



Improving Mental Health and Wellbeing Through Sport

Seven Point Plan | March 2026

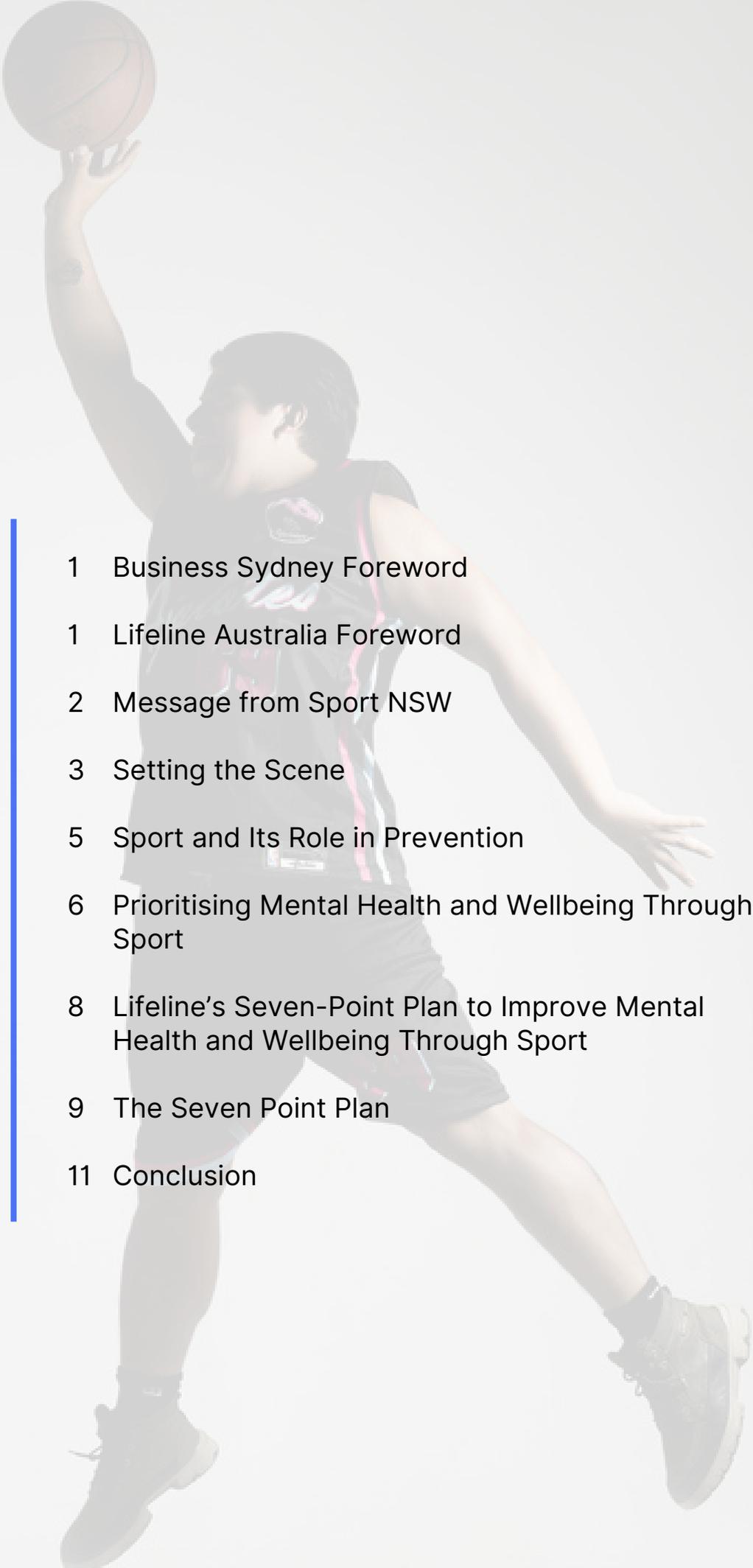


WRITTEN BY:

Dr Anna Brooks, Chief Research Officer, Lifeline Australia
Dr Tara Hunt, Deputy Chief Research Officer, Lifeline Australia
Emma Carr, Head of Government Relations, Lifeline Australia
Clare Jones, Government and Media Relations Manager, Lifeline Australia
David Jones, Public Affairs Manager, Business Sydney



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BUSINESS SYDNEY FOREWORD

Business Sydney has a laser-like focus on helping to make Sydney a vibrant and prosperous city, but we also want it to be a city where positive mental health flourishes.

We are honoured to be associated with Lifeline and Sport NSW as we work together to help make this objective a reality.

Like them, we believe that participation in sport and the values of teamwork, striving and achievement can play a part in achieving a mentally healthy community.

Given community pressures, the pace of modern life and the breaking down of lines of communication, mental health has never been more challenged.

When Lifeline — Australia's largest and longest serving crisis support service — tells us there is a problem, we should all listen whether we come from a government, business or wider community background.

We should also listen to potential solutions, in this case, greater participation in sport, because organisations such as Lifeline and Sport NSW are inherently positive.

But the statistics in relation to the incidence of mental health issues are quite alarming. According to the latest National Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey, 43 per cent of 16 to 85 year olds reported experiences of mental illness in their lifetime.

Forty per cent of young Australians aged 16 to 24 — more than one million people — had experienced a mental health disorder.

This paper makes an unambiguous case that sport can play a positive part in maintaining and improving mental health across the community and across a wide age demographic.

Outlined here are the elements of a seven-point plan that can harness the positive attributes of team or individual sport.

It might be something as simple as governments and councils weather proofing playing fields with rain resistant surfaces so kids don't miss out on school or weekend sports after periods of prolonged rain.

Whatever is done, Business Sydney commends the seven-point plan embodied in this paper. Their enactment holds the key to achieving a thriving and mentally healthy community.



PAUL NICOLAOU
Executive Director
Business Sydney

LIFELINE AUSTRALIA FOREWORD

Over the past 63 years, Lifeline has demonstrated an astonishing ability to shape and evolve its programs and services in the face of all challenges, remaining at the forefront of crisis support and suicide prevention in Australia.

In essence, Lifeline serves as the national psychological safety net - and is extremely proud to do so.

Today, through our crisis support services alone, Lifeline provides hope and connection for people through more than 3,000 conversations every day. We also deliver crucial

community support through services delivered from 43 Lifeline Centres across Australia, via our online Support Toolkit, and through advocacy on key topics including mental health, suicide prevention, and wellbeing.

I'm pleased that business recognises the importance of mental health and wellbeing and is actively engaged in supporting approaches - through activities like the promotion of sports, with associated benefits to a sense of connection and purpose - that have impact at scale. Not only is this the right thing to do, but it is also the smart thing to do. We know that mentally healthy communities are thriving communities, and thriving communities support thriving businesses.

We know sport can play a role in preventing mental ill-health and suicide. And we know that in any health setting, preventing illness and disease is far preferable, for an individual and the community, compared to treatment. Creating an environment that allows as many people as possible to participate in safe, inclusive, community-based sport can contribute to improved mental health across the community and to long-term economic sustainability.

I hope this guide, co-produced by Lifeline Australia and our valued partners at Business Sydney, lays out a clear roadmap to leveraging all the benefits of sports engagement to support community wellbeing. By working together, as individuals, as communities, and as businesses, we can help to improve the mental wellbeing of people across Australia.



PROFESSOR STEVE MOYLAN
Chair
Lifeline Australia Board

MESSAGE FROM SPORT NSW

On behalf of the NSW community sport sector, Sport NSW congratulates Lifeline Australia and Business Sydney on the launch of this important report. As the peak body for community sport in NSW, Sport NSW represents over 80 State Sporting Organisations and their extensive network of community partners.

The report's seven-point plan to harness the power of community sport and physical activity to improve mental health and wellbeing is exactly the kind of bold, evidence-based thinking our communities need right now.

Research has consistently demonstrated that participation in sport, physical activity and recreational programs can significantly improve individual and community health and wellbeing. The benefits extend beyond physical fitness to include increased feelings of belonging, purpose and routine, and opportunities to develop life and work skills. For many, especially those impacted by socioeconomic disadvantage, older adults, new migrants and people living alone, sport provides a crucial social outlet, offering regular opportunities for interaction, inclusion and connection.

At Sport NSW we know that sport is one of the most effective health interventions we have. If sport were a pharmaceutical treatment delivering these outcomes, it would be prescribed nationwide.

Sport NSW's own landmark report, "Beyond the Game: The Value of Community Sport and Active Recreation in NSW," reveals that community sport delivers \$34.7 billion (more than \$4,000 for every resident) in annual social, economic and health benefits to NSW. In the context of this report, the health impact of community sport alone is significant. Valued at \$4.6 billion annually, this includes \$2.88 billion in mental health improvements and suicide prevention.

With almost two million participants and 900,000 volunteers, the community sport ecosystem has the reach, the relationships and the infrastructure to make a real difference. Beyond players and participants, the sector regularly engages with parents, volunteers, spectators and the broader community. This extensive reach, combined with the natural social connections fostered through sport, presents a powerful opportunity to promote and deliver improved mental health and wellbeing, particularly in rural and regional areas where sport is often central to community life.

With the right funding, partnerships and policy support, the community sport sector can deliver culturally appropriate, inclusive and impactful programs that reach the people who need them most.

We urge governments, health bodies, educators and community organisations to get behind this report and act on its recommendations. The evidence is clear, the infrastructure exists. The opportunity to transform mental health outcomes through community sport is too significant to ignore.



STUART HODGE
Chief Executive Officer
SPORT NSW





SETTING THE SCENE

Mental health is vital to all facets of everyday life including relationships, work, sleep and engagement in physical activity. It has an impact both at an individual and community level.

The World Health Organisation describes mental health as enabling people "to cope with the stresses of life, to realise their abilities, to learn well and work well, and to contribute to their communities."

In that context, surging rates of mental ill-health are a pressing challenge for Australia.

According to the latest National Mental Health and Wellbeing survey, 43 per cent of 16 to 85-year-olds reported experiences of mental illness in their lifetime.

It's particularly stark for younger people. The survey found 40 per cent of Australians aged 16 to 24 — representing more than one million people — had experienced a mental health disorder in the previous year, compared with 26 per cent in 2007.

As Australia's largest and longest serving crisis support service, Lifeline Australia holds knowledge that sheds further light on the mental health and wellbeing of Australians.

Marked increases in demand for Lifeline's crisis support services during the COVID19 pandemic have been maintained. Between three and four thousand people contact our crisis support services every day.

It is not only the volume but also the content of those interactions that is so revealing.

Lifeline's experience gives insights into what is on the minds of Australians 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

These interactions reveal some of the significant factors impacting negatively on mental health and wellbeing.

They include relationship breakdown and other major life transitions such as job loss, cost of living pressures and, especially for younger people, loneliness or lack of adequate human connection.

Lifeline's crisis support services, embedded in a broader system of mental health and suicide prevention services, are critical safeguards for Australians experiencing distress and/or mental ill-health.

It is increasingly clear existing approaches are inadequate to address the scale and complexity of the challenge.

The rising human and economic costs can only be addressed effectively with new thinking and approaches.

In this regard, strategies underpinning the national approach to mental health and suicide prevention increasingly focus on prevention.

Two things are key to put this in context:

➤ Mental health is now widely viewed as a continuum from 'well' at one end, through 'coping' and 'struggling'; to 'unwell' at the other.

➤ An individual's place on the continuum is dynamic, influenced by a range of personal risk factors (including biological) and social determinants.



Prevention can be seen as systematically supporting conditions in which individuals are more likely to remain for longer within the well or coping zones.

Fortunately, evidence points to specific conditions under which prevention objectives can be achieved.

In a non-exhaustive list, objectives from the National Suicide Prevention Strategy include:

- Enhancing safety and security, including fostering school and work environments free of bullying;
- Enhancing economic security, including creation of more affordable housing;
- Increasing social inclusion via mechanisms such as creating volunteering opportunities.

Fundamentally, these objectives collectively address some of the most basic human needs for psychological wellbeing including the need for a sense of adequate human connection and a sense of meaning and purpose.

In this respect, sport in all of its forms represents a vital opportunity to make a positive difference.

Participation in sport is an opportunity to address deep and growing societal challenges in supporting mental health and preventing suicide.





SPORT AND ITS ROLE IN PREVENTION

Whether team or individual, elite or community, sport can play a role in preventing mental ill-health and suicide.

The mechanisms underpinning the effects of participating in sport on mental health and wellbeing are widely accepted as being both physical and social in nature.

The 'mental health through sports' approach identifies biological components such as improved sleep and social components such as connection and belonging.

It is via these mechanisms that factors such as mood, vitality, quality of life and life satisfaction are maximised while stress, depression, anxiety and other negative effects are minimised.

The model maps specific mechanisms where participation in sport enhances wellbeing thus contributing to prevention of mental ill-health and suicide.

There is evidence that physical activity may be protective against suicidal ideation.

A systematic review found that adolescents and older adults who were "active" were less likely to experience suicidal ideation than those who were "inactive".

There is also evidence that meeting physical activity guidelines conferred a significant protective effect against suicidal ideation.

Despite the beneficial effects of sport on mental health and wellbeing, a recent estimate found that only 23 per cent of children aged 5 to 15 years were reaching recommended levels of physical activity.

This is at a time when distress and rates of mental illness are rising, particularly among young people.



PRIORITISING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING THROUGH SPORT

The rate of participation in sport faces challenges including cost of living pressures, adverse weather events and increasing shifts to online engagement at the expense of face-to-face contact.

As a consequence, it is important to clearly articulate the benefits of investing in sport as a mental ill-health and suicide prevention enabler.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Investing in sport as an enabler of mental ill-health and suicide prevention offers significant social and economic benefits.

The 2020 Productivity Commission inquiry into mental health found that mental ill-health and suicide cost Australia around \$200-\$220 billion each year.

This emphasises the need for preventative approaches that strengthen community wellbeing. Sport is one such approach.

Participation in sport helps improve social connection, reduces isolation, builds resilience and creates protective community networks.

Economic modelling also suggests that investment in organised sports delivers strong returns. Each dollar invested returns more than seven dollars in social and economic value.

It can be seen that strengthening access to safe, inclusive, community-based sport can contribute to population wide mental health and to long-term economic sustainability.



BENEFITS OF SPORT FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Sport and physical activity are consistently linked with improved mental health and wellbeing across age groups.

For adults, participation in sport is associated with:

- Reduced stress and distress
- Better psychological wellbeing, including higher self-esteem and life satisfaction
- Lower levels of depression, anxiety and stress
- Improved social outcomes such as self-control, prosocial behaviour, communication and belonging.

Evidence suggests that club and team-based sport may offer additional benefits due to their social nature.

Physical activity also appears to protect against suicidal ideation with active adolescents and older adults less likely to experience suicidal thoughts than those who were "inactive".

Physical activity among young people is associated with improvements in depression, anxiety, self-esteem and cognitive functioning.

Participation in team sport is linked with higher self-esteem, better social skills, fewer depressive symptoms and greater confidence, potentially due to the collaborative and connected nature of team environments.

These benefits depend on safe, inclusive environments and accessible opportunities.

Investment in community sport amplifies these outcomes improving health, reducing isolation and building resilience, while also delivering economic gains through job creation and productivity.

Accessible sport lowers healthcare costs and enhances quality of life highlighting its role in wellbeing and long-term economic sustainability.



LIFELINE'S SEVEN-POINT PLAN TO IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING THROUGH SPORT

Two key areas of action are essential to maximise the potential of sport as a preventative strategy.

Lifeline's approach is encapsulated in the following:

- Creating sport environments and programs that are safe, inclusive and connected to local mental health supports. (Points 1-3)
- Growing participation by strengthening local sport systems, removing barriers, investing in inclusive spaces, and promoting opportunities with effective community-focused campaigns. (Points 4-7)

Both position sport as a proactive partner in suicide prevention and community wellbeing complementing broader health strategies and reducing risk factors.

Current strategies that already support increased participation and growth of sport:

- Nationally, Play Well: Australia's Sport Participation Strategy 2023 (Australian Sports Commission) highlights the need for equitable access to sport, strengthening organisations, driving lifelong involvement, activating local spaces and places, building connections and transforming culture.
- In NSW, Everyone Plays Here: NSW Office of Sport Strategic Plan 2024-2028 focuses on sector growth, inclusive facilities, opportunities for all people, strong partnerships and investment and organisational development.

These strategies are not only essential for a thriving sport sector, but also align closely with maximising the mental health and suicide prevention benefits of sport.

Beyond sport:

- The National Suicide Prevention Strategy (National Suicide Prevention Office) emphasises social inclusion as a protective factor and encourages more diverse community clubs, interest groups, and accessible participation options to help people feel connected.
- Likewise, Vision 2030 for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (National Mental Health Commission) calls for integrated, community-based services that meet people where they are.

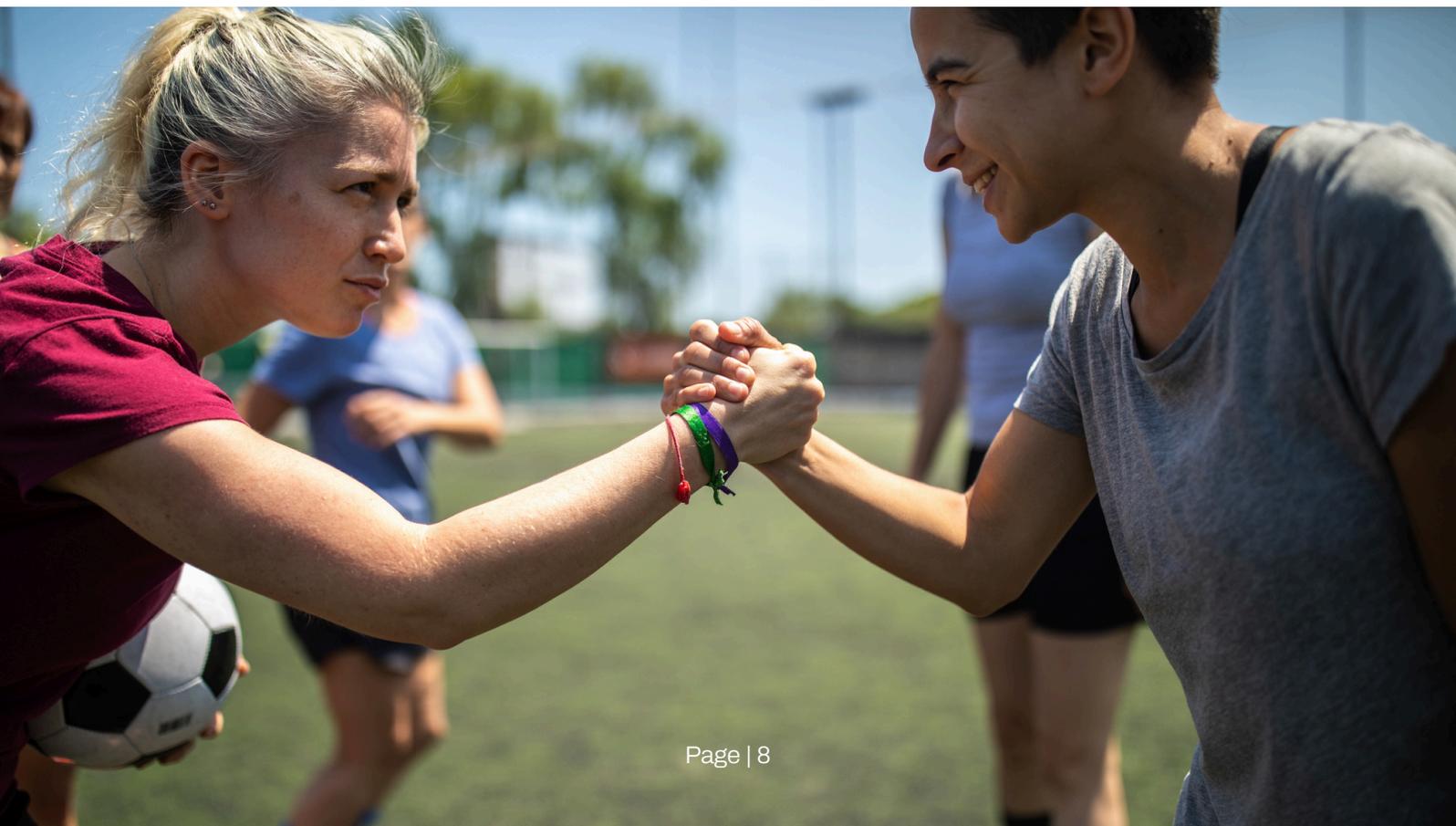
Combined, these frameworks suggest that strengthening local participation, connection and access to sport may support healthier, more resilient communities.

Our pillars adopt these existing approaches and extend them to highlight and strengthen their role in promoting mental health and wellbeing.

Embedding mental health considerations into participation also helps to enhance the role of sport in community wellbeing and suicide prevention.

Our fundamental position is that mental health and wellbeing are essential drivers for healthy individuals and communities.

By working together now, we can enhance sport participation and maximise benefits for mental health and suicide prevention.



1. Enhance Positive, Inclusive Culture in Sports

Psychologically safe and inclusive sporting environments promote compassionate competitiveness, foster belonging and reduce isolation.

A range of actions can help create environments where people feel seen, supported and able to thrive.

Some include setting clear expectations for respectful behaviour and modelling compassion and fair play across the club.

Also included is training for coaches, support staff, volunteers and player leadership in effective communication, emotional regulation and mental health awareness.

Also needed are clear processes for welcoming new participants, checking in with players, celebrating effort and addressing exclusion as it arises.

3. Co-Design Sport Experiences with Community Members

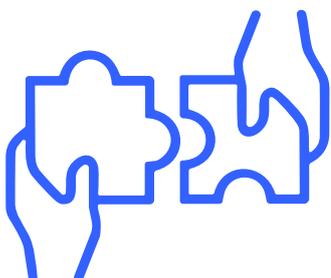
So that sports clubs meet the needs of the whole community, they should actively engage diverse community members including those from marginalised groups in the design and delivery of sport programs and facilities.

This can help remove barriers to participation and ensure that sporting environments meet the cultural, accessibility and social needs of all participants

This is particularly important for groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and LGBTIQ+ communities.

These groups typically experience higher rates of psychological distress, suicidality and self-harm, and lower levels of sport participation than the broader population.

Co-designed sport experiences also foster a sense of ownership, belonging and relevance, which encourages participation, retention and positive mental health outcomes.



2. Build Strong Connections with Mental Health and Wellbeing Services

Coaches, staff and volunteers in sports clubs are well placed to observe early signs of distress among players and colleagues making it important that they have the knowledge and resources needed to help people access support they might need.

Establishing formal partnerships between sporting organisations and mental health, wellbeing and suicide prevention services will help ensure clubs know where to turn when someone needs help.

This should include creating and disseminating clear referral pathways, providing Mental Health First Aid and suicide prevention training, and embedding wellbeing champions within clubs.

Measures of this kind will ensure help-seeking information is available and visible, helping to normalise conversations about mental health to further reduce stigma and connect individuals to support earlier.

4. Strengthen Community Sport Ecosystem

Strengthen the community sport ecosystem through the number, diversity, quality and connectedness of local clubs and social sport options to ensure communities have enough welcoming, inclusive and sustainable places for people to join and stay engaged.

This requires investment in good governance, volunteer capability and volunteer pipelines, as well as support for flexible formats designed for different population groups including women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, LGBTIQ+ communities, culturally diverse communities, older adults and people with disability.

Create strong partnerships between clubs, councils, schools and local organisations so that sport becomes a hub for meaningful social connection.

Foster high-quality, motivational climates that build enjoyment, belonging and emotional safety to ensure sport remains a positive and sustainable part of participants' lives.

5. Remove Financial, Practical and Cultural Barriers

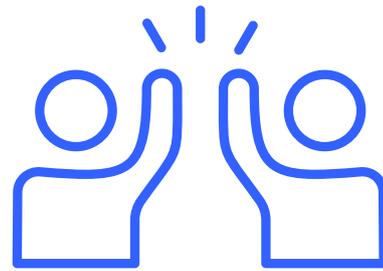
Address individual barriers such as financial, practical and cultural concerns across all ages, backgrounds and life stages.

Financial pressures can be reduced through subsidies, vouchers, equipment libraries or more transparent pricing to make sport more attainable for people on low incomes.

Create flexible, low-pressure participation options such as walking sport, casual social formats or adult beginner programs to offer safer and more achievable entry points for people trying sport for the first time or returning after a long break.

Consider transport needs, cultural safety, disability inclusion and the specific challenges faced by people in rural and remote communities.

Many barriers to participation in sport are also factors that confer risk for mental ill health and suicidality (AIHW, 2025). Moving barriers to participation can improve opportunities for vulnerable groups to reduce risk and improve social connection.



6. Invest in Inclusive Infrastructure and Welcoming Spaces

Design infrastructure with inclusion and belonging in mind to help sport facilities and public spaces become places where communities gather.

Invest in facilities such as gender safe changerooms, accessible buildings, safe lighting and welcoming social spaces to create environments where people feel comfortable spending time for physical activity and social connection.

Placemaking for Social Connection 101 highlights that places that feel welcoming, encourage interaction, reflect local identity and support a variety of uses are more likely to support social connection.

Where possible, locate facilities near public transport, safe walking routes, cycle paths and/or local activity centres to improve access.

To facilitate help seeking, locate facilities near community centres, primary health services, neighbourhood houses or libraries. Ensure help seeking information is available and visible.

Activate parks, school grounds and indoor community spaces for informal or social sport to expand opportunities for local activity, particularly in communities with limited formal facilities.

Encourage partnerships between clubs, councils, schools and community organisations so that existing assets are used more often throughout the week.

7. Promote Sport Through Multi-level Awareness Campaigns

Employ awareness campaigns to increase understanding of the benefits of physical activity and the influence behaviour change. These campaigns must be tailored to the needs of local communities and delivered as part of multi-level approaches.

Encourage participation by highlighting the benefits to wellbeing, social connection and stress reduction by providing clear and accessible information on how to get started so that newcomers feel confident to join.





CONCLUSION

As presented so powerfully in this paper, participation in sport has a capacity to influence mental health in a positive way, especially among young people. As such, we all have a part to play in encouraging all Australians — older and younger — to make sport, either individually or in a team, part of their life.

Australia prides itself on being a nation of sports lovers. Having a population disposed to the pleasure that sport can bring should make promoting sports participation relatively straightforward.

There is a role for everyone to play but sport itself can certainly make a difference. It would be fantastic to see sports

organisations, elite players and commentators making every effort to promote participation on a day-to-day basis. Those involved in sport have the platform and the persuasive power to inspire Australians from all age groups and groups in society to get involved in sport.

In turn, our government leaders and local councils have a responsibility to make sure the facilities and infrastructure are in place to support increased participation.

The dividend for society could be profound and measured in an improvement in mental health across all demographics.

Let's make it a priority.





If you or someone you care for needs support or is thinking about suicide, please contact Lifeline.

13 11 14

24 hours | 7 days

0477 13 11 14

Lifeline Text

24 hours | 7 days

[lifeline.org.au](https://www.lifeline.org.au)

Chat to a Crisis Supporter online

24 hours | 7 days



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