

HEALTHY PARKS HEALTHY PEOPLE SOUTH AUSTRALIA

2016-2021

Realising the mental health
benefits of contact with nature





STRENGTHENING THE PEOPLE-NATURE BOND

MENTAL HEALTH AND MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION

Traditionally, physical health and illness dominate public health strategies and are prioritised over mental health. Tools for living a physically healthy life and preventing physical illness are widely accessible and promoted in society. More recently, across Australia and the globe, there has been greater recognition that the mental health domain requires a stronger focus, as the costs of mental health issues in some cases exceed other disorders that are granted much higher priority (Barry and Jenkins 2007). Whilst mental health has received attention more recently, treatment and minimising stigma remain the key priority areas (The Department of Health 2009). However, there is a great deal of emerging research that suggests that prevention and promotion strategies are a cost effective approach to investing in mental health, and minimising the onset and impact of serious mental illness (Barry and Jenkins 2007).

Furthermore, evidence suggests that contact with nature can play a vital role in promoting mental health. One of the key challenges in the mental health conversation however, is language, where the term mental health is often used to describe mental illness (Barry and Jenkins 2007). This creates confusion around what it means to be mentally well and a resulting lack of recognition about the capacity to promote population mental wellbeing.

The World Health Organization (2013) defines mental health as **‘a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.’** This definition focuses on wellness, rather than mental illness.

A mental illness is a health problem that significantly affects how a person thinks, behaves and interacts with other people. It is diagnosed according to standardised criteria (WA Mental Health Commission). This distinction is important for determining the range of strategies that promote mental health across the population including people with lived experience of mental illness.

Mental health is a positive concept and mental health prevention and promotion strategies aim to enhance the strengths of individuals and communities to achieve positive mental health and quality of life, incorporating the promotion of identified protective factors (Barry and Jenkins 2007; World Health Organization 2004).

Promotion aims to impact on the determinants of mental health to increase positive mental health and reduce inequality (World Health Organization 2004). Mental illness preventative interventions emphasise reducing the prevalence, incidence and impact of mental ill-health.

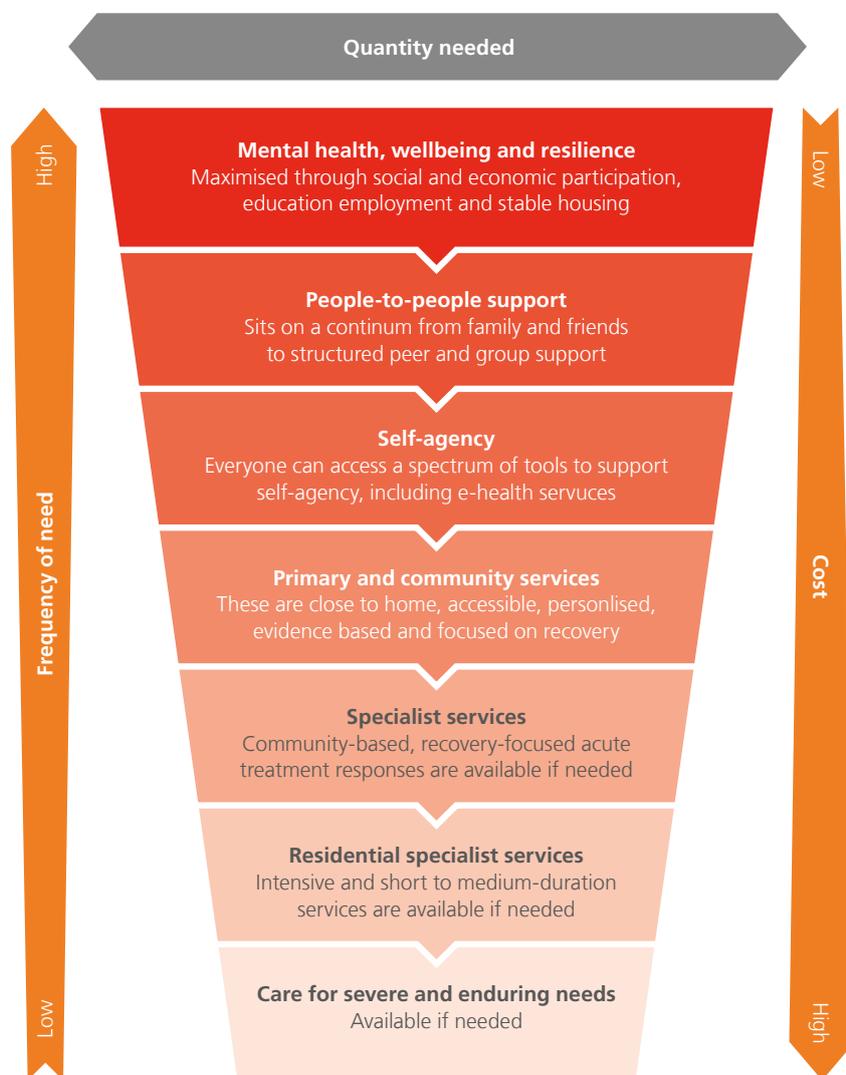


Figure 1. Excerpt from the NSW Mental Health Commissions 'Living well: a strategic plan for mental health in NSW' (2014). It demonstrates the mental health continuum, and the process by which investment in upstream mental health promotion strategies, can potentially lessen demand for downstream treatment for mental illness. As the diagram shows, the more preventative the approach, the less costly it will be in the long term. The model also implies that mental health prevention and promotion strategies need to be embedded in daily living through a range of institutions and structures such as education and employment.

“Parks and green spaces can have a restorative effect and assist in strengthening the mental wellbeing of South Australians.”

Chris Burns CSC (SA Mental Health Commissioner)



THE ROLE OF NATURE IN MENTAL HEALTH PREVENTION AND PROMOTION

The role of nature as an upstream promotion and prevention strategy in public health has started to gain interest from a research, policy and clinical perspective. Investigating solutions within an ecological paradigm is likely to create a shift in thinking around how nature can be an affordable, accessible and equitable resource in both health promotion and restorative public health interventions (*Maller et al. 2006; Mind 2007*).

In the last few hundred years, there has been an extraordinary disengagement of humans from the natural environment (*Axelrod and Suedfeld 1995; Beck and Katcher 1996; Katcher and Beck 1987*). This is mostly due to the enormous shift of people away from rural areas into cities (*Katcher and Beck 1987*). In evolutionary terms, 'the urban environment is a spontaneous, changeable and historically unfamiliar habitat' (*McMichael 2001, p. 252*). In addition to where we live, we are also choosing modern conveniences that are all contributing to the internal conflict between our 'innate need to connect with nature and our disconnection from it' (*Burls 2007a, p. 20*). In turn, this internal conflict can drive and perpetuate negative emotions such as unhappiness and alienation, physical and psychological problems that are key factors in decreasing one's overall mental health and hence heightens the risk of developing a mental health problem or illness.

Although the psychological benefits of exercise in green spaces are less clearly understood than the physical benefits, the evidence has been progressively accumulating and numerous synergies exist between the two areas (*Degenhardt & Buchecker 2012*). Use of parks by adults is known to produce greater psychological benefits than equivalent time spent indoors (*Webb 2014*). Specifically, green open space benefits are more favourable than indoor rest or meditation, particularly for adults who spend a large proportion of their week indoors (*Grinde & Patil 2009*). Furthermore, for older people, the mental health benefits of access to parks are increased compared to either adolescents or adult sub groups (*Hawkins et al 2013*). Older adults report being prone to feelings of loneliness and isolation and, in this respect, accessible green spaces and parks are critical for maintaining or improving quality of life (*Sugiyama 2012*).

Exposure to parks and nature promotes mental wellbeing, including evoking positive emotions and an increased feeling of individual resilience (*Marselle et al 2013*). Connection to nature is therefore critical for disease prevention, and to promote positive psychological states (*Beil & Hanes 2013; Abraham et al 2010; O'Brien et al 2014*).

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

A Commissioner for Mental Health has recently been appointed in South Australia, and will lead a dedicated Mental Health Commission. The Commissioner has been charged with the responsibility of developing and implementing a State Mental Health Plan which will span the spectrum of mental health and mental illness – including mental health promotion, primary and secondary prevention of mental illness and the treatment of mental illness.

Currently, the South Australian mental health system is strongly focused on the treatment of mental illness and does this very well. Historically, South Australia has also undertaken work that recognises the role of mental health prevention and promotion and early intervention. However, the mental health promotion and primary prevention space has been identified as a gap in the current system. There is also limited public awareness around what the protective factors are for mental health and the role in which contact with nature can play to promote and reinforce them.

We all know the things we should do to look after our physical health, such as eating healthy foods, exercising regularly, not smoking or drinking excessively – but few people know what can be done to protect our mental health.

Evidence suggests that nature can play an important role in protecting and promoting mental health and preventing mental illness. The development of the State Mental Health Plan provides an important opportunity for exploring how this can be further developed and how it might be included in health promotion planning for the South Australian community.



COMMITMENT TO ACTION

This action plan has a long term aim and four short term outcomes that can be measured under two themes.

Long term aim: South Australians know that contact with nature is necessary for protecting and promoting their mental health.

THEME 1:

POLICY INTEGRATION AND ALIGNMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING BENEFITS OF CONTACT WITH NATURE.

Short term outcomes

1. Develop a Discussion Paper on the evidence and opportunities of connecting nature and parks to mental health promotion and prevention strategies in South Australia, for the new SA Mental Health Commission.
2. Mental health and wellbeing benefits of contact with nature to be incorporated into the development of policies and programs associated with the new Suicide Prevention Strategy for South Australia.

THEME 2:

KNOWLEDGE BROKERING AND SHARING INFORMATION AND RESEARCH BETWEEN AGENCIES AND WITH EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS, INCLUDING VOLUNTEER NETWORKS AND RESEARCH PROVIDERS.

Short term outcomes

3. Convene master classes that will promote discussion, debate, awareness and collaboration amongst the environment and health and ageing sectors on nature and mental health benefits.
4. Identify opportunities to deliver communication campaigns that promotes the value of nature for positive community mental health i.e. during National Mental Health Week.

EVALUATION

This action plan will be supported by an evaluation framework that will measure and report on indicators that contribute towards validating the role of nature based health strategies on population mental health.

GOVERNANCE

This action plan is sponsored by: **SA Mental Health Commissioner, Mr Chris Burns**, with support from the **Chief Psychiatrist, SA Health, Dr Aaron Groves**.

The Sponsor will provide strategic direction to the Mental Health and Nature Taskforce whose role will be to coordinate, implement and report on the short terms outcomes outlined in Table 1.

The Taskforce Group consists of staff members from the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources, Department for Health and Ageing.

The Taskforce Group will consult with a **Mental Health and Nature Reference Group** that consists of stakeholders that are mental health practitioners, advocates for mental health prevention and promotion, environmental or health policy officers and academics.

The Taskforce Group will report quarterly to the **Healthy Parks Healthy People Leadership Team**, co- chaired by Sandy Pitcher Chief Executive Department of Environment Water and Natural Resources and Len Richards Deputy Chief Executive Department for Health and Ageing. The Leadership Team is a high-level strategic advisory group to the Healthy Parks Healthy People SA agenda.

“We want to increase the mental health throughout our community, irrespective of whether a person may have a mental illness. For most people spending time in contact with nature promotes and reinforces the positive protector factors we need to engage in to keep mentally fit and healthy.”

Dr Aaron Groves (Chief Psychiatrist, SA Health)

ACTION TABLE FOR SHORT TERM OUTCOMES

Action	What would success look like	Lead	Key contributors	Timeframe
1. Develop a Discussion Paper on the evidence and opportunities of connecting nature and parks to mental health promotion and prevention strategies in South Australia, for the new SA Mental Health Commission.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contact with nature is recognised as an effective public health intervention concept in the South Australian Mental Health Plan to promote positive mental health initiatives. 	Department of Water and Natural Resources (DEWNR) and Department for Health and Ageing (DHA)	Mental Health and Nature Reference Group and others as per indicated.	December 2016
2. Mental health and wellbeing benefits of contact with nature to be incorporated into the development of policies and programs associated with the new Suicide Prevention Strategy for South Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contact with nature is used as a universal initiative, aimed at the general public or specific at risk groups. Types of initiatives would promote social inclusion, positive mental health and using nature to reduce the stigma of suicide encouraging help-seeking behaviours. 	Department of Water and Natural Resources (DEWNR) and Department for Health and Ageing (DHA)	Mental Health and Nature Reference Group and others as per indicated.	June 2018
3. Convene masterclasses that will promote discussion, debate, awareness and collaboration amongst the environment and health and ageing sectors on nature and mental health benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An exchange of ideas, information and partnership developments that promotes the Healthy Parks Healthy People SA approach across sectors, integrating public health and ecosystem management concepts in policies, plans and operations. 	Department of Water and Natural Resources (DEWNR) and Department for Health and Ageing (DHA)	Mental Health and Nature Reference Group and others as per indicated.	June 2021
4. Identify opportunities to deliver joint communication campaigns that promote the value of nature for positive community mental health i.e. during National Mental Health Week (October) and/or Public Health Week (April)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parks and nature settings are further utilised to promote mental health through campaigns reinforcing the concept of contact with nature as an effective mental health protection and promotion strategy. High level leadership between the two sectors is demonstrated 	Department of Water and Natural Resources (DEWNR) and Department for Health and Ageing (DHA)	Mental Health and Nature Reference Group and others as per indicated.	June 2021

Table 1: Action table for short term outcomes



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