Women's Health East
Investing in Equality and Wellbeing for Women

Mental Health and Women

Mental health is a foundation for wellbeing and effective functioning for an individual and the community. A woman's mental health and wellbeing encompasses more than the absence of mental illness and may be greatly affected by a combination of biological, social, psychological, environmental and economic factors.[1,2] VicHealth[3] defines mental health as *"the embodiment of social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Mental health provides individuals with the vitality for active living, to achieve goals and interact with one another in ways that are respectful and just."*

Gendered Health Impacts

Gender roles and the social context of women's lives influence their mental health and wellbeing, making their needs unique from those of men. The mental health and wellbeing of women should be prioritised because:

- In Australia, 1 in 4 women will experience depression at some stage in their life.[4]
- Women are more likely to suffer from more than one mental illness at a time, which is linked to increased severity of mental illness and increased disability.[5]
- Mental health is intrinsically linked to physical health.[3] E.g. depression is one of the leading causes of disability in Victorian women and is associated with cardiovascular disease and stroke.[6]

- In Australia, around 43% of women (3.5 million) have experienced mental illness at some time in their lives.[7]
- Among Victorian women aged 35-64 years, depression is the second leading cause of morbidity.[8]
- Mental illness has been estimated to represent the highest burden of disease for adult women in Australia.[9]
- Australian women experience higher rates of anxiety disorders than men, who had twice the rate of substance use disorders than women.[7]

Determinants of Mental Health in Women

The following are the three key overarching social and economic determinants of mental health and wellbeing: [10]

Social inclusion can be described as 'the nature and number of a person's networks and social ties, their participation in community life and their access to basic human entitlements'.[10] It encompasses supportive environments, involvement in community and group activities and civic engagement.[10] Having a social support network can make women feel 'cared for, loved, esteemed and valued'[11], can help them find solutions to problems, validate their identity and provide comfort when needed.[12]

Many factors can compromise women's social connections including, but not limited to:

- Perceptions of safety
- Geographical isolation
- Intimate partner violence

- Living with a disability
- Having caring responsibilities[13]

Freedom from discrimination and violence encompasses:

- The valuing of diversity
- Physical security

- Opportunity for self-determination and control of one's life[14]

Discrimination is defined by VicHealth as ''the process by which a member, or members, of a socially defined group is, or are, treated differently (especially unfairly) because of his/her/their membership of that group".[14] Higher levels of discrimination are associated with poorer mental health.[14]

Violence is frequently the vehicle through which discrimination is played out – for example, sexism can lead to gendered violence.[14] Research shows that intimate partner violence is the leading contributor to death, disability and illness for women aged 15-44 years, with 60% of this burden associated with mental health problems.[15]*

*For more information, please see *Violence against Women* Fact Sheet

Access to economic resources includes access to:

- Work and meaningful engagement
- Education
- Adequate housing
- Adequate financial resources[16]

Mental health is relatively poor among those with low education levels, low-status occupations, and low incomes[17,18,5] and among unemployed people or those with job insecurity.[19,20]People with lower socioeconomic status have limited access to material and psychosocial resources along with limited autonomy and control over life events, both of which have consistently been found to be associated with an increased risk of depression.[16]

Being able to access adequate financial resources is a key contributor to psychological health.[21] Australian working women continue to earn less than men, with the gender pay gap standing at 17.5% in the quarter ending May 2012.[22,23]*

Risk and Protective Factors

A woman's health and wellbeing is determined by the natural, human made and social environments (such as families, social networks and associations).[24] A range of risk and protective factors are thought to influence mental health and wellbeing including:

Protective Factors		Risk Factors	
Arts and cultural engagement	Safe environments	Work stress and strain	Poverty
Spirituality	Diversity	Displacement	Isolation and exclusion
Accessible education	Empathy	Disability	Homelessness
Income	Affordable, accessible housing	Violence	Unemployment
Cultural identity	Respect	Discrimination and stigma	Genetics
Physical health	Accessible, quality food	Peer rejection	Political repression
Empowerment and self determination	Personal resilience and social skills	Natural and human-made disasters	Physical inactivity Racism
Participation in and access to sport and recreation	Accessible and affordable transport	Access to and abuse of alcohol and drugs	Social and economic disadvantage
Social participation	Family		
Accessible, quality health and social services	Positive early childhood experiences		

This table has been adapted from the Melbourne Charter for Promoting Mental Health and Preventing Behavioural Disorders[25]

Eastern Metropolitan Region

The Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR) population was 1,029,482 as at 31 August 2012, of which 51% are female.[26] In the EMR, there are approximately 7,700 people who are registered with a clinical mental health service and 2,340 people accessing community managed mental health services.[27]

As the below graph shows, women are more likely than men to have been diagnosed with depression and anxiety across all municipalities in the EMR.[28] 2010 data from the region shows that women were more likely to report moderate, high and very high levels of psychological distress than men.[29]

Prevalance of Anxiety/Depression[28#]
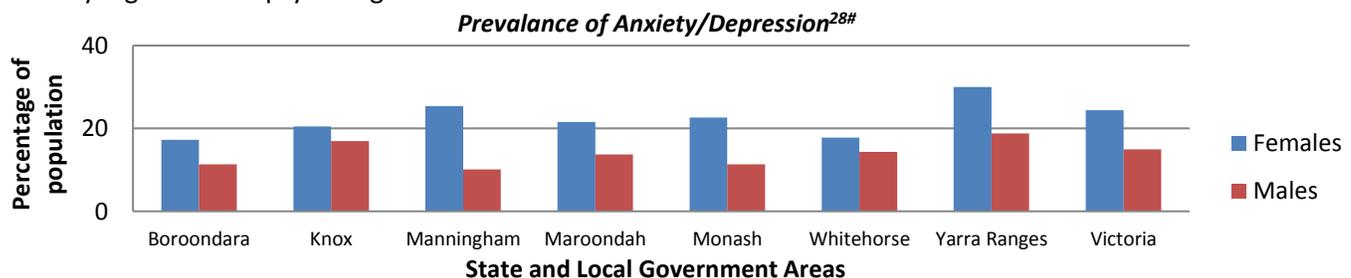
#Survey respondents were asked if they had ever been diagnosed with depression or anxiety by a doctor

*For more information, please see *Women and Financial Security* Fact Sheet

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