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**Mental  
Health  
Council**  
OF TASMANIA



# COVID-19 Impacts and Emerging Themes within the Mental Health Sector

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Monthly Report, July 2020  
Report 3

AUTHORISED BY:

**Connie Digolis**

Chief Executive Officer

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[cdigolis@mhct.org](mailto:cdigolis@mhct.org)

03 6224 9222

0418 431 995

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Level 1, 131A Collins Street  
Hobart TAS 7000

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## About Us

The [Mental Health Council of Tasmania](https://www.mhct.org) (MHCT) is the peak body for community managed mental health services in Tasmania. We represent and promote the interests of our Members and work closely with Tasmanian Government agencies and Primary Health Tasmania to ensure sectoral input into public policies and programs. We have a strong commitment to enabling better mental health care access and outcomes for every Tasmanian. Our purpose is to improve mental health for all Tasmanians, and our vision is for all Tasmanians to have awareness of, and value, their mental health and wellbeing.

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, Federal and State government responded rapidly by implementing a raft of COVID-19 restrictions and social distancing measures in mid-March 2020. In order to clearly understand the impacts on the mental health sector, consumers and their families and friends, MHCT developed a COVID-19 Response and Recovery Strategy. The Strategy incorporates extensive and ongoing consultation which allows MHCT to map how these restrictions and their eventual easing are impacting mental health service delivery in our state. In addition, through engagement with service providers delivering psychosocial supports to the broader population in response to COVID-19, MHCT is also gaining understanding around whole-of-population mental health.

### MHCT COVID-19 Response and Recovery Strategy

The strategy consists of three priority groups and through regular consultation and data collection aims to track how COVID-19 is impacting on the mental health sector, consumers, families and individuals experiencing psychological distress due to the pandemic.

- ▶ The **COVID-19 Mental Health Sector Network** aims to track the impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on Tasmanian Mental Health Sector service providers during the restriction period and beyond into the recovery phase. The Network provides a platform to identify the impact of COVID-19 on service delivery, workforce and client needs and will identify and track emerging issues. The network will provide a mechanism to provide direct and timely information to government, agencies and other key stakeholders as COVID-19 restrictions continue and as services respond to the lifting of restrictions.
- ▶ The **COVID-19 Psychosocial Supports Working Group** aims to provide a platform to capture data and evidence of cross-service collaboration to support people who have no history of mental-ill health, but due to the impacts of COVID-19 are experiencing varying levels of psychological distress. The Working Group members will capture shared data and emerging themes to inform State and Federal Government and relevant agencies on the level of demand and need in the Tasmanian community for psychosocial supports and services during the COVID-19 restriction period, into the recovery phase and beyond.
- ▶ The **COVID-19 Mental Health Consumer, Carer, Family and Friends Network** aims to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on people with pre-existing mental health needs prior to the COVID-19 pandemic along with their families, friends and carers. The Network will provide a platform for sharing the voice of lived experience during the COVID-19 restrictions and into the recovery phase. Network members will provide information on emerging themes and issues experienced by people with mental ill-health, their friends and family in relation to COVID-19 restrictions and beyond into the recovery phase. The Network will provide direct and timely information to government, agencies and other key stakeholders as COVID-19 restrictions continue and begin to ease.

## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact on the mental health of our communities and our sector here in Tasmania. With timeframes relating to recovery uncertain following a recent spike in cases in other jurisdictions, MHCT has noted through our data collection that anxiety within the community has increased. While restrictions have currently eased in Tasmania, our dedicated sector are utilising this period to return services back to face to face delivery. Service providers are delivering as much face to face work as possible in case Tasmania experiences similar impacts of COVID-19 as have occurred in other parts of the country.

During July 2020, the state shifted to phase three in the Tasmanian Government's ['Roadmap to Recovery'](#), which provided more opportunity for the delivery of face to face supports. However, MHCT has heard that the community managed mental health workforce is fatigued, and as the impacts of COVID-19 continue, the workforce is feeling the effects of consistent change, along with the pressure of ensuring service demand is met within a challenging environment.

MHCT's COVID-19 July Monthly Report provides insights into the impacts on the mental health sector during stage three of the state government's *'Roadmap to Recovery'*, alongside the emerging COVID-19 situation in other states. The July Monthly Report indicates that many mental health services are still operating at capacity. Waitlists continue to grow, particularly for Psychologists under the Medicare Benefits Scheme. However, while people wait for mental health support there is limited access to other supports and services to assist them as early in their experience as possible. Whilst demand continues to increase upon an already fatigued workforce, the capacity of our sector must be bolstered to ensure early intervention and timely outcomes for the Tasmanian community.

### Key points

- 71% of mental health service providers have indicated a rise in demand for their services.
- Growing waitlists for mental health services continue to be a concern.
- Ongoing uncertainty and fatigue are impacting on the mental health workforce.
- The impacts of COVID-19 in other areas of the country have increased anxiety amongst mental health consumers.
- The mental health of young people has been identified as a concern by consumer representative groups.

## Identified impacts during July 2020

### Mental Health Service Providers

#### ▶ Workforce mental health and wellbeing

- Members of the Mental Health Sector Network raised concerns about the pressure and fatigue placed on staff. Network members stated that the sector was busy prior to COVID-19, then COVID-19 happened and placed further pressure on organisations and their staff, to continue to provide services despite rapidly changing environments and modalities due to changing restrictions.
- 11% of Mental Health Sector Network respondents indicated that staff impacts are greater than in the previous fortnight 2 -15 July 2020.

*“Staff are gradually returning to working from the workplace - there is some difficulty for some staff in re-adjusting, and to the ongoing uncertainty regarding the progress of the pandemic” (Service provider response - 17 July 2020)*

*“Staff are tired and running low on reserve energy. Most have not taken leave breaks whilst working from home” (Service provider response - 15 July 2020)*

#### ▶ Service Delivery

- Over the month of July, service delivery continued to shift from online/telephone delivery back to in person face-to-face delivery.
- Members of the Mental Health Sector Network noted that a mix of online and face-to-face supports continue to be provided, several members indicated that they have shifted completely back to face-to-face services.
- As part of understanding what flexible service delivery may look like in the future, MHCT has undertaken a survey with clients of service providers to understand what methods of service delivery were most preferable. The survey is currently open, and further detail on the findings will be available in our August monthly report.

#### ▶ Service Demand

- In July, the Mental Health Sector Network survey indicated just over 70% of service providers noting a significant increase in demand on their services (16 – 29 July).
- The majority of service providers indicated ‘new referrals’ as the reason for an increase in demand (16 – 29 July). Of service providers who noted an increase in demand, 87.5% identified this increase was due to new referrals and 12.5% of respondents attributing increase in demand to existing clients requiring further supports.



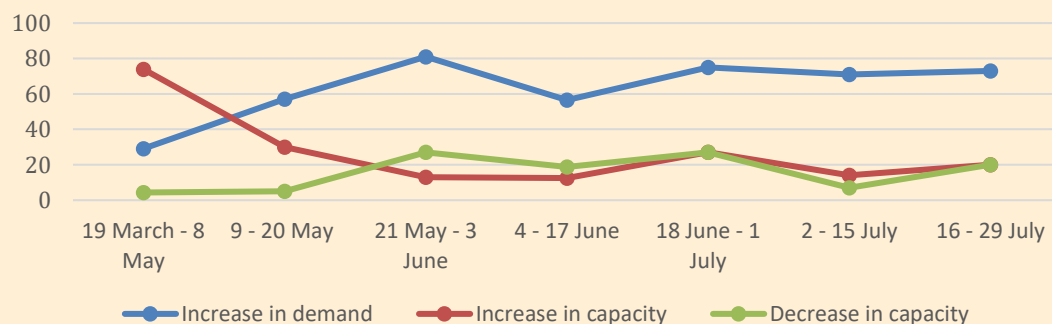
- In the COVID-19 Mental Health Sector Network survey period 16 – 29 July, several service providers identified changes in the source of new referrals. These included receiving more referrals from young people, referrals from other mental health services who are at capacity, and referrals for people who have had mental ill health in the past and now require low intensity supports.
- MHCT has heard from members of the COVID-19 Mental Health Sector Network that there are significant waitlists for psychologists in Tasmania under the ‘*better access to mental health care*’ scheme. And while people wait for psychological services there is limited support options to assist in their recovery.

### Addressing service capacity and demand through a peer workforce

Indications are that the COVID-19 pandemic and associated impacts will drive increased demand for low-intensity mental health services over the coming months, if not years. It is crucial that the CMMH sector is well prepared and equipped to address this increase in demand for mental health supports and services. Mental Health Peer Workers can play an integral role in bolstering the sector to meet anticipated demand, and in providing lived experience, knowledge and recovery focused expertise.

[MHCT's Budget Priority Submission 2020-2021](#) highlights the importance of bolstering our sector's capacity to meet the growing need for low intensity mental health interventions through the development of a peer workforce.

#### % of service providers indictating increase in demand and levels of service capacity



The graph above maps the mental health service provider responses from 18 March – 29 July 2020. As demand increased, service capacity decreased along a similar trend line. However, if capacity is not increasing at the same rate as demand, there may be significant strain placed on the community managed mental health sector in the coming months as the mental health impacts of COVID-19 continue.

## Clients of Mental Health Services

- In the first half of July (2 – 15 July) the COVID-19 Mental Health Sector Network survey indicated that there had been an increase in client support needs (46% of service providers indicated an increase). This largely stabilised in the second half of the month (16 -29 July) with 11% of service providers indicating an increase in client support needs and 89% indicating there had been no significant change.
- In July, service providers indicated that the increase in support needs was in general due to the COVID19 situation (71% 2- 15 July, 67% 16 – 19 July).
- Mental Health Sector Network members (46% 2 – 15 July, 33% 16 – 29 July) indicated that former clients have continued to re-engage with their previous service providers to seek renewed support.

*“Several families and adults have re-contacted our service following their disengagement during the most critical period of the pandemic. Since March, they had not attended, some were waiting for face to face, and some were doing ok, but are feeling the impact of the pandemic and seeking reconnection to work on their mental health or supporting their families that have difficulties.” (Service provider response 15 July 2020)*

- Over the month of July, four service providers noted changes in client demographics, including an increase in referrals from young people, in addition to people from CALD backgrounds living in rural and remote communities, people looking for residential respite in aged care and young mothers with a history of post-natal depression.
- In July, mental health service providers indicated via the Mental Health Sector Network survey that the frequency/positivity of client engagement continues to improve.
- The impact of anxiety continued to be identified by the COVID-19 Mental Health Sector Network as a frequent cause for new referrals during July.

## Consumers, Carers, Family and Friends

- Concerns were raised by consumer representatives regarding telehealth, particularly the barriers to telehealth in the initial assessment phase during the provision of counselling via telehealth.
- Consumer representatives highlighted that the current situation in Melbourne (COVID-19 case spikes) has created an extra layer of anxiety for many Tasmanians. Explaining that watching the situation unfold in Victoria has compounded the sense of uncertainty, and the feeling that there is no end date to COVID-19. Consequently, the assumption is that many people are only living day to day and fear that the virus may reoccur in Tasmania.
- Additionally, consumer representatives highlighted that the pandemic has presented some unexpected challenges – for example, where people look forward to interstate

holidays as a way to take a break and support their own mental health and wellbeing. Continuing border restrictions make this impossible, adding to a general sense of “nothing to look forward to”.

- Consumer representatives explained that COVID-19 and its social and economic repercussions appears to be impacting on young people’s hopes and dreams for their future, highlighting that young people are expressing a lot of anxiety and are struggling to see a bright future for themselves. For example, some are working towards a degree at university but not knowing if there will be a job at the end of it, some are wondering if they will ever be able to travel, and some are not sure if they will be able to go to their school formal.

### Addressing youth mental health through peer to peer models

The Brain and Mind Centre at the University of Sydney have recently undertaken modelling into the impacts of the COVID19 situation on mental health. [The report](#) identified that if interventions were to stay the same, even in a best-case scenario, the prevalence of psychological distress in young people (15-24 years) is estimated to peak at 48.3% by Sept 2021.

Our young people, particularly school leavers, are facing challenging times that require skills to cope with change, build resilience and support their friends and themselves. In [MHCT’s Budget Priority Re-Submission](#), we highlight the need for mental health training to be implemented immediately for all young people in years 10, 11 and 12 along with the development of a long-term peer support program for all Tasmanian schools so that young people are supported to get help early before becoming acutely unwell.

The Brain and Mind Centre highlights the importance of a coordinated approach to curb the impacts of psychological distress in young people that incorporates economic, education, social and mental health interventions. Among the work currently being undertaken to address youth mental health, a recent report by the [Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People](#) highlights the need for peer to peer support programs to enable young people to support each other during and after disaster events. A schools-based Mental Health Peer Support Program will equip our young people with the skills and tools they need to support themselves and each other.

#### Benefits of Youth Peer to Peer Models

*Adolescence is a time of personal identity and social development. Since adolescents are invested in same-age peer relationships, youth peer support offers a complimentary alternative to the ‘expert’ health professional model. Having insider knowledge of existing youth social norms makes it easier for peers to relate to each other as they naturally understand the pressures associated with being a young person in 2020. Youth peer support programs help to reduce youth’s self-stigma and provide youth with support, encouragement, hope and belief in themselves to help overcome personal barriers.*

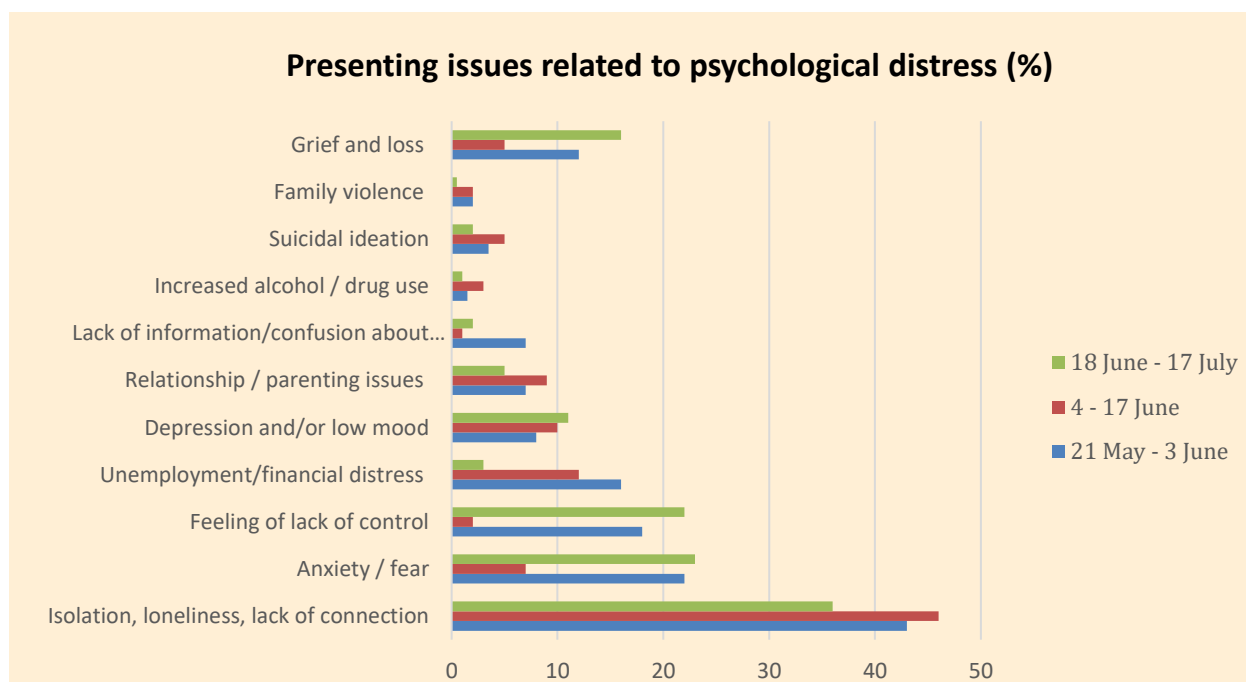
<https://www.cymh.ca/en/projects/youth-peer-support.aspx>



## Whole-of-Population Mental Health

- The COVID-19 Psychosocial Supports Working Group data collection indicated that during the period 18 June – 17 July, 37.5% of interactions with their services related to psychological distress, of these interactions, 54% were new presentations.
- When questioning the reasons and issues contributing to psychological distress, the following table indicates the areas where Tasmanians are currently being impacted.
- Of note, ‘anxiety/fear’ significantly increased in July. Members of the Psychosocial Supports Working Group identified that the situation unfolding in Victoria in relation to COVID-19 is contributing to higher instances of anxiety in Tasmania.

*‘If restrictions are reintroduced in Tasmania, the impacts on mental health will be a lot tougher the second time around. It’s not about experiencing the same restrictions that we had before, it’s experiencing those same restrictions but with a heightened level of anxiety and a tired mental health system’ (Service provider response 28 July 2020).*



- Instances of ‘grief and loss’ and ‘feeling of lack of control’, also significantly increased during July, whilst ‘isolation, loneliness and lack of connection’ reduced.
- In 24% of interactions, the individual was referred onward to a professional support service, of which 4% were referred to Adult Community Mental Health Services (ACMHS) and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) (6.3% in the previous fortnight 4 – 17 June). 4% of interactions were referred to Community Managed Mental Health Services (6.3% in previous fortnight 4 – 17 June).

## Addressing Whole-of-population Mental Health

The Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council (PESRAC) was established to consult with the community and make recommendations to government on initiatives to support the economic and social recovery of Tasmania as a response to the COVID19 pandemic. PESRAC has provided an interim report to government (July 2020), alongside other important initiatives to support recovery, the report recommends the implementation of a screening tool to address the myriad of mental health impacts of COVID19 on Tasmanian Communities.

Investment in a mental health screening tool would be a first for Australia and would strongly support the development of mental health literacy across our state. By implementing a screening tool within a whole-of-population mental health promotion and early intervention model, Tasmanians will have an opportunity to check in on their own mental health and their loved ones.

### **PESRAC Interim Report: Recommendation 61**

*'The State Government should develop and provide Tasmanian with a 'whole of population screening tool' so the general public can 'check in' on their mental health and seek help early if needed. This should be supported by a public awareness campaign to prevent long-term impacts and raise awareness of the newly-funded access points for help'.*

A whole of population mental health screening tool would need to be highly accessible, simple and identify indicators of mental ill-health. The development of such a tool for the state should be designed in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders including the public, primary, private and community mental health sectors and those with lived experience of mental ill-health.

## References

Please contact MHCT for access to the documents below:

- Mental Health Sector Network report summaries 6 and 7
- Psychosocial Supports Working Group collated data report 18 June – 17 July 2020

**Mental Health Council of Tasmania**  
**14 August 2020**