

# 'People are fatigued': Mental health services still in high demand



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March 14, 2021 – 12.00am

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Demand for mental health services remains higher than normal as the pandemic year has left Australians "fatigued" and anxious about their ability to cope with new challenges in 2021.

In February the number of mental health treatments subsidised by Medicare and the number of contacts answered by Lifeline both had double-digit growth, while in January one in five people told the Australian Bureau of Statistics their mental health was worse than a year ago.

National Mental Health Commission chief executive Christine Morgan said the mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic would not disappear once people were vaccinated.



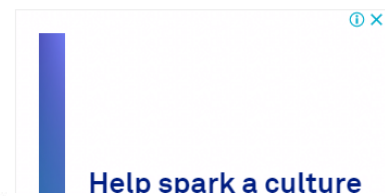
National Mental Health Commission chief executive Christine Morgan said Australians are less able to cope with everyday stress after the pandemic year. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

"The vaccine can stop propensity for physical symptoms, but the mental health tail - the consequences of how we're feeling as a result of all that has happened during the pandemic - will go on for some period of time," Ms Morgan said. "It takes energy to be emotionally strong and people are feeling tired and fatigued."

This fatigue meant people were less able to manage the normal stresses of life and became anxious much more quickly if the virus surged or governments called snap lockdowns.

The number of people contacting Lifeline in February was up 16 per cent from the same month in 2020 and 34 per cent from 2019. There were also more than a million Medicare-subsidised mental health treatments in the four weeks to February 14 - 9 per cent higher than the same period last year before the pandemic but after the "black summer" bushfires.

Last year the Australian government increased the number of mental health treatments that can be subsidised by Medicare from 10 to 20 a year. Ms Morgan said she hoped the increase in treatments was a combination of more people seeking help and individual people getting more help.





Peter Heggie is a carer for his wife Leah who has several mental illnesses. He struggled with his own emotional wellbeing in 2020. WOLTER PEETERS

She is especially concerned about young people, aged from about 14 into their early 20s, because that age group was reporting the highest levels of anxiety and distress.

Ms Morgan said the pressing mental health challenges for people included their fear of the virus itself, their ability to cope with lockdowns and other restrictions, and economic anxiety. Helpline staff were also reporting many callers were still dealing with trauma from the bushfires over a year ago, while others were struggling to cope with the national conversation about sexual assault and rape because of their own past experiences.

There had also been significant increases in the number of presentations for eating disorders, she said, including at hospitals.

“You’re not going to be over that in a couple of months - once an eating disorder has been triggered you need very specialised treatment,” Ms Morgan said. “Recovery does happen and is possible but it takes some time.”

Ms Morgan said there had been an increase in people talking and thinking about suicide but no increase in the actual suicide rate.

Tori McCarthy, a senior therapist at South Pacific Private, said there was an influx of clients seeking treatment for depression and anxiety and the clinic was trying to expand its day programs to meet demand.

“This suggests to me that we are still dealing with the aftermath of the pandemic and will continue to for some time,” Ms McCarthy said.

Peter Heggie, 64, from Thornleigh near Hornsby is a carer for his wife Leah, who has several diagnosed mental illnesses.

In 2020, Mr Heggie was cut off from a support service for carers, his regular psychology sessions were no longer face to face, and he was unable to see friends. Over time he grew emotionally unwell, feeling tired and flat and prone to over-reacting to small things.

“I’m just trying to get by day by day, but the mental resources are not there, they’ve been wound back,” he said.

Mr Heggie is trying to recover by making time for himself, taking dance classes that were a Christmas gift from his wife and joining the nearby Men’s Shed.

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