

Fairer Start Initiative

Reimagining Mental Health

post COVID-19 Working Group

The ECP Fairer Start Initiative seeks to curate and amplify RMIT transdisciplinary research to influence change for a more inclusive and equitable Australia. The *Reimagining Mental Health post COVID-19 Working Group* is one of four key working groups for this Restart.

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted most aspects of people's lives on an unprecedented scale. The pandemic has created new pressures and, for many, exacerbated existing distress. Impacts such as fear of the unknown, lack of control of one's life, concerns over one's housing security, loneliness, job insecurity, and disruption of family life, family ties and social connectedness, are undermining the mental health of individuals, and more broadly our communities as a whole. At the same time, we are witnessing people responding in creative and new ways to this 'new normal' while showing strength in working through these unexpected and often uncontrollable circumstances. We also see 'out of the box' thinking and creativity from the ways various services supporting people in areas of health, mental health and social care are innovating in their approaches to supporting people, ranging from different ways of communication with service users to providing needed care and ongoing support.

Despite this innovation, evidence shows that in Australia, key national mental health support services are struggling to meet unprecedented demand for support from thousands of Australians. Many health and social care support services are witnessing significantly increased levels of anxiety in the community, not only in people who have experienced distress & mental health concerns in the past, but in many instances in people who have never experienced distress (e.g. anxiety and/or depression). In addition to COVID-19, many Australians, especially those in the regions, are still experiencing ongoing trauma caused by the 2020 summer's bushfire crisis and the lasting drought. These accumulating sources of distress and trauma have prompted the Federal Government to boost its mental health response. These experiences also invite a reconsideration of mental distress and mental health with a view to reimagining resilience and wellbeing.

To tackle some of the mental health related concerns, while utilizing a significant existing RMIT capability in transdisciplinary research in mental health and organisation of health and social care, RMIT academics, under the leadership of Micaela Cronin, Director, FSSI and Renata Kokanović, Professor of Health Sociology (*Mental Health*), SGSC, have established the *Reimagining Mental Health post COVID-19* working group within the Fairer Start Initiative. The group builds on the mental health research activities of members of the RMIT Humanities, Arts, Social science and Health (HASH) Network (critical mental health group).

To commence discussions and further facilitate development of RMIT Post COVID-19 mental health response to enhance community positive futures, our initial activities will focus on the following areas:

- What does the community want to hold onto and embed in future mental health and social care service delivery approaches informed by the adaptations made during the COVID crisis response?
- How do we understand mental health, mental distress and emotional wellbeing in our changed world?
- How can lived experience guide new ways of responding to mental distress?
- What does effective mental health and social care look like post COVID pandemic crisis phase?
- How can we contribute to the growing knowledge base regarding the utility of digital mental health service delivery?
- How current acknowledgement in the community about impact of broader social structures on mental health of individuals and community could be utilised in shifting how we talk about mental health and mental distress and further de-pathologize and de-stigmatize experiences of mental health?