



Thursday, 28 May 2020

Committee Secretary
Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100, Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Submission from Beyond Blue on the Commonwealth Government response to COVID-19

Background

This submission focuses on briefing the Committee on the Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service, funded by the Commonwealth Government and delivered by Beyond Blue.

On 29 March 2020, the Commonwealth Government announced an initial \$74 million package to support Australia's mental health in response to COVID-19. \$10 million of this package was provided to Beyond Blue to rapidly design and deploy a dedicated coronavirus support service to provide all Australians with options to support their mental health and wellbeing. The funding was for a six-month period "to help people experiencing concern due to a coronavirus diagnosis, or experiencing stress or anxiety due to employment changes, business closure, financial difficulties, family pressures or other challenges."¹

The service takes a population health and primary prevention approach and gives people a range of support options, from self-care to professional counselling. It went live eight days after the funding was announced.

Beyond Blue has also directed a \$5 million donation from Medibank Private to enhance the supports we provide to the community during the immediate crisis and afterwards.

The Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service

The launch service included:

- a digital platform with a website (<https://coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au/>) offering practical advice, information and digital tools to help people manage their own mental health and wellbeing. Linked tools included mobile phone apps, such as Smiling Mind, Daybreak and the BeyondNow suicide safety planning app.
- a dedicated 24/7 phone counselling service staffed by mental health professionals (1800 512 348)
- easy access to online forums providing peer to peer support
- referral pathways to other specialised services and supports, such as the National Debt Helpline, My Business Health for small businesses and family enterprises, family violence, drug and alcohol and gambling services
- links to emergency and crisis supports.

¹ <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/11-billion-support-more-mental-health-medicare-and-domestic-violence-services-0>

New support options are being added regularly, including webchat functionality, where the community can receive immediate online counselling support from a mental health professional.

The support service is being promoted through media, social media channels, email distribution lists and digital advertising, as well as Beyond Blue's community and corporate partners.

Digital site

Beyond Blue worked with Medibank Health Solutions and Accenture to plan and deliver a digital platform with a website that includes continually updated practical information, advice and referral points for people concerned about the impact of coronavirus on their mental health and wellbeing.

Overarching principles guiding the approach and design included:

- **Maintaining wellbeing, prevention and early intervention:** playing a role in helping *everyone* cope, preventing people from becoming mentally unwell, and stopping the deterioration of symptoms for people who live with a mental health condition.
- **Easy to use and understand:** clear and simple language, information and support options are really important because people have been struggling with information overload. Language like 'wellbeing' is used as well as mental health to ensure as many people as possible see the service as something that they might find helpful.
- **Community need and responsiveness:** reviewing topics, themes and sentiment from people visiting established Beyond Blue channels, support services and content. The needs people have revealed from this reflect the full spectrum of the continuum from stress to severe distress and suicidality. Feedback has come both from people with existing mental health issues and those who have contacted us for the first time.

Resources are organised around the needs of people who might be seeking support:

- [I need support now](#)
- [I have coronavirus](#)
- [Impacts on my work](#): essential services; working from home; managers and business owners; educators; lost my job
- [Managing my daily life](#): coping with isolation and being at home; staying connected; coping with grief and loss; no support network; information for Indigenous Australians
- [I'm supporting others](#): older people; children and young people; employees; family and friends.

The content for the site is developed in collaboration with a range of experts: people with lived experience, clinicians, doctors on the front line, child mental health specialists, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisers and government stakeholders.

New content is added regularly, reflecting emerging themes and community concerns. To avoid duplication and harness the expertise of others, in addition to Beyond Blue's original material, we syndicate content from and links to other mental health organisations. These have included: SANE Australia, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit), ReachOut, Smiling Mind, Hello Sunday Morning, the Raising Children Network and Black Dog Institute.

Phone counselling

A dedicated 24/7 free phone support service was set up and staffed by mental health professionals who were specifically trained for this service, including briefing on the pandemic response.

The phone service operates within a robust clinical governance framework, which includes referral processes for clinical and medical supports, as well as broader social services, such as family violence programs or financial counselling. Escalation protocols are in place for people experiencing acute distress, crisis or suicidality.

The service began with a pool of 60 mental health professionals, working in a distributed virtual environment, with the option to more than double capacity as demand increases. Service usage is continually monitored, with overflow options built in from the beginning.

Online peer to peer support

Beyond Blue's online peer forums provide a safe and secure platform to anonymously discuss mental health concerns including anxiety, depression and suicidality. The forums feature automated moderation functions that scan the content of all posts and analyse that content against a series of rules for different risk levels, including clinical risk. Depending on the risk level, the post is either approved for posting, held for manual review, or escalated to a clinician for immediate action. Peer support is provided by a small team of moderators and trained Community Champions, who draw on their personal experiences. These teams are backed up by a clinical governance framework where referral or other interventions are required.

A dedicated 'Coping during the coronavirus outbreak' thread was established on 13 March 2020 and received over 10,000 views in its first week. This thread has continued to receive a very high level of engagement and has become an integral part of the Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service, receiving cross-referrals from both the website and phone service.

Governance and reporting

A Steering Committee comprising representatives from Beyond Blue (including our BlueVoices Lived Experience Advocate), the Commonwealth Department of Health, Medibank Health Solutions and Accenture, keeps track of new developments in the service, monitors trends in service usage and helps to shape the evolution of the service in response to emerging needs.

Reports are generated on a weekly basis. Quantitative reports are sent to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) for collation and analysis alongside other national data sources. Qualitative reports containing themes and direct quotes from community members are also produced on a regular basis. A new data and insights platform is being built to enhance reporting capability.

Results to date

As at 27 May 2020 (just over seven weeks since go live on 6 April), the Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service website has seen 198,909 users over 220,083 online sessions. Almost one in four (23.1%) sessions saw a 'call to action' follow up (e.g. followed a link to 'Call the support service' or the Beyond Blue 'Coping during the Coronavirus pandemic' forums). More than 2,200 users accessed the site five times or more over a month.

There have been 6,790 telephone counselling sessions with average wait times of less than 30 seconds.

Beyond Blue's peer online forums have experienced significant increases in activity, with almost 585,000 views across the range of forum subjects since the new coronavirus service was launched. The dedicated coronavirus discussion thread alone had 35,221 views and over 800 comments.

Feedback from people accessing the service

"Hi, I am writing to express my gratitude and thanks to your team. Words are not enough and I don't really know what to say except to say thank you to your team for saving me. I called numerous times over the past few months and received great support, I was at the point of no return however started to rebuild myself on the numerous calls. I just wanted to thank your numerous support team as it helped me more than words can express. I will never forget the support I had, I hope I never have to call again (you know what I mean) however will always pass on the great advice I received and will open my eyes and ears moving forward if I see someone struggling etc. Thanks again Beyond Blue." Support Service caller

"Feedback 10/10 star rating for the kindest, most understanding and compassionate counsellor with whom I spoke for a hearty 26 minutes, today around 6 pm. Many thanks to him for cheering me up during this lockdown situation." Support Service caller

"Hi Beyond Blue, I felt miserable and stuck with my life. I had bad time coping with my 6+ years old. I cannot help myself feeling angry, busting at him, also felt guilty and sorry. I had no one to talk to. I just know I need help now or I will not be alright. I had called Beyond Blue and I was crying so much. The lady who I did not remember her name calmed me down, gave me reassurance, patiently waited for me to tell about my problems then she gave me advices. I so appreciate what she did, she helped me a lot. I felt much better after talking to her and will have the advised solution to try on. Thank you so much. You brightened my day." Support Service caller

"It is wonderful we have this forum to connect on, to share how we are feeling, to be supportive, and help each other where we can. Expressing how we are feeling and reacting to situations like the coronavirus can be so beneficial. This virus is very concerning, I appreciate that enormously ... May we all find ways each day, maybe each hour, to get through this." Online forum participant

"I feel so tired, so deep down tired, it's really hard. I am so very lonely in isolation and it's been so, so long since I've had a meaningful hug from anyone." Online forum participant

"One thing which has become obvious is how differently we are impacted. One person is overstressed at work because of the extra demands made due to the virus, others are out of work experiencing all the negative feelings of that. For some home schooling is easy others really struggle & need a lot of help or encouragement from parents struggling to work from home. Some... are feeling very vulnerable because of their health issues making them at high risk if they contracted the disease others I know are struggling because procedures required to address serious health issues have been postponed. Our family situation, finances and housing have all played a role in how we cope or don't cope during this pandemic. I think it is useful if we take time to read different people's posts and think about their situation." Online forum participant