



THE HON SUSSAN LEY MP

Minister for Health
Minister for Sport

MEDIA RELEASE

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Youth self-harm, suicide & depression rates ‘confronting’: Ley

A confronting picture around teenage depression, self-harm and suicide has been painted by the largest ever national survey of youth mental health of its kind in Australian history, Minister for Health Sussan Ley revealed today.

However, in positive news, the number of young Australians seeking help doubled compared with 15 years ago, and positive activities such as sports, exercise and healthy eating are now beating alcohol, drugs and smoking as the preferred way to handle mental health issues for the majority of teens.

Ms Ley today released the landmark ‘Second Australian Child and Adolescent survey of Mental Health and Well-Being’ of over 6300 families and youths aged 4-17, with the last one way back in 1998.

The comprehensive survey found one in seven children and young people experienced a mental disorder in the previous 12 months – the equivalent of 560,000 young Australians.

Ms Ley said while that number was still high, it had stabilised over the past 15 years in a positive sign of change. However, Ms Ley said that while cases of ADHD – the most common disorder in youths – were dropping, she was concerned about the rise in major depressive disorder over the same period.

The survey also alarmingly found as many as one in 10 teenagers – or about 186,000 – had engaged in some form of self-harm in their life, including a staggering quarter of teenage girls aged 16-17.

About one in 13 teenagers (aged 12 to 17) also contemplated suicide – the equivalent of 128,000 youth – with one in 20 reportedly making a plan to take their own life and one in 40 attempting it.

Ms Ley said there was no doubt many of the findings were “confronting, sad and shocking”, however it was important to recognise many areas were improving as well if positive change was to continue.

“As a parent it’s heartbreaking to see these prevalent stories of depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal tendencies amongst our young people, let alone as Health Minister,” Ms Ley said.

“But it’s also a credit to young Australians, and society as a whole, that so many youths are now not only bravely opening up about their emotions and behaviours, they’re actively seeking out help and taking positive actions to manage them.

“We must recognise in years gone by many of these cases we’re hearing about today would have simply gone unaccounted for while people suffered in silence.

“However, when I see figures showing the majority of young people are now looking to join a sports team or activity, talk to a friend, or improve their diet to address mental health issues instead of turning to drugs, smoking or alcohol, that makes me immensely proud.

“There’s no doubt raising awareness is only half the battle – we need positive outcomes as well – but surveys such as this spur me on to ensure we get this current mental health reform right first time.”

The Australian Government is currently working with the mental health sector and the states and territories on significant, long-term reform of the mental health sector and the way services, and outcomes, are delivered.

This includes the appointment of an expert reference group – headed by respected business leader and former beyond blue CEO Kate Carnell – to advise government on implementation of the recommendations from the Mental Health Commission’s recent landmark review of the sector, which is due October 2015 and will feed into the creation of a new national mental health plan.

Today’s survey differs from its predecessor in 1998 as advances in technology have allowed young people to participate more easily without parental supervision, allowing them to paint a more accurate and considered picture of their mental health.

The importance of this is demonstrated by figures showing depression reporting rates nearly doubled when young people (11-17) filled out the survey themselves, as opposed to their parents.

“Mental health is often a difficult conversation for parents and their children to have, but these figures mean it is an important one to pursue for everyone’s sake.

“Ironically we are only finding out about these confronting trends because young people and their families are speaking up and reaching out and we’ve come too far to take a backward step now.”

Ms Ley said schools also continued to play an important part in the identification and management of mental health conditions, with a school staff member among those to suggest that some help for emotional or behavioural problems was needed in 40 per cent of cases.

“It’s essential schools continue to play a role in mental health, with major depressive disorder, for example, seeing students absent an average of 20 days per year. That’s nearly double the number of days for any other mental disorder.”

The Australian Government funded the \$6.6 million, two-year survey undertaken by the Telethon Kids Institute and the University of Western Australia, in collaboration with Roy Morgan Research. The full version of the survey can be downloaded from the [Department of Health’s website](#).

Other key findings in the report

- One third of children & adolescents with mental disorders used support services in 1998 vs two-thirds today.
- One in five (22%) 13-17 year olds used internet services to find out more about mental health.

- Stigma and poor awareness of mental health issues were identified as the main issues for teenagers 13-17 with major depressive disorder not seeking help for further support.
- Males (16.3%) more likely than females (11.5%) to have experienced a mental health issues overall.
- ADHD was the most common of mental disorders (7.4%, equivalent of 298,000 youth), followed by anxiety disorders (6.9%, equivalent of 278,000 youth), major depressive disorder (2.8%, equivalent of 112,000 youth) and conduct disorder (2.1%, equivalent of 83,600 youth).
- One in five teenage girls aged 16-17 found to meet clinical criteria for major depressive disorder.
- Almost one-third of 4-17 year olds with a mental disorder actually had two or more mental disorders.
- One in seven mental disorders were considered severe (15%), while 25% were considered moderate and the remaining 60% were considered mild.
- One in five (22%) 13-17 year olds used internet services to find out more about mental health.
- On a positive, 38% of adolescents took up sport or exercise to help manage emotional or behavioural problems, 45% increased their participation in activities they enjoyed and 23% improved their diet vs just 7.9% turning to alcohol, smoking cigarettes or drugs.
- Higher rates of mental disorder in families facing low income, unemployment and family breakup.

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