 compared to September 2020 suggests a mental health “silver lining” has been experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Increased understanding of the importance of taking care of mental health may have driven an uptake of tools, strategies and interventions to bolster greater mental wellbeing in the past year, serving as a protective factor to potentially more severe mental ill-health.
- In line with incidences of high stress, anxiety, depression and psychological distress, young people, those in the LGBTQI+ community and single parent households showed the lowest degree of wellbeing.
- In section 10 we examine which day-to-day factors most commonly promote positive wellbeing, and in section 11 we explore the strategies and interventions used to bolster positive mental health factors.





## 8 — What are Australians' attitudes toward mental health and wellbeing?

### What are the attitudes toward mental health and wellbeing?

Mental health and wellbeing is Australia's top health concern, with the vast majority holding the belief that mental health is just as important as physical health (89%).

Putting COVID-19 (a one-in-one-hundred year pandemic) aside, participants were asked what they considered to be the top 3 major health issues facing Australians today. Mental health issues and challenges were the highest concern, with two thirds (67%) of respondents endorsing mental health as a top issue.



**Mental health issues and challenges scored 20% higher than concerns for drug and alcohol abuse, cancer and obesity.**

### Top 3 major health issues facing Australians today

**1.** **67%** of respondents reported mental health as a top issue

**2.** **47%** of respondents were concerned about drug and alcohol abuse

**3.** **46%** of respondents were concerned about cancer

**Table 2.** Health issues and concerns facing Australians

Top health issues facing Australians			
Mental health issues or challenges	67%	Diabetes	25%
Drug or alcohol abuse	47%	Injury and violence	17%
Cancer	46%	Asthma	11%
Obesity	41%	Back problems	10%
Heart Disease	35%	Other health/problems/issues (specify)	2%

Q1. To begin with, what do you consider to be the 3 major health issues facing people in Australia today? (n=2000)

Participants in 2021 were slightly more likely to agree that mental health is equally as important as physical health compared to 2020.

**89% vs 88%**  
2021 2020

Out of a total score of 10, participants in 2021 were significantly more likely to agree that it is important to do something deliberate for their mental health every day, when compared to 2020.

**7.7 vs 7.0**  
2021 2020

64% respondents indicated they do something deliberate at least once per week for their mental health and wellbeing.

That's nearly **2 in 3** respondents

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents were significantly less likely to agree that mental health is equally as important as physical health (78%) when compared to non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents (89%).

**78% vs 89%**  
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Women were more likely than males to suggest doing something deliberate for your mental health was very important.

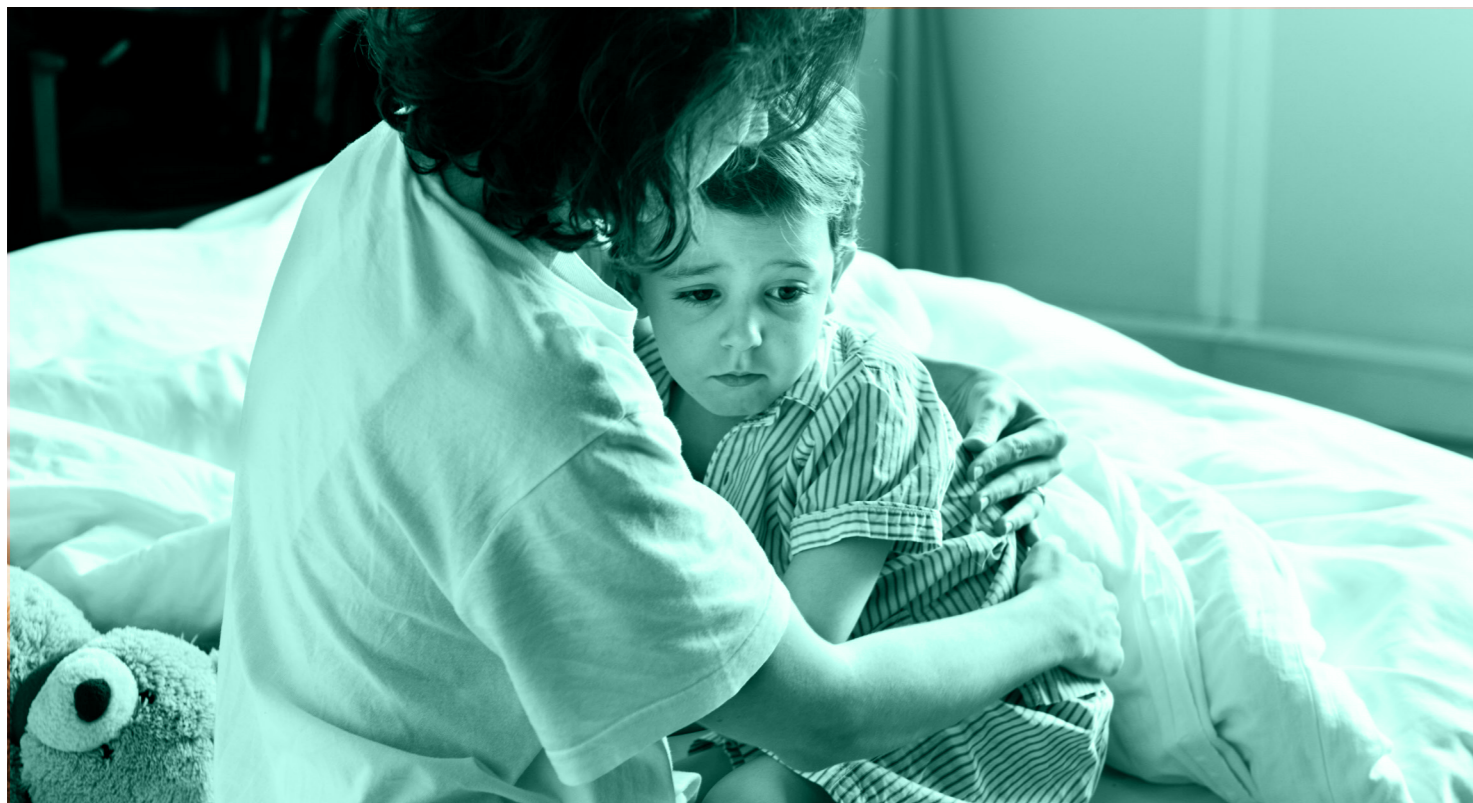
**7.9 vs 7.4**  
Women Men



## Knowledge about mental health

In terms of knowledge, participants were asked to rate their understanding of anxiety, depression and wellbeing out of 10. On average, respondents felt they knew most about anxiety, followed closely by depression and wellbeing.

**anxiety** — 7.4/10  
**depression** — 7.3/10  
**wellbeing** — 7.3/10



## Subgroup differences

Women's self-reported knowledge about anxiety, depression and wellbeing was significantly higher than men.

### Anxiety



**7.8 vs 6.9**

Women

Men

### Depression



**7.7 vs 7.0**

Women

Men

### Wellbeing



**7.5 vs 7.1**

Women

Men

Knowledge of anxiety and depression was significantly higher among LGBTQI+ respondents than non-LGBTQI+ respondents.

### Anxiety



**7.8 vs 7.3**

LGBTQI+

Non-LGBTQI+

### Depression



**7.8 vs 7.3**

LGBTQI+

Non-LGBTQI+

## Implications

- A high proportion of Australians reported having taken supportive action to address their mental health needs or strengthen their wellbeing (64%), however this remains well below the extremely high proportion of Australians who consider mental health as important as physical health (89%). This indicates that there remains scope for considerably more people to participate in activities that maintain good mental health and deliver positive health outcomes.
- In section 10 we explore the dissonance between thought and action around taking care of mental health. In short, greater access to equitable resources should be made readily available to all members of society to address any barriers around mentally healthy behaviours.



## 9 — The mental health and wellbeing of children and young people

### The mental health and wellbeing of children and young people

Many parents agreed that their children’s mental health was just as important as their physical health, however many did not feel confident addressing the mental health needs of their children.



**When asked whether they had looked for information about addressing their children’s mental health needs:**

**75%**

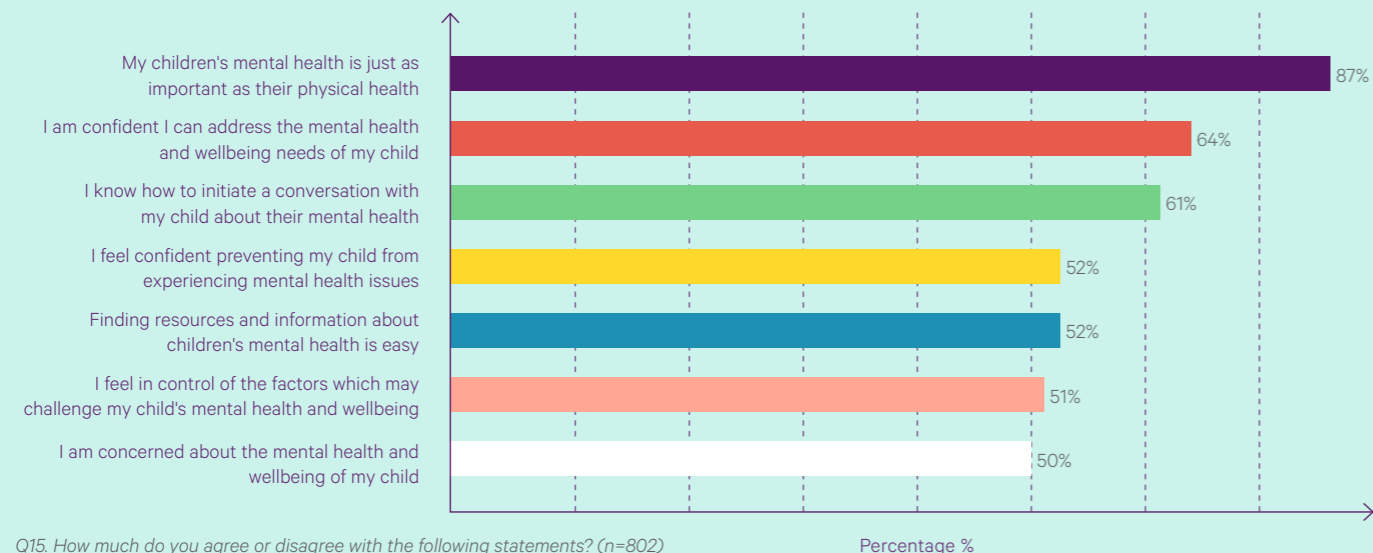
Three in four parents said they had looked for information at least once

**17%**

Only one in five parents said they had never looked for information

→ While nearly nine in ten (87%) parents agreed that their child’s mental health was just as important as their physical health, **fewer felt confident in addressing their children’s mental health needs (64%), found it easy to access resources (52%), or felt in control of the factors which may influence their children’s mental health and wellbeing (51%; see figure 6).**

**Figure 6.** Parent attitudes around addressing the mental health needs of their children



Q15. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n=802)

Percentage %

### Subgroup differences

Mothers were significantly more likely to agree that their children’s mental health was just as important as their physical health, compared to fathers.

**90% vs 84%**

Mothers

Fathers

Fathers felt significantly more confident preventing their children from experiencing mental health issues when compared to mother.

**47% vs 59%**

Mothers

Fathers

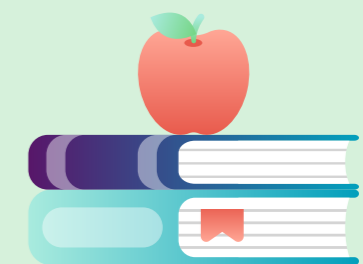
### Further analysis



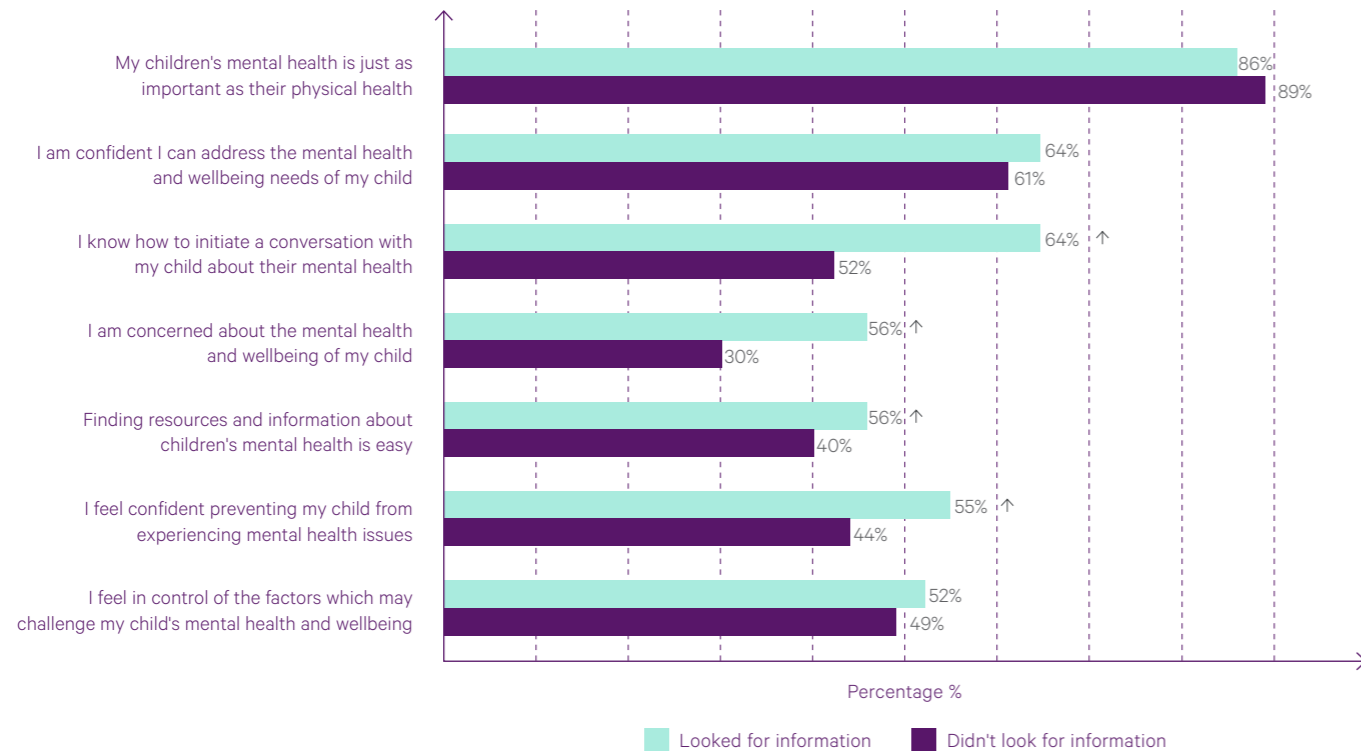
Parents who looked for information about the mental health and wellbeing of their children showed higher degrees of confidence and ability in addressing their child’s mental health (see figure 7).

Participants who felt it was easy finding resources about the mental health of their children showed a higher likelihood of confidence to address their mental health concerns. Results showed moderate to strong positive correlations between respondents finding resources and information about children’s mental health being easy and:

- Feeling in control of the factors which may challenge my child’s mental health and wellbeing (r=.44).
- Feeling confident preventing my child from experiencing mental health issues (r=.44).



**Figure 7.** Parent attitudes around addressing the mental health needs of their children



Q15. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n=802) ↑ arrows indicate significant differences

## Implications

- Results demonstrate that parents place considerable importance on their children maintaining good mental health and wellbeing. Despite this, however, one in two parents found it difficult to find resources about mental health, or feel confident preventing mental health issues for their children in the future.
- As identified in previous reports on preventative mental health, the most effective solutions follow the 'it takes a village to raise a child' ethos to prevent the occurrence of poor mental health throughout children's development into adulthood. This being the case, greater exposure and access to mental health promoting resources should be provided to parents to strengthen knowledge and confidence and subsequently better support the mental health of their children. This involves the promotion of an environment that encourages social and emotional learning and effective preventative interventions, supported by parents, educators, school staff and the local community<sup>11</sup>.
- To provide further support to the development of resilience and mental wellbeing skills among children, particular emphasis must be placed upon scaling up school-based social and emotional learning programs.
- Further research is required to understand the dissonance between attitudes and behaviours, particularly around exposure to mental health strategies and resources.



**10 — What are the enablers and barriers to improving mental health and wellbeing?**

**What are the enablers and barriers to improving mental health and wellbeing?**

**Enablers**

Sleep, exercise, hobbies and interests were commonly mentioned as promoters for mental health. While mental health and wellbeing were considered of high importance to Australians, a lower proportion held attitudes and behaviours to promote their mental health.



**Participants were asked which were the most important things that have made them feel more positive and able to cope with everyday life in the past 12 months.**

**The most common responses were:**



**46%**

Sleep



**38%**

Relationships



**37%**

Exercise



**36%**

Hobbies and interests

→ One in ten (9%) said meditation had helped them be able to feel more positive and cope – scoring equally to all other mental health interventions and strategies (9%).

**Table 3.** The most important things to support positive mental health and cope with everyday life

Most important factors to support positivity and cope		
	Sleep	46%
	Relationships	38%
	Exercise	37%
	Hobbies and interests	36%
	Feelings of purpose	22%
	Physical health	20%
	Living situation	17%
	Sense of belonging	15%
	Diet	13%
	Work	12%
	Speaking to a mental health professional	12%
	Job security	11%
	Mental health interventions and strategies	9%
	Meditation	9%

Q9. What are the 3 most important things that have helped you feel more positive or able to cope with everyday life over the last year? (n=2000)



### Subgroup differences

Meditation was particularly important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who were significantly more likely to select the option compared to non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

**16% vs 8%**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents      Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents

Mental health interventions and strategies were particularly helpful for LGBTQI+ respondents compared to non-LGBTQI+ (14% vs 8%).

**14% vs 8%**

LGBTQI+ respondents      Non-LGBTQI+ respondents

Similarly, speaking to a mental health professional was particularly helpful for LGBTQI+ respondents compared to non-LGBTQI+ (16% vs 11%).

**16% vs 11%**

LGBTQI+ respondents      Non-LGBTQI+ respondents

LGBTQI+ respondents also placed a high emphasis on having a sense of belonging, compared to non-LGBTQI+ respondents.

**20% vs 14%**

LGBTQI+ respondents      Non-LGBTQI+ respondents

**Despite an acknowledgement of the importance of mental health and wellbeing (see section 8), a lower proportion of Australians held attitudes and behaviours which would assist in promoting positive mental health.**

**60%**

know where to access resources to support their mental health and wellbeing

**58%**

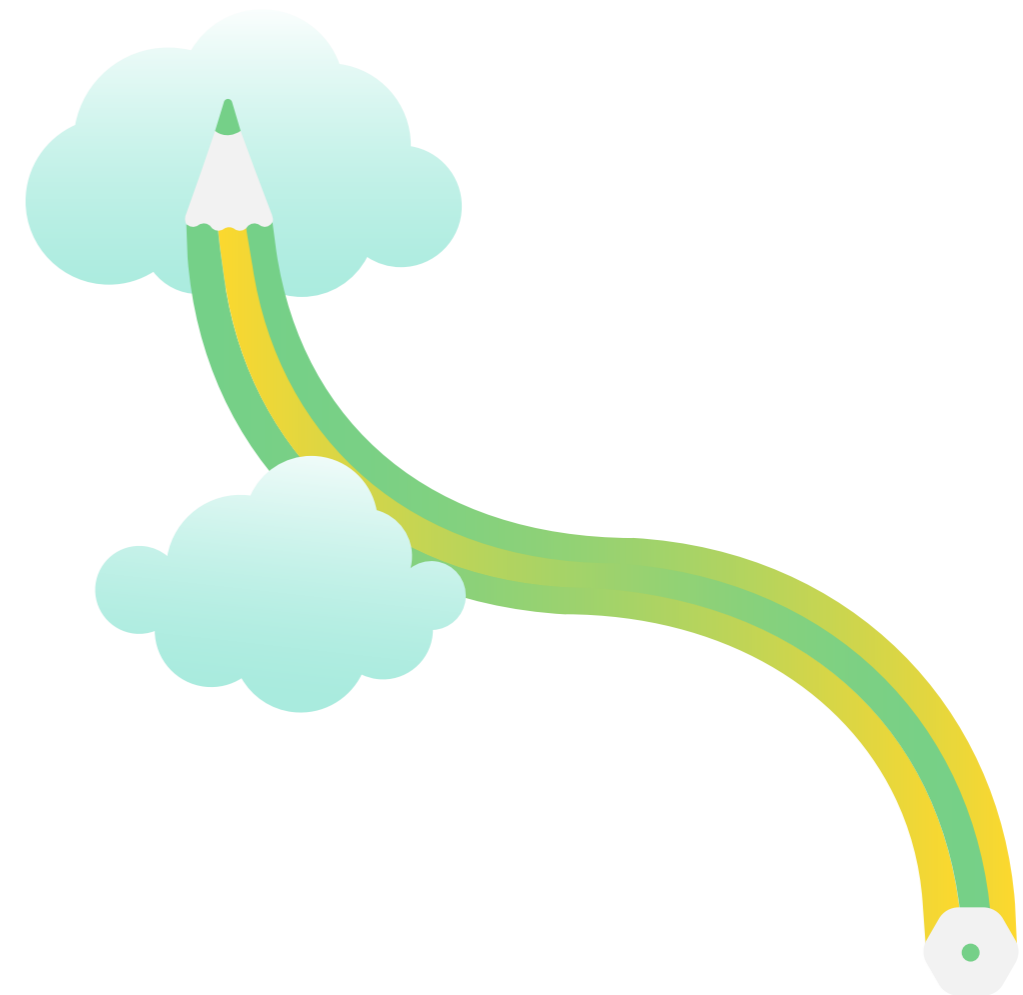
felt motivated to take care of their own mental health and wellbeing

**57%**

had somebody they could talk to about their mental health and wellbeing

**57%**

know what to do to improve their mental health and wellbeing



## Barriers

The key challenges facing the mental health of Australians was not having enough sleep, lacking exercise and trouble finding purpose in their lives.

→ Respondents were asked about the things and situations that have been a challenge to their wellbeing over the past 12 months. In alignment with the enablers, a lack of sleep was the greatest challenge for respondents (43%). One in three respondents mentioned having a lack of exercise (30%) or lacking feelings of purpose (30%) as a major challenge to their wellbeing. One in four (25%) respondents also mentioned adapting to change being a challenge to their mental health.

**Table 4.** The greatest challenges to wellbeing over the past 12 months

Greatest challenges to wellbeing	
Lack of sleep	43%
Lacking feelings of purpose	30%
Lack of Exercise	30%
Adapting to change	25%
Relationships	24%
Poor diet	24%
Poor physical health	22%
Work	22%
Low sense of belonging	21%
Job insecurity	20%
Living situation	20%
Lack of hobbies and interests	15%

**While relationships were considered an important aspect to promoting wellbeing (see section 10), one in two respondents (47%) indicated they find it difficult to initiate a conversation about their mental health with their friends and family. A proportion of respondents also agreed with barriers relating to financial circumstance, not feeling in control and not having enough time to address their mental health needs.**

Q10. What are the 3 factors which have been the biggest challenge to your wellbeing over the past 12 months? (n=2000)

**47%**

find it difficult to initiate a conversation about their mental health with friends and family

**41%**

don't have the money to spend looking after their mental health and wellbeing

**31%**

believe the factors which affect their mental health and wellbeing are out of their control

**15%**

don't care about their mental health and wellbeing





### Subgroup differences

**23%** Women  
**19%** Men  
 Nearly a quarter of women cited a **low sense of belonging** being a primary challenge to their wellbeing, scoring significantly higher than men.

**27%** Younger cohort  
**19%** Older cohort  
 Younger cohorts (18-25) exhibited greater **concerns with their relationships** compared to older cohort (45 and older).

**23%** Younger cohort  
**15%** Older cohort  
 Younger cohorts (18-25) exhibited greater **concerns with their job insecurity** compared to older cohort (45 and older).

In contrast, older cohorts had greater **concerns with their physical health** compared to young people.

**27% vs 19%**  
 Older cohort      Younger cohort

LGBTQI+ respondents reported **challenges associated with a sense of purpose** compared to non-LGBTQI+ respondents.

**39% vs 28%**  
 LGBTQI+      Non-LGBTQI+

LGBTQI+ respondents reported **having a low sense of belonging** compared to non-LGBTQI+ respondents.

**33% vs 19%**  
 LGBTQI+      Non-LGBTQI+

**Job insecurity** was significantly higher for those living in a metropolitan region compared to regional Australia.

**22% vs 15%**  
 Metropolitan region      Regional Australia

### Implications

- A common theme among the enablers and barriers was the importance of sleep, regular exercise, relationships and feelings of purpose. Means to strengthen these factors are explored further in the proceeding section.
- Differences in challenges were found depending on age. Investment is required from governments to ensure universal access to resources which develop mental health skills for all Australians. In addition, these results support the importance of producing and disseminating age and group specific mental health resources to address specific demographic needs.
- Of note was the discrepancy in challenges faced among certain subgroups. The LGBTQI+ community reported higher than average strains on their sense of purpose and sense of belonging. Further research is required to understand this in detail and consider how best to develop inclusive approaches to support these communities more effectively.
- As a likely result of COVID-19, respondents within metropolitan areas saw greater concern over job insecurity than those in regional areas.
- With two in five respondents (41%) highlighting financial barriers to improving their mental health and wellbeing, it is imperative that programs and resources that promote mental health and wellbeing are free of charge, equitable and readily accessible to the population.





**11 — What strategies do Australians use to improve mental health and wellbeing?**

**What strategies do Australians use to improve mental health and wellbeing?**

The majority of Australians used at least one proactive strategy to address their mental health.



Participants were asked which general tools and resources they may have used to address their mental health and wellbeing needs (see figure 8).



**34%**

used mental health professional or general practitioner



**28%**

used self-directed learning about mental health and wellbeing



**23%**

used friends or family who have some knowledge in the mental health area

**Figure 8.** Tools and resources used to address mental health and wellbeing needs



Q16. Thinking about obtaining information on mental health and wellbeing, in the last 12 months, have you used any of these tools or resources? (n=2000)

Participants were also presented with a list of proactive strategies that can be used to address mental health and wellbeing. These were based on a range of interventions, including; Mindfulness Meditation, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment therapy and others.

**81%**

Four in five participants mentioned using at least one proactive strategy

**44%**

used strength based approaches

**36%**

focused their energy on things within personal control

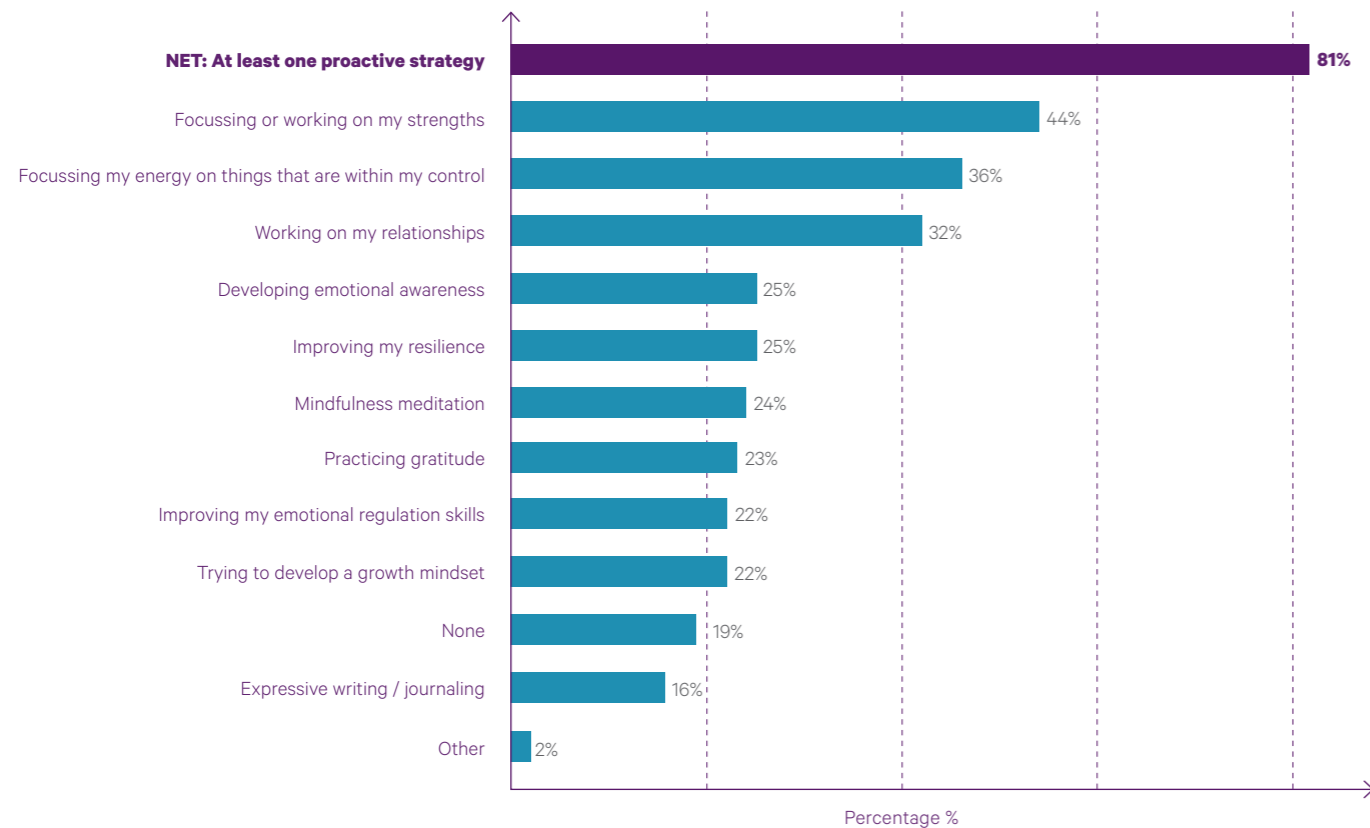
**32%**

working on relationships

**24%**

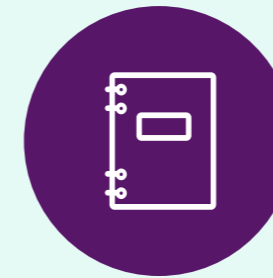
practiced mindfulness meditation

**Figure 9.** Use of proactive strategies used to address mental health and wellbeing



Q17. Below is a list of strategies used to address mental health and wellbeing, have you used any of the following strategies and interventions? (n=2000)

**Subgroup differences**



Younger people (18-25 years old) were significantly more likely to have used nearly all **tools and resources** when compared to older cohorts (26+ years old)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohorts were significantly more likely to turn to utilise **tools and resources** obtained through work, compared to non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohorts.

**28% vs 12%**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander vs Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohorts were also significantly more likely to use at least one **proactive strategy** than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohorts.

**91% vs 80%**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander vs Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Women were significantly more likely to have used at least one **proactive strategy** for addressing their mental health than men.

**84% vs 78%**

Women vs Men

Utilisation of **proactive strategies** was highest among young people (18-25) with 92% of young people using at least one strategy, scoring significantly higher than the average of older age groups (78%).

**92% vs 78%**

Young people vs Older age groups

### What are the outcomes of these strategies?

Nearly all Australians using an evidence based strategy or intervention reported a positive outcome, most commonly feeling more relaxed, having less stress and having better management of their anxiety.



**For those who used any one mental health strategy or intervention, 92% reported at least one positive outcome. The most common outcomes were:**



**41%**

feeling more relaxed and calm



**37%**

better management of stress



**34%**

better management of anxiety

**Table 5.** The most important things to support positive mental health and cope with everyday life

Outcomes when using a proactive strategy			
<b>NET: At least one benefit</b>	<b>92%</b>	I have improved resilience to cope with a difficult life phase or event	28%
I feel more relaxed and calm	41%	I can better manage depression	25%
My sleep has improved	30%	I have improved creativity	19%
I can better manage stress	37%	My work has improved	19%
I can better manage anxiety	34%	I have cultivated better relationships	20%
I have improved focus and attention	26%	None of the above	8%

Q18. Thinking about your own practice of [strategy or intervention], which of the following statements is true for you? (n=2000)

**For those who used meditation, the most common outcomes were:**



**44%**

feeling more relaxed and calm



**36%**

improvement in sleep



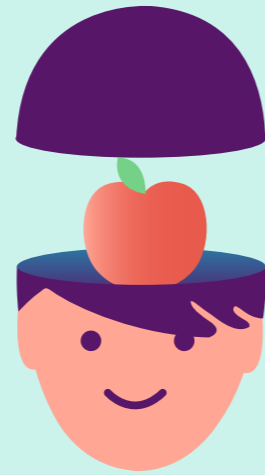
**28%**

better management of stress



## Do we use strategies for prevention or reaction?

Interventions and strategies used for the promotion of mental health are taken up as often as those using them to address existing health concerns. Over two in five Australians wait until their mental health is difficult before taking action.



**66%**

Two in three (66%) respondents indicated they would be open to trying new strategies to improve their mental health and wellbeing. Comparisons of preventative versus reactive use of interventions and strategies were similar.

**44%**

Over two in five (44%) respondents said they would only find strategies to assist with their mental health and wellbeing when things become difficult.

**40%**

A similar proportion (40%) indicated they use strategies and interventions to improve their mental health in a preventative and proactive way.

**Results showed that individuals who were preventative and proactive in their use of strategies and interventions demonstrated significantly higher levels of wellbeing (7.1) than those who were reactive to their mental health (5.7).**

## Subgroup differences

Younger people (18 to 25 years old) were significantly more likely to try out new strategies when compared to older people (65 years or older).

**63% vs 51%**

Younger cohort

Older cohort

Three in four (75%) respondents aged between 26 and 35 years old agreed that they would be open to trying new strategies to improve their mental health.

**75%**

Aged between 26 and 35 years old

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents were more likely to be reactive to their mental health with 54% indicating they only find strategies to assist with mental health when things become difficult, compared to non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents (44%).

**54% vs 44%**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents

Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents

CALD respondents were more likely to be preventative in their approach with 46% using strategies or interventions to improve their mental health and wellbeing even when things are going well, compared to 38% in the general population.

**46% vs 38%**

CALD respondents

General population



**Figure 10.** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander vs Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in attitudes towards mental health strategies and interventions



Q19. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, n=134; non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, n=1839)

## Implications

- Results demonstrate a high proportion of young people aged 18 to 25 currently utilise tools, resources and proactive strategies to address their mental health, as well as the openness to try out new strategies. These results correlate with the greater prevalence of stress, anxiety and depression among these cohorts.
- The willingness to engage in proactive behaviours to maintain good mental health and wellbeing offers a “break in the clouds” for young people. Mental health organisations, as well as governments, should leverage this insight to make mental health services, programs and resources that cater to the varying needs of young people more accessible via investment in mental health promotion campaigns targeted at this younger demographic.
- Australian governments have an enviable reputation for investing in preventative health activities that improve public health. This investment now must extend to mental health prevention, which currently receives 1% of all public funds spent on mental health (the remaining 99% is directed to the provision of clinical care after people experience mental ill-health). Only with investment in programs that help people develop resilience-building skills will we be able to get “ahead of the curve” in mental health.





## 12 — Conclusions and implications

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The State of Mind survey explored many aspects of mental health spanning prevalence, attitudes, behaviours and recourse. What is revealed in this survey is that, after the most disrupted, isolated and uncertain year most Australians have ever experienced, **we are more depressed, anxious and stressed than at the same time in 2020.**

We find that **the “hidden epidemic” of mental ill-health, consistently forecast by experts during the pandemic, disproportionately impacts women, First Nations Peoples and LGBTIQ+ Australians**, who are experiencing higher levels of psychological distress when compared to the broader population.

Most concerning of all is that **children and young Australians are facing significant mental health challenges as a result of the pandemic.**

There is a “silver lining”, however. **Awareness of the importance of maintaining good mental health is at an all-time high:** mental health is the country’s top non-COVID-19 health concern, with Australians overwhelmingly considering it to be as important as physical health (89%) and 4 in 5 adults apply at least one strategy to proactively improve their mental health and wellbeing (81%). There remains much work to be done, but these results indicate our willingness to develop skills that maintain good mental health are at an all-time high.

Most encouragingly, those who reported developing skills like working on their strengths, developing emotional awareness and practicing mindfulness meditation, **also achieved a higher overall wellbeing score (7.1) relative to the general population (5.7).**

Further, with the overwhelming majority of people who developed skills that improve their mental health also achieving positive health benefits (92%), including sleeping better, feeling more relaxed and more calm, we have an opportunity to improve resilience so that people are better prepared to cope during the COVID-19 pandemic and for any and all challenges that lie ahead by immediately engaging Australians in strategies and interventions to improve their mental health.





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