

Media release

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The Black Dog Index – Measuring Australian mental health

A new measure of national mental health has been developed by the Black Dog Institute in response to international recognition that traditional economic-based measures do not sufficiently reflect a country's health.

The Black Dog Index aims to calculate our level of happiness and put a tally around how many of us are living with depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. Similar measures are formally collected in the UK and Canada.

Newspoll contacted over 1200 adults from all walks of life around the country and asked them to provide a score out of ten for a series of questions about their mental health and personal circumstances (including income, marital status, education and political views). The results were compiled into an overall "Happiness" score out of 100 which can be measured over time and linked with other measures such as the unemployment or mortgage interest rates.

According to Newspoll Chief Martin O'Shannessey, the happiest people were older, married, tertiary educated and earning over \$90,000. Conversely, depression was connected strongly with divorce.

Black Dog Institute Director, Professor Helen Christensen, initiated the project with the aim of broadly identifying what factors are involved with people feeling happy or unhappy. As well as giving a snapshot of rates of mental illness, the index will provide much needed information on how to more effectively improve overall mental health and reduce suicide rates.

"The good news is that the inaugural Black Dog Index score is quite high at 77. This means that overall we are quite a happy bunch of people," says Prof Christensen.

"Worryingly, the index also showed that four percent of respondents were actively troubled by suicidal thoughts. This translates to approximately half a million people across the country. With suicide now overtaking motor vehicle accidents as the major cause of death in young people, these are results we need to take very seriously."

"Traditionally, we have kept silent on suicide to minimise the risk of glorifying it. New evidence shows us that talking about suicide can be beneficial by encouraging people experiencing suicidal thoughts to seek treatment.

"It's my hope that new programs like the Black Dog Index will improve public awareness about suicide and help those people who feel life isn't worth living to contact Lifeline, their GP or a friend or family member to talk about it because help is available."

The Black Dog Index will be conducted by Newspoll every three months with results reporting in The Australian.

Contact

Gayle McNaught (M) 0401 625 905 or (E) g.mcnaught@blackdog.org.au