

ENVIRONMENT

On country

The traditional custodians of the land in Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a deep connection to their culture through their respect for nature and awareness of the land – Being 'on country' in the part of Australia where Aboriginal people (or their ancestors/family) were born or raised brings a sense of place, cultural and community connection, and is intrinsically linked with social and emotional wellbeing. Aboriginal people have a special relationship with nature and their identity with the land is sacred and unique. Being on country is healing, and the silence, stillness and vastness of nature provides a time for inner peace and reflection.

Secure, stable and safe housing is fundamental for getting sleep, rest, shelter, sanitation and basic human needs met to maintain good mental health and wellbeing – People who had experienced homelessness were more likely to report having a mental health condition or a long-term health condition. Once you have housing though, the battle may not be over. In addition to having a roof over your head, having access to amenities and services and a safe sense of community also play a vital role in fostering our mental health as we go about our daily lives. Mental health issues can contribute to a person's homelessness or the situation itself exacerbates and causes mental health issues to escalate.

Housing & homelessness

Community & neighbourhoods

'20-minute neighbourhoods' are fast becoming a growing trend in shaping where and how people want to live to increase their community and neighbourhood living satisfaction – Over the past decade, research has reflected that some of the happiest and most content people in life are a 20-minute stroll from all services and community incentives they need access to day-to-day, whether it's access to shops, green spaces, cycle ways, medical facilities, public transport, schools or leisure/sporting centres. The way we design and build neighbourhoods and communities affects residents' social connections, sense of community, social capital and our mental health.

The American Psychiatric Association recognises climate change poses a threat to public health, including mental health, and that those with mental health disorders are disproportionately impacted by the consequences of climate change. The mental health consequences of events linked to a changing global climate include mild stress and distress, high-risk coping behaviour such as increased alcohol use and, occasionally, mental disorders such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress. Climate change-related impacts can also lead to job loss, force people to move, or lead to a loss of social support and community resources – all of which have mental health consequences.

Climate Change

Embracing Nature

Research shows a strong connection between people living close to or spending a lot of time in or near natural or green areas results in improved feelings of happiness, self-worth and overall life satisfaction – People feel better after getting out and experiencing natural habitats, be it the beach, bush, outback or alps, or even nature reserves and green park spaces closer to home. Embracing our natural world and learning to appreciate the simpler elements of nature can reduce mental distress and create a sense of calm, clear our head and allow time for reflection, relaxation and restoration.

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Living remote & natural disasters

People living in remote, regional or rural areas tend to be more prone to mental health challenges based on distance to services and each other, increased exposure to extreme weather events and natural disasters, and barriers to financial security and employment options. People living regionally experience consistently poorer mental health outcomes than those living in the Perth metropolitan area and difficulties in accessing services and support. Adversities reported in these areas include experiences of isolation, loneliness and lack of opportunities for activity or connection, distance from services and supports, issues with alcohol and other drugs, stigma around mental health and unwillingness to get care, and the need for greater financial stability and employment options to keep people feeling optimistic about the future.

COVID & other threats

Living through a viral pandemic can be a stressful experience for many, coupled with grief and loss for others too – Many people, understandably feel concerned about COVID-19, and although the focus has been largely on the physical and hygienic protections to take during the pandemic, we also need to look after our mental health and wellbeing. If you have been feeling anxious or worried as the threat of COVID spreading, or concerns about other health ailments, then try to keep things in perspective, find daily self-care tips to help with relaxation and focus, and take the practical and preventative cautions you need to in order to limit your risk.

World issues at large

Information from all around the world is now delivered to us live in real time straight to the devices in our hands, meaning we are exposed to more stimuli than ever before – Absorbing images and information about war, starvation, famine, suppressed human rights, trafficking, extreme violence and civil unrest across the globe (or even localised political disputes and issues) can be good if it creates increased awareness leading to action, help and reform but for many of us – especially those empathetic or sensitive by nature – it can leave us feeling rather defeated, helpless and overwhelming. It's important to know when to have a rest from our devices and switch off from the bad news.

Sense of place

Where you were born and raised holds a special place in your identity and sense of place for a lifetime – People often describe going back (either physically or just reminiscing) to where they grew up and spent their childhoods, as a nostalgic experience, a place of healing, visiting and understanding their roots. A sense of place is deeply instilled in the way we experience and view our world and relationships with others. A good sense of place fosters positive emotional attachment and involvement, and encourages social interaction. This builds social networks, a sense of community and involvement with one's neighbours and community, which protects both physical and mental health.

Lifestyle factors

How we choose to live matters – What you do in your spare time when engaging in the environment around you plays an important part in your resilience and wellbeing. Are you enjoying walks out in nature near where you live, meeting friends for catch ups or giving back to society through volunteering or other charitable/community-minded work? Our lifestyles shape the people we are and can become.

More info, resources & support: mentalhealthweek.org.au/environment