

Supporting you through Anxiety and Depression

Online Toolkit

September 2019



Creating a mentally healthier world



A diagnosis can be positive

From time to time we all need a little help and support no matter who we are or where we live. Talking about mental illness can be tough, but it's an opportunity as well: to help you understand the reality of a depression or anxiety diagnosis and learn strategies that will help you get, and stay, well.

Mental Illness : Fiction vs Fact

FICTION		FACT
Mental illness only affects a few people	V	Mental health issues are common: one in five Australians will experience a mental illness
Mental illness is caused by weakness	V	Mental illness is not a character flaw. It's caused by a range of genetic, biological, social and environmental factors
People with a mental illness can "pull themselves out of it"	V	Mental illness isn't caused by weakness and it's not 'cured' by just being strong either
People with a mental illness never get better	V	With appropriate treatment, many people can – and do – recover from mental ill-health
Mental illness permanently reduces a person's capacity to function at work	V	When a person experiences mental ill health they may not be as productive as usual. But recovery generally means they will return to their full capacity at work.

Mental illness affects everyone

Living with a mental illness can significantly impact our quality of life and impacts the people around us too: our parents, partner, children, friends, co-workers or community.

According to the World Health Organisation, depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide and in Australia, the leading cause of non-fatal disability. It's important that everybody knows what to look out for and how to help.

The first step is learning to recognise the signs and symptoms, distinguish normal moods, sadness or worry from something more serious, and to understand when to seek help. We know people can manage depression and anxiety, and we know treatments are available. It's important to seek help early to avoid longer-term suffering.

This Tool Kit provides suggestions on a range of ways to seek support and assistance no matter where you live.



You are not alone



Craig's experience

"I'm a former NSW Police Detective Sergeant. In 2012, after a 25-year career, I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and major depressive disorder. I was medically discharged from the force. When I was first diagnosed, I had mixed feelings. I was fearful of what the diagnoses meant for my future, but also relieved because I finally had a name for the problems I'd been living with for many years. I've learned to accept my diagnoses. Now I look at them no differently than if I'd been diagnosed with a serious physical illness or injury."



Wayne's experience

"I'm an ex-NRL player and firefighter, and now work as an educator. I enjoy the simple things in life: swimming, running, chilling out in nice surroundings. I was diagnosed with melancholia when I was 50, something I'd been dealing with since I was 12. When I was first diagnosed, I felt relieved: I finally understood what was wrong. My doctor explained that I'd been brave tackling it; I wasn't weak as I'd thought. Now I understand I have an illness that needs to be managed like many others. By knowing the enemy and how to manage it, I can fight."



John's experience

I had a bloke come and pick up some parts, I got out of the ute and he looked at my legs, I had this cirrhosis on my legs, and he said that's cirrhosis – caused by depression. I had no idea that I was suffering depression, but I'd tried all sorts of remedies to get rid of this and that made me realise I needed to get a bit of help. Once I got a bit of help was able to get through that period of depression.



Amy's experience

I live by the beach and enjoy ocean swimming and surfing. I was diagnosed with anxiety and depression when I was 16. I felt pretty overwhelmed when I was diagnosed: I'd never thought of myself as someone who had a mental illness. Now I realise that the diagnosis doesn't define me – it's just a part of who I am. Being diagnosed has also helped me communicate what I'm experiencing with mental health professionals, family and friends."

What is depression?

We all have times when we feel low, have a drop in our self-worth and feel somewhat depressed. In most cases, we 'bounce back'. People with clinical depression, however, experience these feelings intensely, for long periods of time and sometimes, for no apparent reason. And they can't just snap out of it: the strategies we usually use to lift our mood simply don't work. Depression influences not only how we feel, but also how we think, behave and interact with others. Someone with depression can start to feel isolated and withdrawn from what's going on around them. And these feelings – the "black dog" – begin to follow them everywhere.

Common signs of depression include:

- lowered self-esteem or self-worth,
- changed sleep patterns, insomnia or broken sleep,
- changes in appetite or weight,
- reduced ability to control emotions like pessimism, anger, guilt, irritability and anxiety, fluctuating emotions throughout the day (such as feeling worse in the morning and better as the day progresses),
- reduced energy levels,
- reduced capacity to experience pleasure: not enjoying what's happening now nor looking forward to anything,
- reduced pain tolerance and sometimes a host of new ailments,
- reduced or absent sex drive,
- poor concentration and memory, and
- reduced motivation: things seem meaningless and not worth the effort.

If these signs persist for most days over a two-week period and interfere with your ability to manage at home and while working, you might benefit from seeing a mental health professional for an assessment.

1. Lelliott P, Tulloch S, Boardman J, Harvey S, Henderson M, Knapp M. Mental Health and Work. London: Cross Government Health Work and Well-being Programme, 2008

1 in 6 people will
experience depression
at some stage of their life¹



What does depression feel like?

Produced by Matthew Johnstone for WHO

What is anxiety?

Just as there are times when you might feel down, but are not clinically depressed, there are times when you will feel anxious, but do not have an anxiety disorder.

It's normal to feel anxious in high pressure situations: family commitments, life changes and environmental conditions that make the future uncertain. To some degree, this sort of anxiety can help us focus and stay alert. Anxiety becomes a problem when you start to feel this way most of the time, about minor things and the worry interferes with your day-to-day life.

Anxiety disorders are a mix of:

- psychological symptoms: frequent or excessive worry, poor concentration, or specific fears or phobias such as a fear of dying or losing control,
- physical symptoms: fatigue, irritability, sleeping difficulties, general restlessness, muscle tension, upset stomach, sweating or difficulty breathing, and
- behavioural changes: procrastination, avoidance, difficulty making decisions or social withdrawal.

To be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, a combination of these symptoms is typically present most days for over six months and interfere with your ability to function while working or at home.

It's common to experience a low mood as well as excessive worry and the two conditions – clinical depression and anxiety disorder – can occur at the same time.

1. Lelliott P, Tulloch S, Boardman J, Harvey S, Henderson M, Knapp M. Mental Health and Work. London: Cross Government Health Work and Well-being Programme, 2008

1 in 4 people will
experience anxiety¹



What does anxiety feel like?

Produced by BeyondBlue

Fears vs reality

“I was afraid I wouldn’t be believed. That people wouldn’t understand. That they’d think I was weak or crazy. In reality, when the time came to tell people about my illnesses, I was not only believed but received an enormous amount of support from family and friends.”

Craig’s Experience

Fears like Craig’s are common, but the reality is often very different.

FEAR		REALITY
Fear of labels or being called names	✓	With greater education and understanding, the reality is that we can develop more empathy.
Fear of medications or the side effects they may have	✓	Many people are misinformed about the role and side effects of medication. They might even avoid seeking help because of this fear. The reality is not everyone needs medication.
Fear of being seen as weak	✓	People living in rural or remote areas are more likely to experience mental health issues than those living in the city. Chances are, there are other people in your community who are going through the same thing.



Information for family and friends

“How can I help?” is one of the most common questions about mental illness.

If you're worried about someone in your life:



Start by creating
space to talk



Gently let them
know why
you are **concerned**



Encourage
them to **open up**



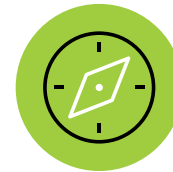
Listen first



Take things at
their pace



Offer
warm support



Respect
their point
of view



Validate their
experiences



But remember, you can't make someone get help – they have to be ready.
Download the Black Dog Institute's fact sheet for some more tips about how you
can support people in your life who might be dealing with mental ill-health.

Mental illness at home

“Being from a macho background, I was worried I’d be perceived as weak and people’s attitudes towards me would change. I was afraid my sons would lose respect for their father.

In reality, the majority of my friends were understanding, and a surprising number told me that they may be suffering as well. My sons rallied around me and some of their friends shared personal experiences with me too. The boys all began talking about it and supporting each other, which I hadn’t expected.”

Wayne’s experience

“I was afraid my family and friends would treat me differently once they heard I’d experienced anxiety and depression. In fact, talking with them about what I was going through was immensely rewarding. They provided unconditional love and support. It was amazing to realise I had people in my life that cared so much about me.”

Amy’s experience

Talking to your kids

Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI) has a great collection of resources for families: guides for speaking to kids of all ages about mental illness, tips for supporting family members and friends, strategies for dealing with potential periods of illness in the future, and much more, all available at www.copmi.net.au

Here are some of the key things COPMI recommend thinking about before talking to your kids:

- consider their age and how they might best understand what's going on. For example, even very young children can gain some understanding if they're told "Mum's not well. You've done nothing wrong and she's getting help so she can get better",
- you shouldn't expect to have all the answers but be as prepared as you can. Be honest, positive, hopeful and reassuring,
- remember that one discussion is never enough: a real understanding takes time and a child's questions and need for information will change as they grow,
- encourage them to ask questions or raise concerns whenever they want, and be there for them when they do, and
- let them know there are other people they can talk to if they want:
Kids Helpline is available on **1800 55 1800**, 24 hours a day and is anonymous and free.

There's also a section of the COPMI website with information, advice and support that's been written specifically for children and young people.



Visit COPMI

Looking ahead

Most cases of mental illness can be managed, but it's important to prepare for a time when you may become unwell again. Here are some strategies to help you prepare:

- build up a network of trusted relatives, friends or teachers who can offer your kids support,
- if it's appropriate, explain the situation to teachers and parents of school friends, so any misinformation or hurtful comments can be stopped as soon as possible. Children may need some guidance about how to respond to questions or teasing from other kids. It helps if there's a teacher or other adult at school who they can reach out and talk to,
- make sure there's someone you and your kids know and trust who can care for them at short notice if you become unwell,
- if older children are taking on more responsibility with chores or their younger siblings, make sure they have a support network around them, and
- find out if there are local services or groups for kids whose parent has a mental illness. Your support team or local Carers Association will be able to help.

Here's some excellent resources that have lots of tips and advice for families, friends, carers and kids:

SANE (Australia) - sane.org

Kids Helpline - www.kidshelpline.com.au | 1800 551 800



[Download a list of useful contacts and helplines to have on hand if you need them.](#)

Tools for your wellbeing

The Black Dog Institute's Wellbeing Plan can help guide conversations with friends and family. Work through it together to develop a plan that works for all of you. Your support team can help refine the plan too if you need help: take it along to your next appointment. Review it regularly and keep it updated, and remember it's a guide only – adapt it to suit your needs.



[Download the Wellbeing Plan](#)

Black Dog Institute's myCompass is a free online self-help program for people who have been feeling down, stressed or anxious or simply want to build good mental health.

mycompass.org.au



Mental illness at work

Generally, there's no obligation to tell your employer about a mental health condition if it doesn't affect how well you do your job. However, you do need to tell them when your condition:

- affects how you carry out the requirements of your job. You are sharing information so that the employer can identify any reasonable adjustments that could help you do your job
- affects your health and safety and/or the health and safety of your colleagues, and
- is affected or could be affected by the nature of your work. A failure to disclose a mental illness may have an impact on workers compensation should you suffer any recurrence, aggravation or exacerbation of a pre-existing mental illness.



What are 'reasonable adjustments'?

Employers have a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments to help a person maintain their mental wellness to remain at work.

Reasonable adjustments are modifications that can be made to a job role for a person experiencing mental ill-health. Reasonable adjustments include things like change to your tasks, work environment, hours or how much supervision or support you need. Some examples of reasonable adjustments are:

Some examples of reasonable adjustments are:

- allow personal phone calls for emotional support
- flexible start and finish times
- schedule time for medical/psychological appointments
- switch to smaller tasks

Employers must make such adjustments, unless:

- the worker couldn't or can't satisfactorily perform the essential requirements of their job even after the reasonable adjustments are made or,
- making the adjustments would impose an unjustifiable hardship on the employer

A failure to make reasonable adjustments for a worker or prospective worker experiencing mental illness can constitute discrimination.

Your rights and responsibilities

Both employers and workers have formal rights and responsibilities under discrimination, privacy, and work health and safety legislation.



[Try the Heads Up tool to weigh the pros and cons of telling your employer or co-workers about your situation](#)



“When I began my career in the police force, the culture seemed like we had to be tough enough to deal with anything. I feared that declaring my illnesses was declaring failure, and I had a genuine fear I’d be forced out of a career I loved.

In reality, I was supported by my colleagues and immediate superiors. They encouraged me to take as much time as I needed to get well. Unfortunately, because I hadn’t got help early, my illnesses became so severe that a medical discharge was unavoidable. My eventual recovery took five long years.”

Craig’s experience

Your rights

Protection from discrimination

If you have a mental health condition, certain laws protect you against discrimination in the workplace. The Australia-wide Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) and other equivalent federal, state and territory laws make it unlawful to discriminate against, harass or victimise people with disabilities, including in an employment context.

Privacy

Your rights to privacy are set out in the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) and the 13 Australian Privacy Principles. If you tell your employer you have a mental health condition, they can't disclose this information to anyone without your consent. They can only use the information for the purpose for which you told them, such as adjusting your role or working environment to accommodate your mental health condition.

A healthy, safe workplace

Health and safety legislation requires employers to ensure that workplaces are physically and mentally healthy for all workers. That means they must make sure your work environment doesn't harm mental wellbeing or aggravate an existing condition. Under each state's work health and safety (WH&S) practicable, means they must take action to prevent or lessen potential risks to the health and safety of you and your co-workers, including to mental wellbeing.

Your responsibilities

If your mental health condition doesn't affect how you do your job, there's no legal obligation to tell your employer about it. That applies whether you are a current employee or a potential employee going through the recruitment process. WH&S laws protect your right to a safe workplace; you have responsibilities under the same legislation. You must take care of yourself and others and cooperate with your employer in matters of health and safety. This applies to all workers, whether they have a disability or not. In addition, under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth), your ability to work safely is an 'inherent' or essential requirement of any job. If mental illness could reasonably be seen to create a health and safety risk for other people at your place of work, then failing to tell anyone about that risk could be a breach of your obligations under the legislation.

"I feared I'd be treated differently and overlooked for promotion. That my career prospects would be affected. The reality was that people at work were supportive and understanding and it gave them understanding of my behaviour."

Wayne's experience

"I feared that I would be treated differently at work if I spoke about my experience of anxiety and depression. Being open about my mental health at work has allowed me to bring my full self to work."

Amy's experience

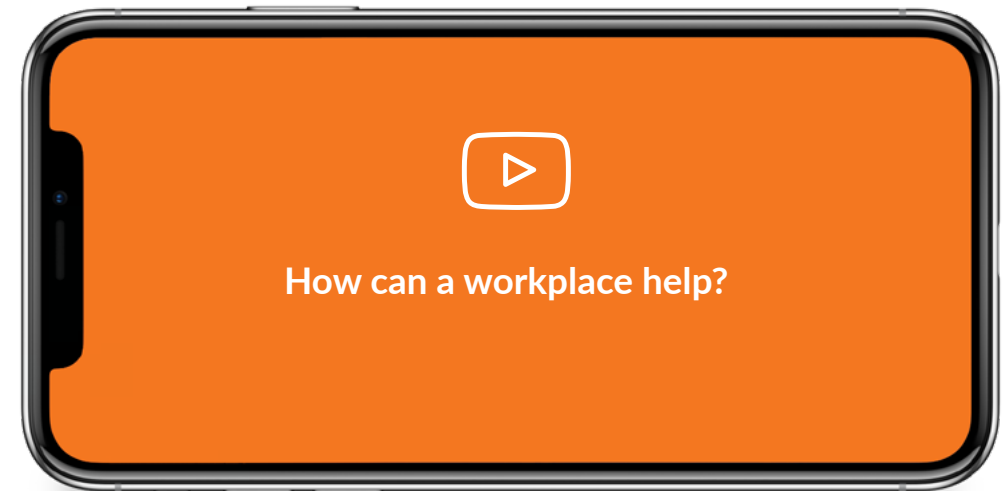
Staying at work

It may seem that taking time off work is the best solution, but that's not always the case. Most people with mild to moderate mental health issues can function at work (perhaps with some reasonable adjustment to their duties) and benefit from being there. The benefits include:

- a sense of belonging, which is an important part of resilience, and avoiding isolation at home,
- maintaining productivity and a sense of achievement,
- having a healthy distraction,
- maintaining a routine,
- being better able to track progress,
- receiving support from peers and employer,
- resolving factors that cause or worsen issues, leading towards less 'mental scar tissue' at work
- removing fears that can arise after some absence, like the possible reactions of co-workers, and
- increased commitment to work for an employer who's actively trying to help.

An employee should take time away from work, however, if they're:

- at risk of self-harming or suicidal behaviour,
- a danger to others or behaving in a way that's significantly affecting other employees, and reasonable adjustment is impossible or doesn't improve the situation,
- showing signs of psychosis (e.g. delusions of grandeur, paranoia or hearing voices),
- suffering from very deep depression, often characterised by psychomotor slowing, which severely impacts upon concentration, motivation, productivity and capacity to control emotions, and
- very agitated and unable to control their emotions.



Start a conversation with a mate

Regular, simple, casual conversations help build a sense of belonging and connectedness, which has been shown to promote wellbeing. Make time to ask friends, neighbours and co-workers, about their weekend, how their holiday was or simply how things are going.

Checking in regularly with your co-workers, friends and neighbours means we're more likely to notice when things are different or behaviours change. It can help people to be more open to sharing and make a 'difficult' conversation easier.

If you notice a change in a co-worker's, friend's or neighbour's behaviour or performance, ask yourself if it might be due to an underlying personal or mental health issue. If you think that's a possibility, have a chat and ask how they're going. Here are some pointers to help you start that conversation:

- choose a time and a place that suits you both: somewhere private when you both have time to talk,
- talk about the changes you've noticed and ask if they want to talk about anything,
- encourage them to talk, but accept that they may not want to,
- listen and show that you're listening – don't jump in with a solution,
- find out if they're ready to look for help and if you can help them do that, and
- check in after a few days and see how they're going.



[Some tools and tips to help start a conversation](#)



Keeping healthy

If you have people working with you or for you, here are some things you can do to promote mental health and wellbeing at work. Research shows that the way our jobs are designed, the way our workplaces are structured and function, and the support we receive from our co-workers are important factors in developing a mentally healthy workplace. Here are some things you can do:

- Build an ongoing feedback loop. Make time for regular, informal conversations with your workers/co-workers. Regular conversations and feedback are more likely to help people feel valued and allows more opportunities to get to know them as individuals. You're also more likely to notice changes in behaviour or performance, and feel more comfortable asking about their wellbeing and mental health.
- Everyone benefits from fully understanding their role: a lack of job clarity is a key feature in workplace stress. Find regular opportunities to discuss tasks and what's expected of your workers/co-workers.
- Encourage trusting and respectful communication. Always hold sensitive conversations in places that provide privacy and respect.
- Make work meaningful. Having regular conversations about how individuals contribute to the overall direction of the business can help people feel connected.
- Set the standard: if you witness or hear behaviour or conversations that are inappropriate, intervene quickly.
- Be aware of your behaviour and the messages you send, an employer or co-worker.
- Acknowledge good work and achievements.
- Offer support by suggesting online or telephone resources like Lifeline, Beyond Blue.

Workplace Wellbeing Plan

The Black Dog Institute's Workplace Wellbeing Plan can help guide conversations with your employer or co-workers. Work through it together to develop a plan that works for all of you. Your support team can help refine the plan too if you need help: take it along to your next appointment. Review it regularly and keep it updated, and remember it's a guide only – adapt it to suit your needs.



[Download the Wellbeing Plan template](#)

Getting well

Find a support team

Building a team to support you is key to managing mental illness, and the first step is quite straightforward: see your doctor. It's a good idea to request a long consultation when you book to make sure you've got time to cover all the aspects that go in to making an accurate diagnosis.

Your GP will conduct a general check-up to see if there are any physical causes for your symptoms and assess the nature of the mental health problem. They can refer you to other health professionals or services within your community. They can also provide suggestions for online resources and telephone support. Depending on the severity of your situation, medication may be prescribed to relieve your symptoms.

It's important to remember that the first GP you see might not be right for you. You should feel comfortable talking with your doctor about how you are feeling; you should expect time, confidentiality, good communication and empathy. If you don't feel you've 'clicked' with the practitioner, try another one until you find the right match.

Some GPs have completed specialised mental health care training; it's a good idea to ask your current doctor or ringing local practices to see if the practitioner you're seeing has that extra knowledge.

*“Someone kind and non-judgemental.
Someone who could help me understand
what was happening and connect me with
what makes me feel powerful and alive.”*

Adam's experience

Ask a friend or family member for support if you feel overwhelmed by the process



Book a
long
consultation



Get your
symptoms
assessed



Persist until
you find a **GP**
you 'click with'



You may be
referred
for expert advice
or therapy



You may need
medication

*I went and saw a local doctor and said look I'm really
struggling and he got me in to where I needed to go.
The phone services are amazingly available all the time,
so I would definitely use them again if I had to.”*

John's experience

Exercise your mood

Our level of physical health has an impact on our capacity for resilience and research suggests that regular physical activity can increase our body's natural chemicals (endorphins), which effect mood, sleep, libido, appetite and other functions.

The Australian Physical Activity Guidelines recommend at least 30 minutes of brisk walking or some form of activity where you notice a slight increase in your breathing and heart rate. Physical activity can be tough if you're feeling unwell, but you can start with smaller goals like walking to the letterbox or a bike ride around the farm.

“Exercise – and the endorphins it produces – is amazing.”

Wayne's experience

“I make sure to do some physical exercise every day, whether that be going for a run, a swim or a surf.”

Amy's experience



Eat good mood food

Physical health also includes a healthy diet, regular meals and adequate sleep. Eat a balanced diet and minimise processed foods, sugars, coffee and energy drinks.

Some foods can also have a positive impact on your mood, including those that contain omega-3. Check out the Black Dog Institute's fact sheet about the benefits.

“Exercise helped. Good food. Good people. Doing small, manageable things that felt like I'd accomplished something, that I was worthwhile. Doing things I love and being kind and gentle to myself instead of harsh and critical.”

Adam's experience



[Omega-3 Benefits](#)

Build good friendships

Good relationships are incredibly valuable for building resilience. Put into your friendships what you expect in return – love, support, respect – and think about a person in your life who is generally supportive of you, someone you'd like to build an even better relationship with. Think about how you could give back to them to strengthen your relationship.

“My close friends have been an immense help to me. They point me in the right direction if they think I need to visit my doctor or take some time for myself, and they listen. Sometimes you just need someone to listen.”

Tara's experience

Be the gate keeper of your thoughts

The way you think about things can affect your resilience. Try to be a 'gate keeper' of negative or unhelpful thoughts by holding the key to them: only you can change the way you think about things.

Picking up some problem solving, goal setting, and time management skills can help as well, and make sure you acknowledge your successes and praise your achievements.

“When I have negative thoughts, I remind myself about the good things I have rather than concentrating on the worries.”

Wayne's experience



Keep a level head

Staying level-headed when you're dealing with everyday stresses is another way to build resilience. It's easy to get overly anxious when you're confronted with stressful events, but how you respond to life's challenges can influence your mood and outlook. One of the easiest and most effective ways to build resilience is to regularly practice slow breathing. Research has shown that this simple practice can lower blood pressure and heart rate, reduce stress hormones, improve immune system functioning, and increase physical energy and feelings of calm and wellbeing.

Help others

Helping others and being part of a bigger picture can help you tremendously: the simple act of giving has the greatest returns. Contribute to your family, social groups or the wider community through volunteering programs or local groups. It's also valuable to have a set of guiding principles, things that are reflected in the decisions you make and what's most important in your life. These can help you stay focused on what really matters.

Discover what gives you meaning

Having a spiritual dimension in our lives can make us happier and more resilient, and it needn't involve religion. Spirituality can provide meaning and connect us to 'something bigger' outside our daily life. You can build resilience in this area by identifying the things in your life that give you a sense of meaning and purpose: that might be your faith, your family, hobbies, community, sport, school, work, the environment – whatever you feel connected to.

“I’m fully aware of my risk of relapse and have my own recovery game plan, which includes a few different strategies: mindfulness, regular enjoyable exercise including yoga, practising ‘gratitude’ and doing volunteer work. Total commitment to these strategies led to my eventual recovery.”

Craig's experience



Appreciate the little things

Being mindful and appreciative of the little things – not just the big – can help you build your resilience. Take a moment to appreciate:

- the taste and smell of a cup of coffee,
- the sun on your face,
- the warm water on your back in the shower,
- the joy and innocence of a small child,
- the love and loyalty of pets, and
- the experience of being in nature.

Relaxation techniques



[Need some tips and techniques to help you relax?](#)

[Visit the Black Dog's website for some ideas.](#)

“Because I feel panicked and overwhelmed if there’s too much going on day to day, I have to make time for myself. From experience, increasing my heart rate with aerobic exercise is my quickest fix. Other strategies are meditation and getting lost in a good book. Recently I’ve started working on mindfulness again.”

Tara’s experience



Emergency support

If you or someone you know is in crisis and needs immediate support, call emergency services on 000 (triple zero), contact your doctor or local mental health crisis service, or go to your local hospital emergency department.

Emergency contact information - 24 hours

Emergency on 000 (or 112 from a mobile phone)

Lifeline on 13 11 14

Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800

MensLine Australia on 1300 789 978

Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467



Kindly funded by the CBH Group

