

The Role of The General Practitioner in mental health and wellbeing

A General Practitioner (GP) plays an important role in assessing and diagnosing mental health concerns across the lifespan, from childhood through older age. As a trusted first point of contact, the GP identifies signs of anxiety, depression, substance use and serious mental illness. Assessment includes a biopsychosocial history, mental state examination, physical health review and risk assessment, while considering developmental, family, cultural and social factors when determining diagnosis and appropriate care.

Management focuses on person-centred, evidence-based and ongoing care. This may include psychoeducation, supportive counselling, lifestyle interventions, medication and psychological strategies where appropriately trained GPs coordinate care with psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers and community mental health services, involving families and carers when appropriate. Regular reviews monitor symptoms, treatment response, medication effects, functioning and risk. In the Barossa, continuity of care and timely referral are particularly important for patients with complex or changing mental health needs.

TIPS: Prepare your concerns beforehand, be honest about symptoms, discuss priorities, ask questions, clarify treatment options and agree on a follow-up plan before leaving. Most people will need longer time and so book a “double appointment”. A family member or trusted friend can help you get the support you are looking for.

Being Mentally Healthy is a continuum

Understanding mental health and wellbeing as a spectrum from thriving to struggling helps us recognise that being mentally well can change over time. People may move between feeling well, experiencing distress, developing mild, moderate or severe mental illness, crisis and recovery. These changes can happen to anyone, and recognising where we are on the continuum can help us act early and seek the right support.

Good mental health

Good mental health can be supported through regular physical activity, mindfulness, progressive muscle relaxation and controlled breathing exercises. Eating nutritious foods, maintaining good sleep routines, staying socially connected and spending time in nature can also improve wellbeing. Minimising alcohol and avoiding harmful substances further support emotional stability, resilience and overall mental health.

The aim is to move towards recovery, wellbeing and staying well. Simple strategies such as maintaining routines, connecting with others, exercise, rest and healthy activities

can support mental wellbeing. When these strategies are not enough, support from family and friends or support lines can help. If distress continues or is not improving after two weeks, it is important to seek professional help rather than waiting for things to get worse.

Psychosocial distress

We know that adverse social determinants, including relationship difficulties, loneliness, addiction, housing instability, education, financial stress, social support networks, early childhood adversity, previous trauma, can all significantly contribute to psychosocial distress. These factors may reduce safety, stability and connection, increase anxiety and emotional dysregulation, and create barriers to accessing support. Addressing these underlying issues is essential to improving wellbeing, resilience and overall mental health outcomes.

Recognizing Mental Illness

Mental illness involves noticing changes in a person's thoughts, feelings, behaviour and daily functioning. Signs may include persistent sadness, anxiety, irritability, withdrawal, loss of interest, difficulty concentrating, changes in sleep or appetite, low energy, increased alcohol or drug use, or feelings of hopelessness. Symptoms that persist, worsen or interfere with relationships, work or everyday activities should be taken seriously. Early recognition and seeking professional support can improve outcomes and reduce the risk of crisis.

Mental Health Crisis

In simple terms: **a mental health crisis is when psychological distress becomes so intense that a person's usual ability to cope is overwhelmed and they need additional support or urgent help.**

A crisis can involve things such as:

- Feeling extremely overwhelmed, distressed, panicked, or confused.
- Being unable to manage normal daily activities.
- Experiencing severe changes in mood, behaviour, or thinking.
- Feeling unable to keep yourself or someone else safe.
- Having thoughts of suicide or self-harm, or feeling that life is no longer worth living.
- Experiencing a severe loss of contact with reality, such as hallucinations or extreme paranoia.

A mental health crisis **does not necessarily mean someone has a mental illness.** It can be triggered by many things, including trauma, grief, relationship difficulties, financial or work stress, substance use, or a major life change.

Recovery

Recovery from psychosocial distress focuses on personal growth, hope, and connection. Instead of just treating symptoms, modern care helps people rebuild their lives. Individuals learn coping skills and find meaning again. Support networks and community spaces play a vital role in helping people feel safe, valued, and truly understood.

Navigating a mental health crisis requires urgent care combined with long-term recovery plans. Emergency response systems now aim to offer compassionate, trauma-informed help instead of harsh interventions. After the crisis passes, healing continues with steady medical support, stable housing, and patient guidance that empowers people to fully regain daily control.