



Science.
Compassion.
Action.

Navigating Australia's mental health system in 2024

CONSUMER REPORT



Introduction

In Australia, mental ill health is rising.

That's despite decades of government investment, significant research endeavours, and a growing commitment to mental health training and support in schools and workplaces.

The scale of this issue is staggering; a recent report shows that **494,000 Australians living with moderate to severe mental health problems** are not receiving the support they desperately need ([Health Policy Analysis, 2024](#)).

More than 1 in 9 (or around 11.8%) of people aged 16–85 in Australia **appear to be in need of mental health care but aren't receiving it** ([ABS, 2020–2022](#)). For every person receiving treatment, **at least one person is going without**.

This is not just a gap in care — it is a national crisis.

These statistics form part of a grim trajectory; in Australia, **we are now passing on worse mental health outcomes to future generations**, far more so than any other serious illness.

Our mental health system is failing people's needs. But the ubiquity of this message often means the details get lost.



When we say...

"Australia's mental health is getting worse."

"Australia's mental health system is broken."

What do we mean?

And when we say...

"The system does not meet people's needs."

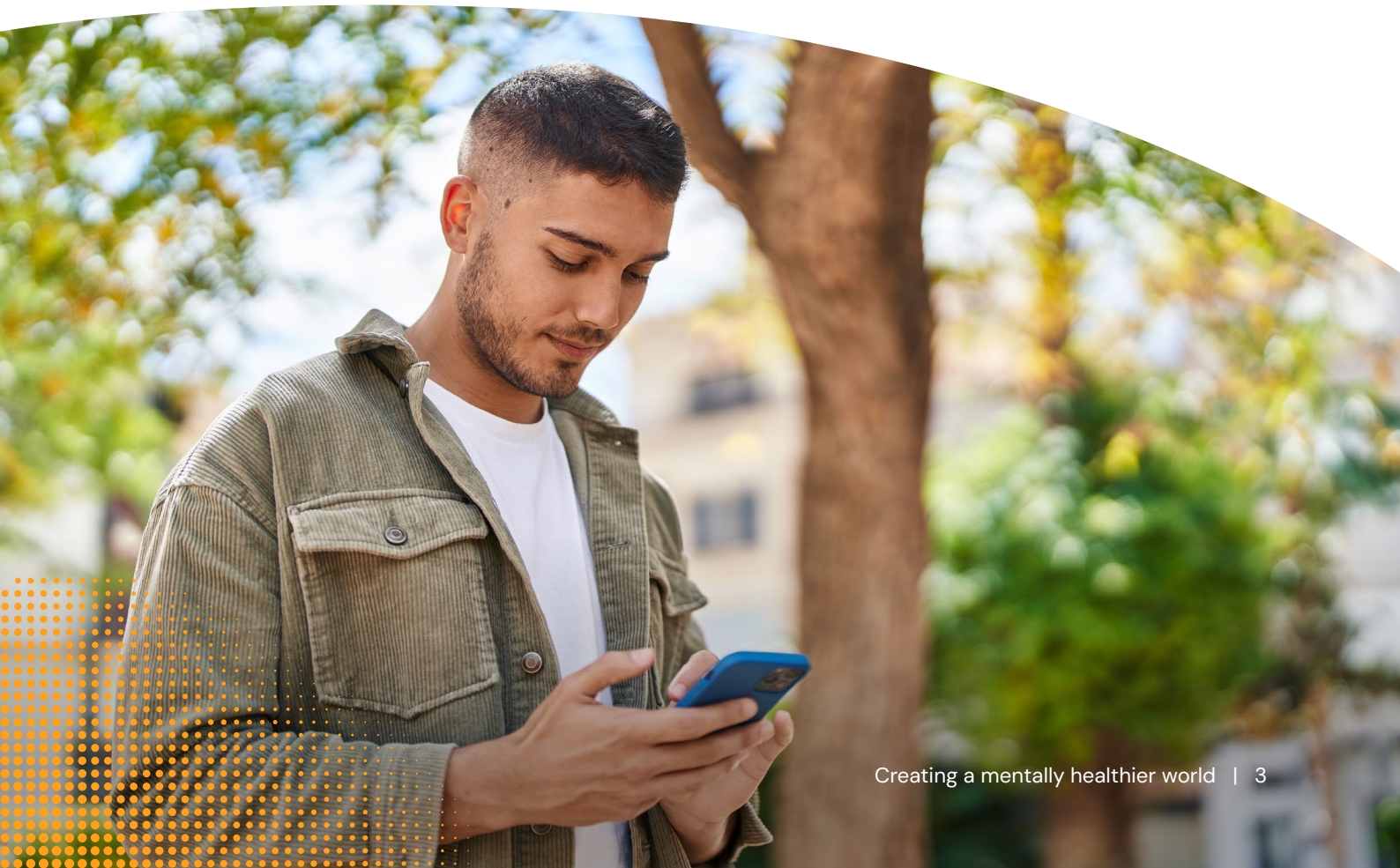
Who do we mean?

A snapshot of Australia's mental health

Timed ahead of Mental Health Month this October, Black Dog Institute conducted an online poll to 'pulse check' Australia's mental health. The results paint a stark picture.

Of people who sought mental health care in the last 12 months:

- > only 23% reported receiving timely and appropriate care
- > only 37% reported getting what they needed to improve their mental health
- > 77% reported waiting four or more months to seek help
- > 60% reported waiting more than 12 months to seek help
- > those who waited named cost, access, negative help-seeking experiences and stigma as key barriers
- > men and people living in rural or remote areas were less likely to have received the help that they needed
- > young people (18-24) were twice more likely to have struggled with the cost of accessing help compared to older adults (65-74).



About the poll

Our online poll was designed to gauge the real, human experiences of people living with and seeking help for their mental health issues. This poll was not a formal peer-reviewed research project; instead, it was an informal conversation with everyday Australians about their wellbeing and the state of our national mental health system.

The poll was published on Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and Black Dog Institute's website. Over two weeks, people aged 18 and over from across Australia who had mental health concerns in the past 12 months responded to questions about:

- whether they had sought help for their mental health in the last 12 months
- who they had approached for mental health support in the last 12 months
- how long they'd been experiencing symptoms before reaching out for help
- whether they received the help they needed to improve their mental health
- whether they felt they'd received timely and appropriate care.

Respondents were also given the option of providing demographic information (that is, about their age, gender identity and location).

Who responded?

People across a variety of ages (18–74+), gender identities and geographic locations completed the poll. A total of 4.3% of respondents identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

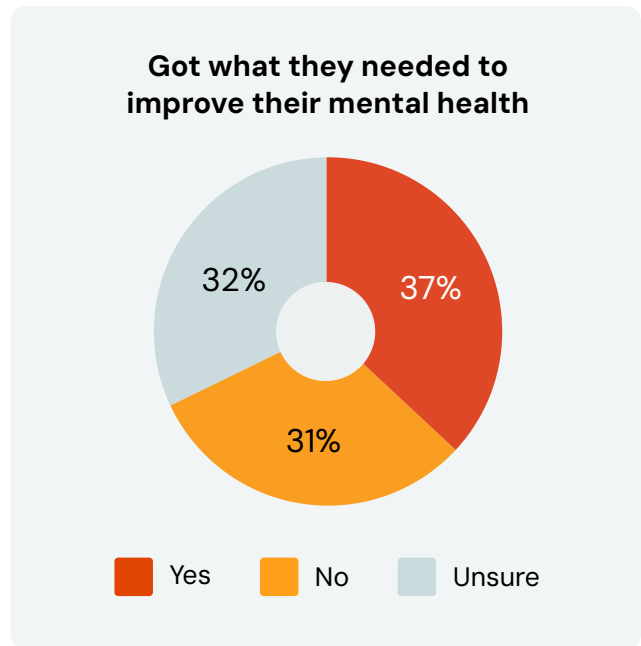
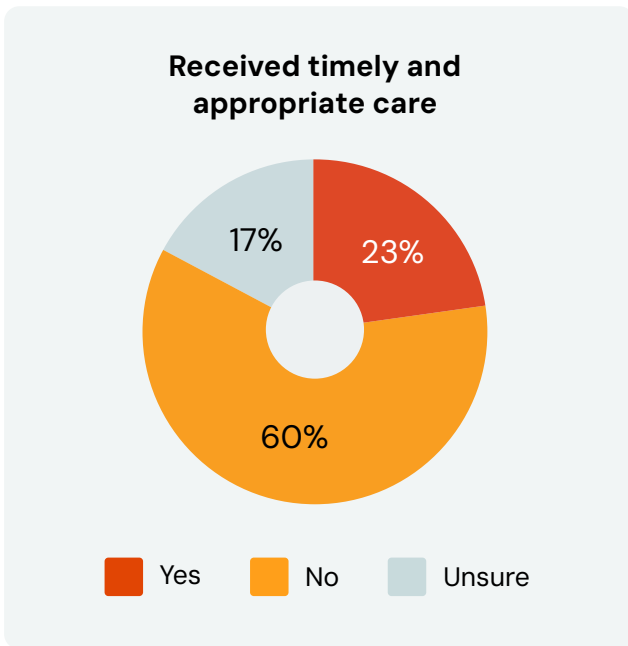
Overall, 2,722 responses were included in the final analyses. Of these:



Key findings

The mental health care system

The vast majority of respondents reported that the mental health system failed to support their needs. Among respondents who sought mental health support in the past 12 months:



Seeking help for mental health concerns

A significant proportion of people **delayed seeking help for their mental health**, despite experiencing concerning symptoms in the preceding 12 months. Among those who eventually sought help, 77% waited at least four months, and 60% waited more than 12 months.

When asked why **they didn't seek help sooner**, three common themes emerged:



of people named **cost** as a key reason for not seeking help or delaying seeking help.



of people said a **lack of services, not being able to find a suitable service or not being able to get an appointment** prevented them from seeking help sooner or at all.



of people said that **previous negative experiences** of seeking help for their mental health stopped them from seeking help sooner or at all.

Who is seeking help?

Mental health concerns exist at every intersection of Australia’s population. However, based on the poll findings, there are three groups who report facing particularly significant challenges:



Men

Men were **less likely to seek help for their mental health** compared to women and other gender identities. They were also **more likely than women to report stigma or fear of discrimination** as a barrier to help-seeking. When they did seek help, they were **less likely to report having received the support they needed** to improve their mental health.



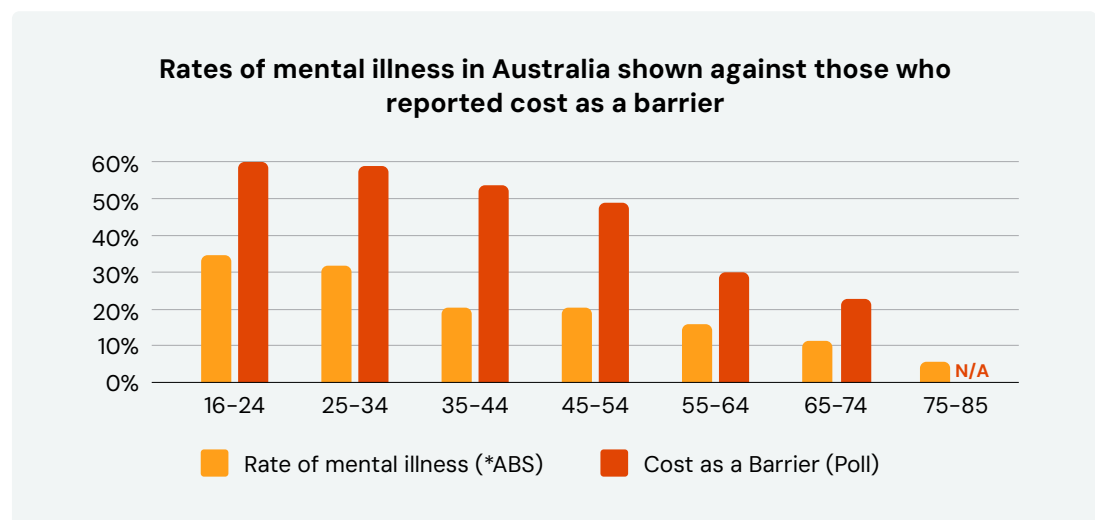
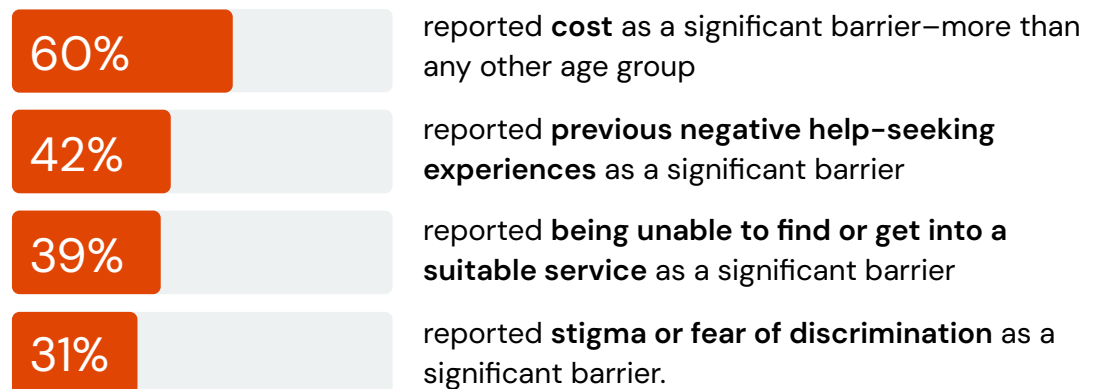
People living in rural or remote areas

People living rural or remote areas were **less likely to have received the help they needed** to improve their mental health and **less likely to have received timely and appropriate support**. They were also **more likely to report previous negative experiences of help-seeking** as a barrier to accessing care.



Young adults

Young adults aged 18–24 were most at risk of facing certain barriers to seeking help for their mental health. Among this group:



* Source: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/mental-health/national-study-mental-health-and-wellbeing/latest-release#prevalence-of-mental-disorders>

Where to from here?

People are more than the numbers that tell stories about their lives, but the numbers from this poll reveal a suite of underlying issues driving poor mental health outcomes across Australia.

These poll findings lead us to the following conclusions:

- **The mental health system is not offering Australians the care they need.** Long wait times and a shortage of mental health professionals are leaving vulnerable Australians without access to timely and appropriate care, particularly those in rural and remote areas. When people finally get care, it doesn't always help.
- **Cost and quality are major barriers to seeking mental health care** across all age groups. Cost is top-of-mind among young people who face some of the highest rates of mental ill health but are the least likely to be able to afford the care they need. Many others aren't seeking care because they've had bad experiences in the past.
- **Effective interventions are not reaching priority populations.** Men and young adults have long had elevated risks of mental ill health, making them priority populations needing care. We have evidence-based interventions for these groups, but they aren't available to everyone in need.

What we must do now

The reality of the mental health crisis is that there are no simple solutions, and it's important that we fully embrace this narrative. For too long, the complexity of the problem has been denied, leading to fragmented and underfunded responses that have only deepened the crisis.

This is reflected in our poll findings, which suggest the mental health system needs urgent attention. This is why Black Dog Institute is calling on the Federal Government to urgently prioritise three key areas of change:

- 1. Fully fund our mental health system:** In 2020, the Productivity Commission called for an additional \$2.4 billion to be invested in Australia's mental health system every year. This has not happened; in fact, this year's Federal Budget allocated the smallest investment in mental health since 2018.

The solutions are undoubtedly complex and require substantial financial investment, but the path forward is clear. As a society, we must decide whether we're willing to make bold changes to fund the comprehensive, long-term reform needed to turn the tide on the rising burden of mental ill health.

With adequate funding, we can connect everyone in need with high-quality mental health services that are widely available, financially accessible and meet people where they are on their mental health journey.

- 2. Create a roadmap for a mentally healthier Australia:** We need a renewed Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement, Federal and State accord, and a commitment to joint funding to drive better mental health outcomes in Australia.

This must include funding models that bridge gaps in psychosocial support services, helping the nearly half a million Australians living with moderate to severe mental health conditions who are currently going without essential care.

Such a roadmap would create a renewed national vision for our mental health system at all levels of government.

- 3. Give Australians the mental health workforce they deserve:** Long waitlists, high out-of-pocket costs and negative patient experiences suggest we don't have enough health professionals in the workforce. We need a comprehensive plan and increased funding to ensure an appropriately skilled workforce is available to meet growing demand.

A robust mental health system that is well-staffed, adequately funded and integrated across the country will lay the foundations for a mentally healthier future.