

Women and Mental Health

Critically, 6.6 out of 10 women in Australia suffer with a mental illness according to the Mental Health Australia Report to the Nation. The National Institute of Mental Health have also found that disorders such as depression, anxiety and eating disorders are particularly high in the female demographic. There is no one reason behind female mental health diagnoses. In reality, there are a myriad of topical issues, such as the cost-of-living crisis, that have become major drivers.

WOMEN AND MENTAL HEALTH

In 2022, the Australian Bureau of Statistics' National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing reported that four in 10 Australians aged 16 to 85 suffered an anxiety, depression, or substance abuse disorder during the previous financial year. Recent statistics also found that 21% of women have an anxiety disorder and that 56% of females have at least 1 of the 10 selected chronic conditions.

While mental health is important for all genders, women can suffer from certain mental health conditions at higher rates than men due to a range of factors...

Biological differences include:

1. Menstruation.
2. Menopause.
3. Pregnancy and birth.
4. Different forms of cancers such as cervical cancer.

Socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors include:

1. Women are more likely to be carers, which can lead to stress, anxiety, and isolation.
2. Physical and mental abuse, which can have a long-term impact on their mental health.
3. Gender based inequalities, unstable work conditions, and disparities in pay also contribute to women's higher risk of depression.
4. Women experience sexual violence five times higher than men which can cause severe mental health issues including PTSD.

IMPROVING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

While raising awareness and checking in on another person's mental health is always important, it's also imperative that you think about your own feelings. Devote some of your time to self-care, which may look like:

- Improving the quality of your sleep.
- Paying more attention to your diet.
- Increasing the amount of exercise you do.
- Practicing mindfulness via meditation, breathing exercises, or writing in a gratitude diary.
- Spending more time with supportive people like your friends or family.
- Talking through your feelings — such as sadness or anxiety — with a trusted person.
- Talk with a mental health professional if your feelings are overwhelming or impacting your everyday life.

Doing these activities will boost the regular production of feel-good hormones: dopamine, serotonin, endorphins, and oxytocin. In addition, they can also increase your preparedness for triggering and external shocks in the future that can induce adverse feelings.

HELPING WOMEN IN YOUR LIFE

While short term feelings of stress, anger or sadness are common and not always a sign of mental illness, you may have noticed changes in someone you know that are out of the ordinary. Regardless of whether these situations are emerging or ongoing, it's critical to talk with them before their situation exacerbates.



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They may appear:

- more anxious
- irritable,
- argumentative or
- sleeping less.

Whether it's your sister, daughter, mother, aunt, or friend, let her know that it's okay to talk about any difficulties she's having. A conversation on the subject can be started by simply asking: "Are you okay?". It's important to try and initiate a discussion when you are both relaxed and have time to talk. And remember, their natural reaction may be defensive, so:

- be calm,
- be patient and
- be sympathetic.

If they admit that stress, anxiety, or other symptoms seem to be making it hard for them to cope, recommend they talk to their GP or a mental health professional.

HOW ORGANISATIONS CAN HELP SUPPORT WOMEN'S MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

While individuals can advocate for mental health awareness in the workplace, the drive must come from leaders, managers, and HR. It can be achieved by:

1. Providing mental health training and offering tools and strategies to navigate workplace mental health, such as how to have difficult conversations and cultivating

mentally healthy cultures. Ensure all employees have access to mental health resources and regularly communicate about the mental health benefits available via email or promotional posters. If applicable, leaders should try and normalise using these services by sharing if they have personally found the services useful.

2. Naming mental health advocacy in relevant policies and incorporating it into organisational practices. These policies might include paid leave, or flexible hours. Leaders should also rectify any structural issues that discriminate against women such as pay inequity or lack of consequences for harassment.
3. Fostering a sustainable working environment by increasing employee autonomy and minimising unrealistic workloads. Women are often caregivers, so leaders should build in as much flexibility as possible. Every woman and every individual will need something different, but in a work setting, that could be remote work arrangements or flexible hours.

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