

Ten Ways to Improve Mental Health



This Ten Ways guide was developed by Dr Robbie Lloyd, Research and Project Officer, Justice and Peace Office, Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney to assist with implementing the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Social Justice Statement 2020-21 “To Live Life to the Full: Mental Health in Australia Today”.



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TEN WAYS TO IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH—JUSTICE AND PEACE OFFICE

Making Mental Health Everyone's Business

The Australian Catholic Bishops have named their 2020-21 Social Justice Statement "To Live Life to the Full – Mental Health in Australia Today." (<https://socialjustice.catholic.org.au/2020/07/03/social-justice-statement-2020-21/>)

The statement calls on Catholic parishes, schools, organisations and communities to reject stigmatization of people living with mental health challenges, and it encourages everyone to be active in understanding more about mental health. When we are more informed, we can work to become people and places of greater acceptance, care and healing as Jesus has taught us all.

Following Pope Francis' call in *Laudato Si'*, that the test of our society's commitment to the common good is the care we show for the people who are most vulnerable or disadvantaged, here are Ten Steps we can take towards helping everyone Live Life to the Full. (Relevant page numbers in the Social Justice Statement are noted in brackets). These are not always easy steps to take so the Justice and Peace Office invites calls for assistance in exploring how you can become practically involved in addressing these challenges, both locally and in state and national advocacy for policy, program and funding changes.

Australia's mental health record is one of very slow improvement, with many setbacks due to failures in funding community mental health services. Since the Richmond Report aimed for reform in the 1980s we have been underserved with appropriate funds to support community-based recovery for those experiencing mental distress. This matters to everyone because we will either experience mental ill health ourselves, or know friends and family who do. Once you have been exposed to the need for support it is glaringly obvious we need better policies and programs, that help people to get well and stay well in the community. These ten points aim to help you get started in exploring how you can be more informed, more active. And more effective when it comes to advocating for someone experiencing mental ill-health.

If you know of urgent cases needing help, some key support services are:

- **NSW Mental Health Line 1800 011 511** – Mental health professionals help with concerns for you or someone you are concerned about, including children, teens, adults and older people: <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/mentalhealth/Pages/mental-health-line.aspx>
- **Beyond Blue 1300 224 636** – 24/7 mental health support, both online and by phone, by mental health professionals, providing information & advice on coping with COVID-19, isolation & connection, workplace & financial hardship. <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/get-immediate-support>
- **Lifeline 131 114** – The 24-hour crisis support & suicide prevention service. <https://www.lifeline.org.au/about/our-services/>
- **Kids Helpline 1800 551 800** – A telephone counselling support line for children and young people ages 5 to 25 and available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. <https://kidshelpline.com.au/>
- **Carers Connection Line 1300 554 660** – For family members, friends, or carers of someone with a mental illness, helping with information, referrals and support Mon-Fri 9am-5pm. <https://www.mentalhealthcarersnsw.org/contact-us/>
- **LGBTIQ community ACON 02-92062000** – MH issues affecting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender & intersex (LGBTI) people & ageing. <https://www.acon.org.au/what-we-are-here-for/mental-health/>
- **Multicultural & Refugee community** – NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) 02-96466800 <http://www.startts.org.au/services/>
- **Older people Dementia Support Helpline 1800 699 799** – Provides support for carers of people with dementia who have behavioural and psychological changes. <https://dementia.com.au/>
- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Help** – Aboriginal Counselling Services (ACS) M: 0410 539 905; E: aboriginalcounselling@live.com.au provides crisis intervention and counselling in NSW in a sensitive and culturally appropriate way.
- **CatholicCare's** counselling options help with many things including with mental health counselling, addictions, and domestic violence. Call the CCareline on 13 18 19 from 8am-6pm Monday—Friday. <https://www.catholiccare.org/>

1. MAKE MENTAL HEALTH A PRIORITY - BY FIRST IMPROVING YOUR AWARENESS

Actively express the principle of the common good to support the poorest of our brothers and sisters (p 14). To do this in the context of mental health we need to understand it more, be less afraid and understand that, when it comes to mental health, we really are all in it together. And there is a special place for spirit-based people in supporting those suffering mental turmoil (p 13). So a first step is to organise for education sessions in schools and parishes to really increase mental health awareness, and to listen to local people with lived experience. Also, knowing more about Australia's history of institutionalisation and the subsequent lack of proper support for community mental health when those institutions were closed in the 1980s, will help to provide a context for this whole story. Failure to fully enact the Richmond Report created "the missing middle" (p 10) who still don't receive effective community-based support.

The prevalence of multiple diagnoses is vital to know about, when drug and alcohol issues and other addictive behaviours (like gambling or computer games addictions) magnify mental distress. And beneath all these indicators there is often a trauma which may be a root cause of mental distress. Many sources of information and education can inform you about these subjects, plus the Justice and Peace Office can help with presentations and facilitating workshops to suggest ways your community can get more hands-on in offering to help local people and families experiencing mental distress.

By starting within your own parish and school community, it is possible to increase knowledge and create a more relaxed environment in which to discuss mental distress. It will also make it easier to reach out to the local mental health networks, who provide support for people living with challenges and their carers. Inviting guest speakers and arranging visits to the local hospital and community health service will increase people's knowledge of what's available, while decreasing fear around the subject.

2. SUPPORT EVERYONE AS SOCIAL BEINGS TOGETHER & REJECT STIGMATIZATION

Bishop Mark Coleridge, President of the Bishops Conference, has reminded us all (p 2) that many will experience mental health challenges in our lives, and we need to remember the burden this puts on individuals and their carers. Talking about removing the stigma around mental distress breaks down people's fears of it and begins to create awareness that we are all somewhere on the spectrum of mental distress at different times in our lives.

Because we are social beings (p 3) we need the bonds of family and community to live healthy lives, but we know many people are still falling through the cracks in our society, especially asylum seekers and refugees, many First Nations people, the homeless and those seeking social housing, plus those coming out of prison. These are some high priority groups for national and state advocacy to change government policies, recognize International Human Rights Standards and Reform Immigration Detention and Prison systems.

Local support from parishes and schools (p 11, 15-17) can begin by seeking open discussion of people's own experiences of mental illness and shared ways to support each other. This begins to break down stigma and build shared feelings of support. Then parishes and schools can begin to feel more informed to support local individuals and families needing help.

Peer to Peer Support is essential for individuals, carers and families to feel respected and welcomed in their journey to recovery. So your community can help to strengthen existing peer support groups in your area, or form them if they don't exist yet. The Justice and Peace Office can help to advise on this process if you are unsure.

3. ADVOCATE FOR THE SYSTEMIC CHANGES WE NEED TO SUPPORT EVERYONE

There is a major need to transform the social determinants of mental ill-health in Australia, where lack of social housing, employment, transport and social support perpetuates suffering among those with mental distress. Improving support for locally-based community mental health services, with a person-centred caring approach (ie. not putting the system and clinicians first) is a fundamental need.

To be able to improve the locally based network of acute services for those needing complex and long-term care, along with improved community mental health centres and practical supports for carers, we need governments to redirect funding priorities in this direction. COVID19 has thrown up how much we all depend on each other and the healthcare system. But in mental health it is still grossly underfunded (pp 10-11) and fails to honour the rights of individuals and their families.

Your parishes and schools can become voices for policy and funding changes, as well as being practical agents for new approaches in your local areas. Once you get to know the mental health system and related NGOs in your area, and how they serve (or not serve) the needs of young and old, you can become advocates for systemic change as well as being hands-on locally. The Justice and Peace Office can provide guidance in understanding what may be the most relevant steps to take in your local context.

As far as systemic changes go, we need to see much more independent oversight and public accountability of how mental health funds are allocated. Local Health District boards have been uneven in ensuring effective community mental health is a priority at the Statewide level, and Primary Health Networks control Federal mental health funds but they are closed shops to most communities and don't engage with them actively enough. These are the bodies controlling local and regional expenditure in mental health, and they need to be much more accountable to the communities they are meant to serve.

Your parishes and schools can become part of the new movement for reform, and the Justice and Peace Office can assist you in planning the most effective combination of local action and higher level advocacy for reform and accountability.

4. KNOW THAT FAITH-BASED COMMUNITIES HAVE HOLISTIC WAYS TO CARE

Because human beings are "a unity of body, mind and spirit, and we are persons-in-community" (p 13) we need a more holistic approach to supporting those living with challenges, not just the medical approach. While looking after the practical needs and social determinants (physical health, housing, food, transport etc) of health, we also need to pay attention to "the mystery of the Transcendent" (p 3), which means listening to and respecting the spiritual journey of those going through mental distress.

This can be expressed in local schools and parishes once people have learnt more about the nature of mental illness. But we know that mystery and wonder are natural parts of God's creation, and mental illness is one window into that field of unknowns, requiring sensitive, patient, listening support. Young and old alike often share a sense of bewilderment with life's complex challenges, and we all can help to make this conversation a natural one to have. This helps to make it OK to be sometimes confused, fearful, anxious or depressed by what can seem to be life's overwhelming issues.

Making your community a mental health friendly one can open all sorts of new discussions about what it's like "to have a bad hair day", or "feel like having a spack attack" – using lighter expressions to disarm the topic and to create an invitation to explore how people are feeling. This is the beginning of creating mutual understanding to support the Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) of everyone in your community.

Pastoral Care needs to be holistic, providing a wrap-around effect for those living with challenges and their carers. Neither priests nor school principals or teachers are experts in this field, but they can be part of a mix of local support networks, who work with clinicians (GPs, psychologists), school counsellors and NGO teams, to create Communities of Belonging where people can feel heard and safe.

By forming support groups who know how the system works locally, and who is good at what areas of practical support, you can put faith into action and support the common good. The Justice and Peace Office can help to guide you in establishing this sort of integrated approach between your parishes and schools if they are not already active in this space. The aim will be to know how to connect in with person-centred care services that cover health, housing, social services and spiritual support.

5. UNDERSTAND MORE OF HOW YOUNG & OLDER PEOPLE NEED SUPPORT

Young people are most prone to mental distress, which occurs predominantly in the under 25 year age bracket (p 4). By offering local school and parish-based youth peer to peer support, visits by specialists like Beyond Blue, Be You for schools, and headspace for young people in and out school (from 12-25 years of age), you can break the cycle of “not knowing what to do.”

Conversation groups around mental health issues, and openly discussing current challenges such as social media bullying, sexting and feelings of hopelessness and suicidality, can be part of a combined set of solutions. Shying away from these topics only keeps shoving things under the carpet, but if you are feeling unsure of how to address them, get help from your local Catholic Schools Office or contact the Justice and Peace Office.

It is OK to not be an expert in mental health and still want to make a difference. Even headspace is unable to effectively help with complex cases for young people, so knowing how to access the right contacts in the local adult mental health service, in a way that is not intimidating for young people and their families, is an essential practical support.

Similarly, older people can suffer from their own unique challenges, and they need local hands-on support to address social isolation, depression and challenges like loss of partners and friends (p 5). You have the means to be part of answering these needs locally and through your advocacy on the statewide and national level.

Catholic aged care and social services have networks across the community, so parishes can be more active with them in supporting hands-on outreach to older people and their carers. The challenge of dementia, stroke and other health issues among older people need both access to clinical expertise and the local social support networks, to ensure isolation and loneliness don't make the problems much worse.

There are ways to form effective youth and elders support systems in your area, meeting your local cultural mix. The Justice and Peace Office can help you plan for such actions, to meet the specific needs of your local area.

6. MAKE OUR FIRST PEOPLES ONE OF OUR FIRST PRIORITIES

Because of ongoing transgenerational trauma, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have suffered massive mental health challenges ever since Europeans occupied their land. The ongoing effects of Stolen Generations, Deaths in Custody and the need to Close the Gap in Health and Education outcomes are all indicators of why we need local communities to get to know each other more.

This is the beginning of engaging in mutual understanding and Reconciliation Action Planning to holistically address the interconnected and complex causes of trauma, mental health and ongoing drug and alcohol addictions, when people seek pain relief from that trauma.

By working together with local Traditional Owner groups, Land Councils and Aboriginal Health services, we can engage with movements like the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which is one expression for honouring First Nations peoples (pp 14-15). There are other calls for a Treaty, for changing Police and Court processes towards young and adult First Nations people. All these movements need more advocacy to change policies and practices that maintain discrimination, racism and disadvantage.

By meeting your local First Nations community groups and seeking to understand their experiences, you can become partners in the changes that need to occur before mental health can improve among all ages.

Has your school or parish sought to establish a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)? This is the best way to go on a patient learning journey, guided by the local elders, to begin understanding what has happened in your area, and what needs to happen next to restore relations of mutual respect and friendship.

The Justice and Peace Office can help with guidance on where to begin, if you have not yet explored this field of local community partnership building.

7.BE THERE FOR VULNERABLE GOUPS – ESPECIALLY RURAL & REMOTE, MULTICULTURAL, HOMELESS AND INCARCERATED

Schools and parishes have been encouraged by Pope Francis to “take the initiative and go out to those pushed to the edges, rather than waiting for them to come to us” (p 7). We need to be actively expressing the Catholic Social Teachings of support for human dignity and the common good, removing stigma and including those who suffer.

While advocating for systemic improvements, we can also directly address the needs of rural and remote, multicultural, homeless and incarcerated people. Local families who are vulnerable can be supported practically with food and help paying bills, with transport and sometimes accommodation.

The way your community opens its doors to those in need and provides practical pastoral care (p 8) will be the best way to reverse the negative stereotyping and stigma of mental distress. This affects all ages, locations, cultures and socio-economic groups, but the poor and disadvantaged are hardest hit by mental distress.

There are several key items that need to be uppermost in creating more effective Statewide and local mental health support:

(1) Social Housing available for those in need – governments at all levels (National, State & Local) need to do much more to expand social housing and help those without homes to find affordable places to live. This needs to include allocating public investment, forcing developers to create a percentage of social housing whenever they build commercial properties, and making planners include social housing in every new estate.

(2) Creating local Community Mental Health Rehabilitation Centres and Recovery Colleges – which honour lived experience and give equal roles to those living with challenges alongside clinicians and adult educators in delivering the programs.

(3) Make Multicultural Mental Health a priority – so those from other cultures can be helped in ways that are respectful of and sensitive to the historic and cultural backgrounds they have come from, and what special needs they may have, after experiencing intergenerational trauma back home and since arriving.

(4) Reform Australia’s treatment of Refugees and Asylum Seekers and replace the current Immigration Detention System – to allow for Refugees to become valued members of our society, and to be supported in recovering from the trauma they have experienced in coming here, and since encountering the current systemically punitive Australian immigration detention system.

(5) Create Rural and Remote Mental Health Services that link to integrated community care and support.

(6) Create Pre-release Rehabilitation and Post-release support for those coming out of Prison – so they can find housing, social support and meaningful roles in our society.

8. BE ACTIVE AGENTS OF SOCIAL SOLIDARITY IN YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY

When families suffer from job losses and resulting poverty (pp 5-7), relationship breakdown or stresses due to natural disasters (drought, fires etc) they can enter into the troubled waters of addiction (alcohol, drugs, gambling or computer games), mental distress, and sometimes domestic and family violence, often leading to social isolation.

Local support is the fastest way to ensure individuals and family groups don't collapse under these sorts of pressures. Your schools and parishes can be places of welcome and support, by actively reaching out to those who are suffering. By setting up peer to peer support programs among young people, visiting homes after school and on weekends, and being there for one-on-one conversations, timely local intervention can often help to avoid major mental distress, while you argue for systemic change to improve services.

Carers of young and old need much more support, including both professional care and community networks of practical help. Parishes and schools can become one-stop-shops for this sort of networked help.

Those with complex needs need more effective support both within hospitals and on discharge. Community rehabilitation centres, and recovery colleges (where lived experience counts equally alongside clinical support on the staff), are badly needed across the country. This can be brought about by combined lobbying and local action to form networks of services to create their own new ventures.

Person-centred care means the person comes first, not the clinical health system, which can be daunting and off putting for most people. Local parishes can be part of ensuring the health service is more responsive to the needs of those living with mental distress and their carers, by visiting people there and checking on how well this sort of approach is applied locally (or not). Your voices are the ones that count – local people calling for local reform, plus lobbying and advocacy on a state and national level.

The Justice and Peace Office can provide guidance if you are unsure of how best to approach this set of challenges.

9. LOBBY FOR MORE DEDICATED LOCAL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES OFFERING PERSON-CENTRED SUPPORT – WITH INDEPENDENT, ACCOUNTABLE FUNDING

Australia desperately needs more person-centred, community-based Rehabilitation Centres and Recovery Colleges, where people with lived experience of mental challenges can feel at home and work alongside clinicians and adult educators as equals, helping to create and deliver programs forming new pathways to discovering lives lived fully in society.

There are major gaps in the system currently (p 2), with funding preferences always going to more clinical positions, which effectively keep “pathologizing” mental illness. Changing this culture is a decision for state governments, local health authorities and federally-funded primary health networks. They all need to be lobbied to plan for changing these priorities, to create dedicated, independent and accountable funding for more person-centred and community-run services in local community settings.

Catholic health and human service providers also need to address this same gap, by examining their own programs to make them more empowering for those with lived experience and carers, while preventing funds being reallocated to mainstream “expert” clinical services. So if you can find out what is or is not happening in your area, you can work towards increasing advocacy for improved service provision (p 8), as well as practical ways to acknowledge, support, engage with and celebrate those with lived experience.

A campaign to establish more Community-based Rehabilitation Centres and Recovery Colleges, staffed equally by people with lived experience alongside clinicians and adult educators, would radically change the culture of Australian mental health support. Catholic parishes and schools can be leaders in this field if there is the will to follow Pope Francis' and the Australian Catholic Bishops' leadership on helping those affected by mental distress as priorities in 2020-21.

The Justice and Peace Office can help guide your thinking on these issues if they appear too complex to know where to start.

10. BE AGENTS OF CHANGE WORKING MORE IN YOUR OWN PARISHES AND SCHOOLS

To reject stigmatization and work effectively in addressing the social determinants of health we need to work locally, statewide and nationally (p 18). Your parish or school can become active in liaising with the local hospitals, general practice clinics, and non government organisations like Catholic Care, Vinnies etc to become active participants in increasing support offered in your community.

At the same time we need more combined voices, young and old, arguing for reforms in mental health that have been called for in multiple reports since the 1980s. Your local actions and informed calls to your local MPs will help to force the changes needed, to create more holistic care for all those suffering mental distress, rejecting stigmatization, improving the social determinants of health, and embracing person-centred, community-based care.

By starting to campaign locally at both levels, in the community and with politicians and health bureaucrats, your parishes and schools can help improve life for all ages and stages in life. This can include steps such as:

- (1) Form a committee to explore how your parish and school can engage more effectively with mental health services, and work to improve the Social & Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) of all ages in your community.
- (2) Investigate the successful models for Recovery Colleges and Community-based Mental Health Rehabilitation Centres, which are spread all over Australia, but yet to be systematically supported by government funding.
- (3) Be promoters of Peer to Peer Support programs in your parish and school among the different age groups (Young People, Adult, and Older People), Cultural groups, and Networks of Carers and Lived Experience supporters.
- (4) Explore the local Hospital-to-Home Service for those being discharged from mental health wards, and find out what support people get when they leave hospital – you may be able to help develop better supports in community settings for those with the challenges and their carers.

The Justice and Peace Office can help you to explore these issues if they seem too complex to know where to begin.

