



Nutrition promotion strategies and advocacy in mental health

Foreword: Nutrition plays a complex role in people's mental health. Trust, respect, and hearing each person's lived experience is crucial to being able to provide appropriate and safe nutrition counselling. It is important to uphold truly person-centred care alongside evidence-based practice, and to acknowledge that mental health is multifactorial and more complex than diet alone.

Nutrition promotion underpins public health policy because nutrition is a critical factor in health determination. Public health policy is an evolving entity. In 2021, mental health in Australia is a national health priority with a key role for dietitians. It is well documented that people living with mental health conditions frequently have poor diet quality and reduced nutritional quality of life, which is associated with adverse physical health and premature mortality. Dietitians therefore have a key role in mental health settings, however are often underutilised in the health care of people who live with mental health concerns.

This resource aims to empower and invigorate the emerging or established dietitian to connect and value-add to mental health consumers, mental health teams and services. There are many different ways to promote nutrition in mental health, including through education, information, multidisciplinary collaboration, program and resource development/promotion and research.

Education

- Provide in-services for colleagues, e.g. mental health clinicians or allied health professionals. Topics could include 'role of diet in mental health', 'what a dietitian does', or 'how can dietary interventions help manage cardiometabolic side effects of some psychiatric medication'.
- Facilitate nutrition education sessions for the mental health team, including support workers, food service staff, recreation officers, and nursing staff.
- Conduct food and nutrition information sessions for families or carers in a community or hospital setting.
- Develop group nutrition programs run by dietitians in collaboration with other mental health staff (occupational therapist, physiotherapist, peer support worker).

Collaboration

- Be less prescriptive and more collaborative. Identify peer support workers in your organisation who could be key allies in helping to highlight the role of nutrition and physical activity in mental health; they could help champion this message throughout your organisation.
- Collaborate with occupational therapists in their work around shopping, cooking and meal planning skills.
- Effectively communicate critical information, alerts and risk in a timely way to clinicians, carers, families, counsellors, social workers (allied health).

- Attend relevant case conferences and clinical review meetings.
- Try a 'meet-and-greet'. Distribute *the mental health promotional flyer* at a health clinic.
- Network with support groups, carer groups, and mental health non-governmental organisations (NGOs), where possible.
- Look for opportunities to join working groups or committees relevant to nutrition in your mental health setting.
- Attend mental health conferences and network about the role of dietitians in mental health, on an individual level.

Mentoring

- Participate in inter-professional mentoring (as a mentor or mentee), with a mental health professional, e.g. psychologist, psychiatrist, mental health nurse, social worker, occupational therapist.

Programs and plans

- Suggest mental health case / key workers use *Nutrition Support Action Plans* - These decision tools help guide the selection of action-based resources for mental health case managers.
- Implement a nutrition screening program to assess the diet quality at your healthcare location (e.g. average serves of fruit and vegetables eaten per week, soft drink / caffeine consumption). Share the results to advocate for prioritisation of nutrition in a unit, for an individual client, to change hospital menus, or to advocate for healthier vending machines.
- Include cardiometabolic markers (BSL, HbA1c%, non-HDL-C) with a screening program or audit.
- Undertake quality improvement projects – take a leadership role in identifying gaps and practice improvement.
- Get involved with menu planning if your setting provides food. *A toolkit for healthy eating in supported accommodation*.
- *Develop a community kitchen/garden*, walking group, or other nutrition project targeted at clients with mental health issues. Even talking about these project ideas with your contacts can start raising awareness about food and nutrition.

- Report against relevant practice standards, guidelines, policy and procedures including *NSQHS standards for accreditation* for people living with mental health conditions.

Resource development and promotion

- Make sure that the resources you develop are tailored to your clients' needs by consulting staff and clients in the development phase.
- Know your websites (Beyond Blue, Black Dog Institute, SANE Australia, Headspace, MindMatters, Carers Assist, Reach Out Australia) for easy access to relevant and helpful nutrition information fact sheets for staff and clients.
- Prepare a nutrition resource folder for the mental health team you are working with.
- Write nutrition and mental health articles in newsletters or magazines for your organisation, mental health organisations, or NGOs.
- Ensure the nutrition department is included in in-patient services for the mental health ward or service. Check this is reflected on patient brochures, website and internal documentation.
- Contribute to *Nutrition Education Materials Online (NEMO) mental health group*.
- *R U OK?* Initiate a mental health check-in day in your region via social media and community health facilities.

Advocacy actions with a broader scope

- Collaborate with your peers to provide a loud voice to publicly recommend, support, campaign, stand up for, argue for dietitians as valued integral members of care plans for all people experiencing mental health conditions.
- Participate in advisory committees, project groups and interest groups as a volunteer – watch for Dietitians Australia Mental Health Interest Group (MHIG) and MHANDi activities.
- Supervise a student research project in mental health (contact the MHIG committee for current projects).
- Get involved in your local dietetics course to help build the capacity of student or graduate dietitians, e.g. lecture about working with clients with mental health issues.

- Write a formal submission to management for additional dietitian hours for mental health, e.g. within large healthcare network.
- Contribute feedback to governmental or independent reviews about nutrition in mental health services, e.g. advocate for increased dietetic input; discuss the need for improving physical health amongst people who live with mental health concerns.
- Write an [advocacy letter](#) to your local state or federal Member of Parliament about the need for more dietitians to be involved in care plans in mental health.
- Consider collaborative research to extend the evidence base for the link between physical and mental health, overall wellness, and to close the mortality gap for people living with mental health conditions.

Recent mental health advocacy work at Dietitians Australia

Dietitians Australia is committed to ongoing advocacy in the mental health space, including submissions to institutions such as the Department of 'Veterans' Affairs' and Medicare, the development and delivery of mental health training for dietitians, the establishment of the Dietitians Australia Mental Health Working Group (September 2020), and consultancy with the National Mental Health Workforce Strategy Taskforce to promote the role of APDs in mental health (February 2021). Current and ongoing advocacy work at Dietitians Australia can be found on the [Dietitians Australia advocacy page](#).

Further reading:

- [Mental Health Briefing Paper](#): Dietitians Australia December 2020
- [Mental Health Role Statement](#): Dietitians Australia May 2018
- [Addressing the Physical Health of People with Mental Illness](#): Joint position statement Exercise and Sports Science Australia (ESSA), The Australian Psychological Society (APS), Dietitians Australia (DA)
- [Western Australian Health Promotion Strategies Framework 2017-2021](#): A five-year plan to reduce preventable chronic disease and injury in our communities Government Western Australia Department of Health
- Teasdale SB, Samaras K, Wade T, Jarman R, Ward PB. A review of the nutritional challenges experienced by people living with severe mental illness: a role for dietitians in addressing physical health gaps. *J Hum Nutr Diet*, 2017; 30: 545-53
- Teasdale SB, Latimer G, Byron A, et al. Expanding collaborative care: integrating the role of dietitians and nutrition interventions in services for people with mental illness. *Australas Psychiatry*, 2017; 26: 47-9.

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Afterword: When working to improve the mental health and wellbeing of others, it's also important to look after your own mental health. Personal life stress, and stress related to work can affect your mood, thoughts and feelings in different ways, at different times. Remember to be mindful of your own wellbeing and make time to take care of your mental health at work, such as debriefing, taking a short walk/break outdoors, seeking support, and practising self-care. If any of the topics discussed in this resource brought up any distress for you, you can find helpful resources at [Beyond Blue](#), [Head to Health](#), and [Mental Health Australia](#).