

## 2021 Mental Health Wellbeing Explainer

We all agree that we need to improve population mental health wellbeing, but efforts are thwarted by confusion around the definition and what are the most effective ways to intervene. The WA Mental Health Commission is developing a framework to guide mental health wellbeing interventions following a literature review on What works to promote mental wellbeing and prevent the onset of mental health conditions? Available [here](#). This brief explainer describes the issue and gives some insights into the Mentally Healthy WA approach to improving mental health wellbeing in the community.

### What is mental health wellbeing?

Defining and measuring **wellbeing** continues to challenge researchers who have been trying to agree on a definition because in order to address a problem, you must first define it (1). Mental health has multiple dimensions that interact in complex ways. Interacting influences include individual and lifestyle factors, social family and community networks, working and living conditions through to wider socioeconomic, cultural and environmental conditions, including policy (2).

There has never been a more important time to promote **mental wellbeing**. The World Health Organization (WHO) highlights the complexity in responding to mental health and the need to focus on five key messages (addressing all dimensions described above when responding):

- Mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders.
- Mental health is an integral part of health; indeed, there is no health without mental health.
- Mental health is determined by a range of socioeconomic, biological and environmental factors.
- Cost-effective public health and intersectoral strategies and interventions exist to promote, protect and restore mental health.
- Mental health is a state of wellbeing where a person realises their own potential, copes with life's normal stresses and can make a contribution to their community (3).

When discussing **mental health**, most definitions focus on the positive and distinguish it from mental illness. The WHO defines mental health as a 'state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, copes with the normal stresses of life, works productively and makes a contribution to his or her community' (3). This holistic definition challenges the idea that mental health is simply the opposite of mental ill health and highlights the different aspects of positive mental health including:

- subjective well-being (how you rate your own wellbeing) (4)
- affective balance (the balance of emotions that individuals experience in their day-to-day lives, such as feeling good, upset, nervous, afraid, excited, attentive, and proud) (5)

- affective balance is when the positive outweighs the negative (6).
- positive emotions strengthen the capacity to solve problems, which builds coping ability (7).
- the development of abilities to manage life, maximize one's potential, participate in, and contribute to society (8).

According to this definition, complete mental health is not applicable to the whole population at all times as a half of all Australian adults will experience a mental health issue over their lifetime (9).

**Mental wellbeing**, also known as subjective wellbeing, is a broad concept (10) that is integral to overall wellbeing, encompassing emotional, psychological, and social domains (11). Subjective wellbeing is our perception and evaluation of our life. Wellbeing is a multi-dimensional construct (12) that involves more than just being in a good mood or feeling happy. In addition to positive emotions, wellbeing is achieved through optimal development, a 'meaningful' life, and satisfaction of basic human needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (13). Higher subjective wellbeing has been associated with good health and longevity, better social relationships, work performance and creativity (6).

### **How we protect and promote mental wellbeing?**

The field of mental health promotion is evolving rapidly. Several countries are introducing evidence-based and cross-government policies and programs to promote wellbeing. Evidence is emerging on the cost-effectiveness of a number of these interventions, in parenting, schools, workplaces, older age, and other social support domains. Experience is growing on the development of partnerships and implementation, the links between mental health and human rights, and the need for mental health promotion in disaster situations (10).

### **Key principles for mental health promotion**

Mental health promotion focuses on the whole population with the aim of enhancing population mental health and well-being and is concerned with achieving positive mental health and well-being at an individual, community, and population level. The focus of this multidisciplinary area of practice is on strengthening protective factors for good mental health, enhancing supportive environments and enabling access to resources and life opportunities for individuals and communities that will promote their social and emotional well-being (8).

Mental health promotion should be:

- Informed by evidence
- aimed at populations, and tailored for specific sub-groups
- a life course approach
- be accessible and promote equity
- feasible, cost-effective, and impactful
- a comprehensive multi-strategy, multi-level approach (system)
- co-developed with key stakeholders and community (8).

## **The Act Belong Commit Campaign: positively influencing mental wellbeing in Western Australia**

Health promotion mass media campaigns are successful in encouraging behaviour change at a relatively low cost per head (14). Population wide campaigns can be less stigmatising than other interventions as they apply to everyone and are easily accessible (15). The Act Belong Commit mental health promotion campaign was the first of its kind and commenced in 2008 (16).

The campaign targets adults and encourages them to prioritise their mental health through engaging in evidence-based protective behaviours communicated through the 'Act Belong Commit' message. Act Belong Commit facilitates social connectedness, and community participation, physical activity, involvement in creative arts and other activities that are positively related to mental wellbeing (17).

Most population interventions rely on personal agency and so fail to reach the people who need them most. The unique Act Belong Commit Partnerships Program significantly extends the reach of the campaign to these hard-to-reach populations by formally engaging community organisations to embed the message and facilitate activities in their local communities. The reach is further extended through a dedicated school's program and materials have been developed for specific population groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse populations (e.g. the Act Belong Commit ['Words to Live by'](#) video series and [targeted resources](#)).

In 2020, mental wellbeing among the West Australian population, as measured by the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Health Wellbeing Scale, suggests an average level of wellbeing across the population, which is similar to UK norms pre-COVID-19 (Act Belong Commit unpublished data, 2020). Findings support the need to continue to promote mental wellbeing to maintain and build this level of wellbeing.

The Act Belong Commit campaign encourages people to increase their participation in 15 protective behaviours to increase the frequency of social connectedness, engaging in physical activity (especially outdoors in nature) and giving meaning to life (18). A comprehensive review of protective behaviours for mental and psychological wellbeing in Australian adults found the behaviours promoted by Act Belong Commit to be effective (11).

In 2020 we measured the association between mental wellbeing and the frequency of participation in these behaviours among West Australian adults. Mental wellbeing was higher the more often people participated in the specific behaviours (Act Belong Commit unpublished data, 2020).

The campaign is as relevant today as it has been from the beginning with evaluation results showing consistent high levels of awareness, approval, and intention to prioritise mental health. In 2020, 75% of West Australian adults were aware of the Act Belong Commit campaign. The campaign aims to encourage people to prioritise their mental health and take action. In 2020, one in four people had taken action to protect their mental health because of the campaign (Act Belong Commit unpublished data, 2020).

Previous research has shown that the campaign is beneficial to those Western Australians with a diagnosable mental illness or who have sought help for their mental health. In 2013/4, a greater proportion of adults with a diagnosable mental illness or who had sought help, said that the campaign changed the way they thought about mental health (41.4% vs 24.2%;  $p < 0.001$ ), and that they were doing something for their mental health as a result of their exposure to the campaign (20.5% vs 8.7%;  $p < 0.001$ ) (19).

## Contact

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This Explainer was prepared by Christina Pollard and Lynne Millar to provide insights into the concept of mental wellbeing drawing from an evidence-base including the latest research undertaken by Mentally Healthy WA (2020) measuring mental wellbeing among the WA population.

## Further reading

- Mental health: strengthening our response, World Health Organization [here](#)
- Mental Health is important, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [here](#)
- Promoting Social and Emotional Health [here](#)
- Wellbeing concepts, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [here](#)
- International Union for Health Promotion and Education (2021). Critical Actions for Mental Health Promotion. Paris: IUHPE [here](#)



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