



# National communications charter

A unified approach to suicide  
prevention and mental health



Life in Mind



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Everymind acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

We value the contributions of people with lived and living experience of mental health concerns, alcohol and other drug concerns, and suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

Thank you to the current and former Champions who contributed significantly to the development of the *National communications charter (the Charter)*.

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# About the National communications charter (the Charter)

## What is the Charter?

The Charter is an evidence-informed document to help guide the way mental health and suicide prevention sectors, governments, businesses, communities and individuals communicate about mental health and wellbeing, mental health concerns and suicide.

## Purpose of the Charter

The Charter guides a united approach to the way we communicate about mental health concerns and suicide. It supports us to agree on our shared commitment to best-practice approaches by:

- Elevating mental health and suicide prevention to a priority across settings
- Embedding the voice of lived experience in how we do this
- Collaborating to improve outcomes
- Communicating with consistent and appropriate language and messaging.

Through a shared commitment and combined actions, we can work together to reduce stigma and discrimination, and communicate in ways that are safe, inclusive and hopeful.

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There are more and more voices – people and organisations - contributing to and helping manage mental health concerns and prevent suicide. Now more than ever, there is a need to align voices and ideas. The Charter will help people, organisations and communities build a united and impactful voice across our wonderful society.

Mark Leopold, Transitioning Well

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## How do we use the Charter?

Signing the Charter serves as a formal commitment to use safe and consistent communication about mental health and wellbeing, mental health concerns and suicide. It is an agreement to put the seven guiding principles into practice to reduce stigma, minimise harm and promote help-seeking and help-offering.

It is important to remember that the language used in the Charter may not reflect the views and words of all people living in Australia. Where possible, we need to choose language that describes a person's experience as this experienced-focused language can promote public empathy and understanding.<sup>1</sup>

The Charter provides a toolkit and resources to support ways we can action these principles in the places that we live, work and interact.

The Charter is hosted on the *Life in Mind* digital portal: [lifeinmind.org.au/the-charter](https://lifeinmind.org.au/the-charter)

# Signing and actioning the Charter

Mental health and suicide prevention sectors, governments, businesses, communities and individuals are encouraged to sign and action the Charter through the following steps:

1. Agree to the seven principles and sign the Charter
2. Action the principles
3. Monitor the principles in action.



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For a charter to be a purposeful document, people need to believe in it, be prepared to sign it and genuinely strive to meet its guidelines. Without your buy-in and commitment, it becomes another piece of paper on the shelf – and they don't save lives!

Bronwen Edwards, Roses in the Ocean

”

# The Charter principles

1

**We will make communicating about mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention a priority.**

**Why:** Everyone has a role to play in improving mental health and wellbeing, and preventing mental health concerns and suicide in Australia. Prioritising suicide prevention, and the mental health and social and emotional wellbeing of people and communities, helps people to feel connected, valued and live fulfilling lives.

2

**We will respect the diversity of, and our actions will be guided by, people with lived and living experiences of mental health concerns and suicide.**

**Why:** It is important to value and respect the diversity and unique experiences of individuals and communities affected by mental health concerns and suicide. Involving people with lived and living experience broadens our understanding, reduces stigma, improves the quality of prevention activities, and helps to ensure research or programs are relevant to those they aim to support.

3

**We will listen to and empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and be guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions, to strengthen social and emotional wellbeing.**

**Why:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide and mental health is different to non-Indigenous suicide experiences, therefore different approaches are required. It is important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are at the forefront that guide and identify the solutions necessary to prevent suicide and strengthen social and emotional wellbeing. Ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices can be heard in a culturally safe space will promote more effective solutions.

4

**We will base our communication on clear, consistent and evidence-informed messages.**

**Why:** Using an evidence-informed approach to advocacy and awareness can reduce stigma associated with mental health concerns and suicide, and encourage help-seeking and help-offering. By communicating in a unified and consistent way, we actively raise awareness and enhance our understanding to take action.

## 5

### **We will use appropriate, respectful and person-centred communication.**

**Why:** The words, phrases or images we use matter. Using appropriate, respectful and safe communication is key to reducing stigma, increasing help-seeking and reducing harm. Unsafe communication can perpetuate myths and isolate people from the support they may need.

## 6

### **We will work together to combine our efforts and support change.**

**Why:** Activities to promote mental health and wellbeing, and prevent suicide and mental health concerns require coordinated and collaborative action. This includes governments, health and non-health sectors, non-government organisations, industry, media, as well as individuals, families and communities. By working together, we can maximise our efforts and resources to support change.

## 7

### **We will provide and promote access to the appropriate supports and services for people and communities.**

**Why:** People need to know what supports and services are available if they or someone they know is experiencing distress, mental health concerns or have been impacted by suicide. If people are aware of the specific supports available, they may be more inclined to reach out or offer help to others.



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The Charter gives organisations a great foundation to work from as it defines and recognises that mental health is a positive concept and that mental health concerns don't discriminate.

David Burroughs, Westpac

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People with lived experience should see the Charter as a rock-solid foundation to develop generations of teamwork. It says, you are worthwhile and you are necessary.

Cameron Solnordal, SANE Australia

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# Understanding mental health and wellbeing

Mental health is a positive concept that is sometimes misunderstood and used to refer to mental ill-health. It is about wellness rather than illness and relates to living and working well, feeling resilient and being able to connect with others.

Mental health increases the ability of people and communities to realise goals and potential, to cope with the normal stress of everyday life, to work productively and to contribute to society.<sup>2</sup>

Mental health can be supported and maintained through mitigating risk factors and enhancing protective factors such as positive relationships and connections to community, cultural identity, physical activity, creative expression, a sense of purpose, financial security, availability of opportunities and others.

The promotion of mental health and wellbeing is in every person's interest. We can all do something to promote mental health, including building mental health and wellbeing into public policy, creating supportive environments, strengthening communities to take action, supporting individuals to develop skills and reorienting services and supports to take a prevention approach.<sup>3</sup>



Mental health and wellbeing crosses language and cultural divides. Supporting individuals and families holistically and in partnership, we build stronger communities that flourish as a whole.

Maria Cassaniti, NSW Transcultural Mental Health Centre



## Key messages:

- Optimal mental health and wellbeing requires an approach that addresses the whole person, acknowledging the interconnection of mental health, physical health, social connections, sense of identity and other aspects.
- Protective factors can operate at individual, family and community levels as well as at broader social, cultural and institutional levels.
- Addressing systems and processes that enable social exclusion, invisibility and stigma to occur can help reduce exposure to risk factors and support mental health and wellbeing.
- Protective factors improve and support mental health and reduce the likelihood that people will experience mental health concerns.

# Understanding social and emotional wellbeing

The phrase 'social and emotional wellbeing' is preferred by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as it reflects a more holistic view of health.

In broad terms, social and emotional wellbeing is the foundation for thriving physical and mental health. Social and emotional wellbeing is influenced by a network of relationships between an individual and their family, kin and community, and recognises the importance of connections to land, culture, spirituality and ancestry.<sup>4</sup> In this context, wellbeing can be strengthened by building connections to land, culture, spirituality and ancestry, kinship, self-determination, community governance and cultural continuity.<sup>5</sup> The social and emotional wellbeing model also acknowledges that wellbeing is influenced by historical, political and social determinants of health.

The Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration outlines the importance of social and emotional wellbeing for improving the mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This includes the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and to embed social and emotional wellbeing within all parts of the Australian mental health system.<sup>4</sup>

Social and emotional wellbeing is also used by some people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, who may have differing concepts of mental health and mental health concerns.



SEWB Diagram adapted from Gee et al., (2014)

Original conceptual SEWB diagram citation: Gee, G., Dudgeon, P., Schultz, C., Hart, A., & Kelly, K. (2014). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing. Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice*, 2, 55-68.

Adapted Design citation: Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing Project (2021). *The National Empowerment Project (NEP): Cultural, Social and Emotional Wellbeing (CSEWB) Program*. University of Western Australia. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10042911>

## Key messages

- Social and emotional wellbeing is influenced by social, historical and political determinants of wellbeing, and can be strengthened by cultural determinants.
- Factors that strengthen the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and are a source of resilience include connection to land, culture, spirituality and ancestry, kinship, self-determination, community governance and cultural continuity.<sup>6</sup>
- Health is holistic not only in the sense of being about the whole person; it is also about whole communities.
- Factors that protect the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and are a source of potential strength and resilience include connection to land, culture, spirituality and ancestry, kinship, self-determination, community governance and cultural continuity.<sup>6</sup>

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Aboriginal communities want self-determination, and to be involved in decisions that impact them. When this happens, and when culture is strengthened, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing flourishes.

Professor Pat Dudgeon AM, Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention

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# Understanding mental health concerns

In the Charter, the term 'mental health concerns' is used when referring to a person's experience of mental health issues. It is a term that draws on a person's unique experience rather than being defined by diagnosis or illness.

A mental illness is a disorder diagnosed by a medical professional that significantly interferes with a person's cognitive, emotional or social experiences. Examples include depression, anxiety, schizophrenia and eating disorders. These can all occur with varying degrees of duration and severity.

A mental health concern can reduce a person's cognitive, emotional or social abilities, but not to the extent that it meets the criteria for a mental illness diagnosis. These experiences are common and likely to resolve in time with the right support, but if the mental health concern persists or increases in severity, it may develop into a mental illness.

Mental health concerns can have varying impacts on individuals and those around them, as well as having personal, social and economic costs for individuals, families and communities. This can include social isolation, relationship breakdowns, unemployment and undue financial stress, homelessness, social stigma and other forms of discrimination.

The journey to recovery is different for every person. With no single definition, recovery is best described as a process, sometimes ongoing and lifelong, defined and led by the person living with mental illness or experiencing mental health concerns, through which they can achieve independence, live with high self-esteem and have meaningful and contributing lives.<sup>7</sup>



## Key messages

- People of all ages and walks of life can experience mental health concerns.
- The prevention of mental health concerns is in the interests of every person, community and government.
- People living with a mental illness or who experience mental health concerns can and do lead full, meaningful and productive lives.
- A person's help-seeking behaviours and recovery journey is unique and dependent on individual environmental and social factors.
- Reducing discrimination, stigma and prejudice related to mental illness can encourage people to seek help that's right for them.
- People can have needs that are specific to their experience, identity or community.
- Support for people with mental health concerns and the people who support them can reduce feelings of isolation.

# Understanding suicide prevention

Suicidal behaviour has far-reaching, long lasting and significant impacts on individuals, families, organisations and communities.

The reasons people take their own lives are complex. There is no single reason why a person attempts or dies by suicide. A suicide death may arise from an interaction between distress and a range of factors in a person's life. Suicide may also be influenced by social and economic circumstances and differences between cultures and individuals' experiences within society.

Suicide can occur with or without the presence of a mental health concern, although some people may be disproportionality impacted by suicide because of a mental illness.<sup>8</sup>

Suicide prevention aims to decrease the number of people who die by suicide or attempt suicide each year. It also aims to reduce the number of people that live with suicidal thoughts and support those people who have lost someone to suicide. Prevention efforts focus on reducing risk factors and strengthening protective factors that may prevent suicide and suicidal behaviour.



**It is vital for the community to work together to reduce the number of lives lost to suicide and to support those left behind, and a key way to do this is by finding ways to communicate openly and honestly about suicide and its impact.**

Associate Professor Jo Robinson, Orygen



## Key messages

- Suicidal behaviour has far-reaching, long-lasting and devastating impacts on individuals, families, workplaces and communities.
- The reasons for suicide are complex and multifaceted.
- Suicide can be prevented.
- Suicide is not always connected to mental illness.
- All suicidal behaviour should be taken seriously.
- Communities can play a critical role in suicide prevention by giving people a sense of belonging or a feeling of connectedness, reducing stigma, developing their skills to support someone in distress or crisis and providing social support or referrals to appropriate services.



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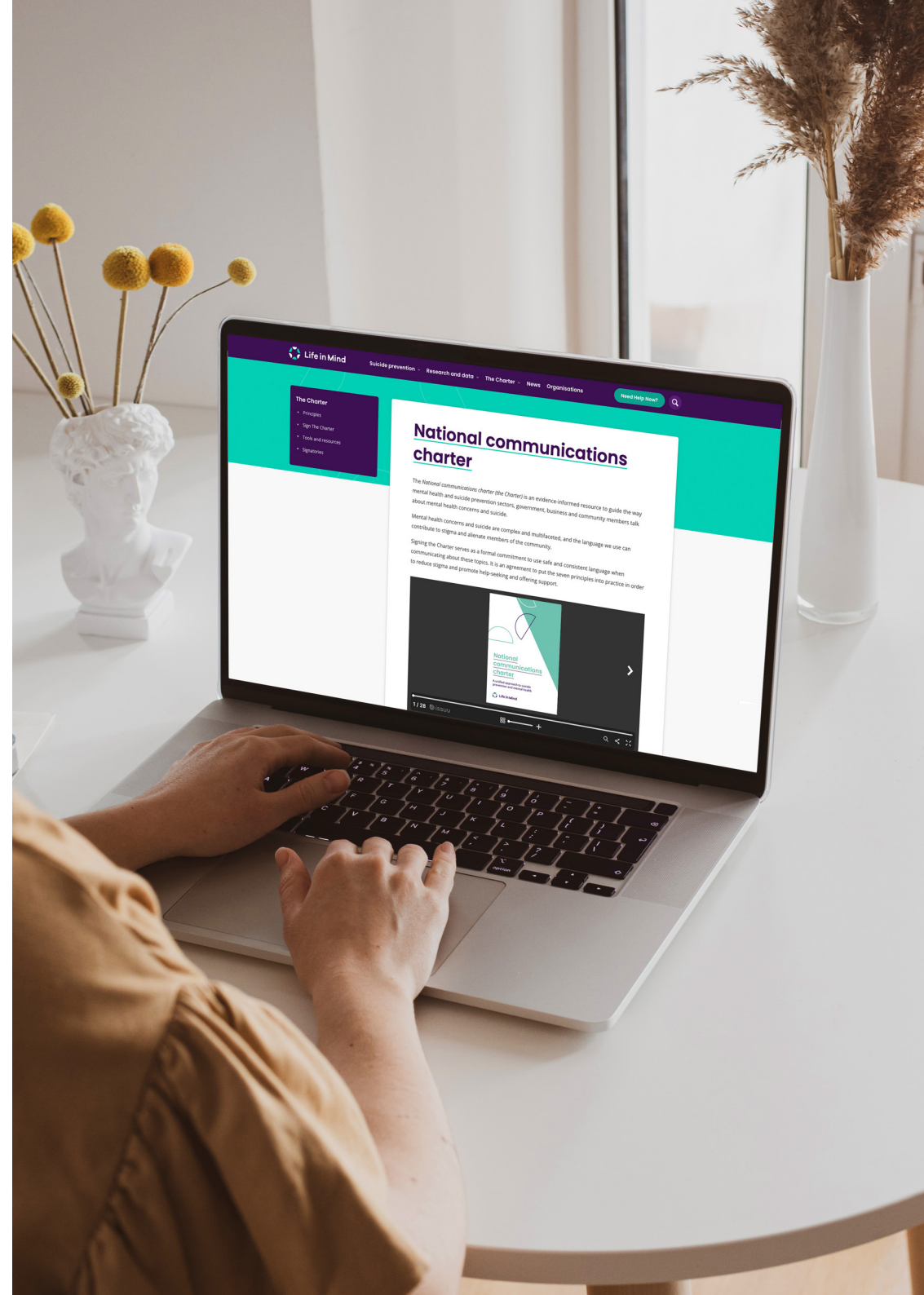
A commitment to the Charter is a commitment to how we can all talk about our nation's mental health and wellbeing. Uniting organisations across sectors, whether it be government, business or communities, maximises the incredible efforts currently underway in the mental health space.

Lucy Brogden, carer advocate

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# References and notes

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