



Proposed Joint Statement- Preventive Mental Health Conference 2026

Preventing Mental Ill Health in Australia: A National Call to Action

Australia is facing a growing mental health crisis that demands a fundamental shift in how we think about and invest in mental health. While important investments have been made in treatment and services, demand continues to rise and systems remain overwhelmed. The evidence is clear: without a stronger focus on prevention and promotion, the burden of mental illness will continue to grow and place unsustainable pressure on individuals, families, communities and the health system more broadly.

Delegates to the Preventive Mental Health Conference recognise that preventing mental ill health and promoting mental wellbeing must become a core national priority. This statement represents a shared commitment across sectors to strengthen Australia's approach to mental health by investing earlier, addressing root causes, and building systems that support lifelong wellbeing.

The Mental Health Challenge in Australia

Mental health conditions are among the leading contributors to the burden of disease in Australia, affecting individuals across the lifespan and impacting families, communities and the economy. A key challenge is that Australia's mental health system remains largely reactive, focused on responding to crisis rather than preventing problems before they arise. Currently, less than 1% of the federal mental health budget is invested in prevention and promotion¹, placing Australia 27th among OECD countries in prevention investment².

This imbalance is unsustainable. Research suggests that substantial investment in prevention could significantly reduce the incidence of mental disorders, with modelling indicating that large-scale prevention investment could prevent hundreds of thousands of young people from developing mental ill health.

At the same time, public support for prevention is strong. Recent national survey data³ shows that:

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Expenditure on mental health related services. 2021 [cited 2021 20/10/2021]; Available from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mental-health-services/mental-health-services-in-australia/report-contents/expenditure-on-mental-health-related-services>

² Productivity Commission 2025, Delivering quality care more efficiently, Inquiry report no. 112, Canberra

³ J Morgan A, Jorm AF, Carbone S, Tsiamis E, Reavley NJ. National survey of community attitudes to prevention of mental health problems. Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol. 2025 Nov 13. doi:

- 80% of Australians believe preventing mental illness should be a top government priority ;
- 79.5% believe government has a role in preventing mental health problems at a population level;
- Nearly two-thirds believe prevention should be funded equally with treatment.

Australia faces both a pressing challenge and a historic opportunity to transform the way we approach mental health.

Building on Existing Government Efforts

The Federal Government is already supporting a range of initiatives that contribute to preventing mental ill health and promoting wellbeing. These initiatives span multiple sectors and address both individual and structural drivers of mental health across the life course.

Key examples include:

- **Early childhood and parenting programs**, including evidence-based parenting initiatives that support healthy child development and strengthen the early foundations of mental wellbeing.
- **School-based mental health initiatives** that promote student wellbeing, build resilience and enable the early identification and support of emerging mental health challenges.
- **Policies addressing the social determinants of mental health**, including housing initiatives, economic supports, family violence prevention and efforts to strengthen social cohesion.
- **Efforts to improve online safety**, particularly initiatives designed to reduce harms associated with digital environments and support the wellbeing of young people.

While many of these initiatives were not originally designed to improve mental health outcomes , they nonetheless contribute to strengthening protective factors and reducing risk factors that influence people’s mental health.

Alongside government action, the philanthropic sector plays a key enabling role by supporting innovative interventions that target specific risk and protective factors for good mental health. A key challenge, however, lies in transitioning these initiatives from pilots or locally delivered solutions into sustainable delivery pathways that can operate at scale.

Strengthening a Systemic Approach to Prevention

Preventing mental ill health and promoting high levels of wellbeing requires a **whole-of-system approach**. Mental health is shaped by complex interactions between social, economic, environmental and individual factors. Effective prevention therefore requires action across sectors including health, education, housing, employment, justice, and community development.

Several elements of the prevention system require strengthening:

1. Cross-sector collaboration

Mental health promotion must be embedded across sectors. Many initiatives that influence mental health, such as eliminating family violence, preventing bullying, strengthening community cohesion, social connection or improving housing security, sit outside the mental health portfolio. Stronger collaboration across sectors is essential to align efforts and maximise impact.

2. Data, research and evaluation

Better data and evaluation are needed to guide investment and demonstrate impact. Governments collect vast amounts of data, yet there are significant gaps in understanding mental health outcomes across different population groups and geographic regions to help target investment and monitor our impact. Strengthening national data infrastructure and investing in research and evaluation to assess which initiatives deliver the greatest benefits will help ensure resources are directed to what works.

3. Workforce capability

Prevention requires a skilled workforce that spans multiple sectors. Public health practitioners, educators, community organisations, researchers and policymakers all play critical roles in strengthening mental wellbeing. Building capability across this broader workforce is essential to embed prevention as core business.

4. Community-led and culturally informed approaches

Communities themselves are powerful drivers of mental wellbeing. Strengthening social connection, cultural identity and community leadership are key protective factors for mental health. Prevention efforts must support locally led solutions and recognise the leadership and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and culturally diverse communities.

Guiding Principles for Investment

Delegates agree that future investments in mental health promotion should be guided by a clear set of principles to ensure resources deliver the greatest impact.

- **Evidence-informed action**

Investment should prioritise interventions supported by strong evidence or robust theoretical foundations, recognising that prevention research has historically been underfunded and that the evidence base is still developing. Sustained investment is also needed to build this evidence base—moving beyond small pilots to rigorous evaluation, and supporting the scaling of interventions that demonstrate effectiveness—to ensure meaningful and lasting improvements in outcomes.

- **Population impact**

Priority should be given to interventions that address widespread risk factors or strengthen protective factors with potential for large population impact. There is a sufficient evidence base on initiatives that are suitable for scale. In a systemic approach, there is the potential to prioritise both 'quick wins' and longer-term investment which builds over time.

- **Equity and fairness**

Prevention efforts must address inequities and ensure that vulnerable communities are not left behind. Initiatives should be designed to reduce disparities rather than unintentionally widening them.

- **Life-course approach**

Mental health is shaped across the lifespan, with a particular opportunity for impact in the early years. Prevention strategies must support wellbeing from the perinatal period through to adolescence, adulthood and later life.

- **Community engagement**

Programs should empower communities, strengthen social connections and build on existing community strengths.

- **Sustainable funding pathways**

Numerous models exist which propose a pathway for sustained investment in prevention investment. These need to be assessed and agreed options should be embedded into government processes to create sustained funding mechanisms, which are critical to achieve impact over time.

A National Call to Action

Australia stands at a pivotal moment. The evidence is clear, the public supports prevention, and the opportunity for change is real.

We call on governments, organisations, researchers, communities, philanthropic organisations and the private sector to work together to change the trajectory of mental health in Australia, particularly for children and young people.

We call for:

- **Stronger partnerships** across government, research, community organisations, philanthropic organisations, the private sector and lived experience leaders to build a coordinated national prevention movement.

- **Sustained investment** in mental health promotion and prevention, including a commitment to increase prevention funding to at least **5% of the national mental health budget** as part of an overall increase in mental health spending.
- **Sector-wide collaboration** to identify and address key risk and protective factors that shape mental health outcomes.
- **Government leadership** to embed prevention across policies and systems and to support long-term systemic reform.

Preventing mental ill health is both possible and essential. By working together across sectors and investing earlier, Australia can create the conditions for healthier individuals, stronger communities and a more resilient society.

The time to act is now.

DRAFT