
A NEW STRATEGY FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

ORYGEN SUBMISSION



Orygen welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the new *Strategy for Mental Health and Wellbeing in New South Wales* (NSW). This submission highlights the importance of ensuring that the mental health needs of young people in New South Wales are prioritised in the Strategy.

We note the forthcoming NSW *Health Strategy for Young People's Health and Wellbeing* and emphasise the need for strategic alignment with the new *Strategy for Mental Health and Wellbeing* to drive coordinated action and improved mental health support and outcomes for young people.

ABOUT ORYGEN

Orygen is the world's leading research and knowledge translation organisation focusing on mental ill-health in young people. At Orygen, our leadership and staff work to deliver cutting-edge research, policy development, innovative clinical services, and evidence-based training and education to ensure that there is continuous improvement in the treatments and care provided to young people experiencing mental ill-health.

Orygen conducts clinical research, runs clinical services (five headspace centres), supports the professional development of the youth mental health workforce and provides policy advice relating to young people's mental health. Our current research strengths include: early psychosis, mood disorders, personality disorders, functional recovery, suicide prevention, online interventions, neurobiology and health economics.

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1. WHAT IS WORKING?
2. WHAT IS NOT WORKING?
3. WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

STRONGER FOCUS ON YOUNG PEOPLE

Orygen recommends that the Strategy includes a strong focus on addressing the mental health needs of young people. Recent data shows that 45.9 per cent of young people in NSW believe there is ‘not enough’ or ‘barely enough’ government support for youth mental health.⁽¹⁾ Mental ill-health disproportionately impacts young people – 75 per cent of life-time experiences of mental ill-health begins before a person is 24 years old. This occurs during a time when people are often engaged in education, establishing careers and navigating independence. The support provided to a young person with mental ill-health can alter lifelong trajectories.⁽²⁾ The NSW *Strategic Plan for Children and Young People Tracking Report* identified ongoing concerns about the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in NSW. The report found that almost one in four (23%) children and young people in NSW identified mental health as the issue most impacting them.⁽²⁾ Similarly, Mission Australia’s most recent *Youth Survey* found that one in five young people in NSW nominated mental health as their greatest challenge (20%) and a similar proportion reported experiencing high levels of psychological distress (22%).⁽³⁾

Despite the need for care among young people in NSW, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data shows that community mental health service contacts for 12-17 year olds in NSW are 7.3 per cent below the national average. The only other cohort with lower-than-average contact rates is those aged 85 years and over.⁽⁴⁾ Other statistics reveal that the proportion of young people in NSW who sought but did not receive mental health support has more than doubled, rising from 7.6 per cent in 2021 to 15.5 per cent in 2023.⁽¹⁾ This widening service gap underscores the importance of a focus on the mental health needs of young people in the upcoming Strategy.

The need for a focus on youth mental health is aligned with existing NSW priorities. For example, the NSW *Living Well in Focus 2020–2024* Strategy identified youth mental health as a key area for reform and recommended strengthened prevention and early intervention efforts to reduce the incidence of mental ill-health among children and young people.⁽⁵⁾ Noting the disproportionate rates of suicide and self-harm among young people, the NSW *Suicide Prevention Strategy 2022-27* includes several priorities focused on supporting improved mental health outcomes among young people.⁽⁶⁾

An all-ages approach to mental health and wellbeing and suicide prevention increases the risk for missing the specific mental health needs of young people. Orygen recommends that any youth-focused priorities are co-developed with young people to ensure that actions are relevant and acceptable to them.

Recommendation 1

Orygen recommends that the NSW Strategy for Mental Health and Wellbeing identifies the mental health and wellbeing of young people as a priority and includes specific goals to ensure services and supports are designed and targeted specifically for young people.

4. HOW SHOULD CHANGE HAPPEN?

INTEGRATION ACROSS DEPARTMENTS

Orygen supports the Strategy’s recognition that a whole-of-NSW Government approach is essential for improving mental health and suicide prevention outcomes. In particular, the role of coordinated cross portfolio responses that support mental health and wellbeing. Orygen’s recent submission into the *National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement* outlined the importance of policy integration between social determinants and related psychosocial domains. Social determinants and

related psychosocial domains intersect across a range of policy areas (e.g. housing, disability supports, education) that have impact on experiences of mental ill-health and contribute to its onset. This intersection provides a robust rationale for integrated policy responses in the upcoming Strategy. For example, the Strategy could fund the delivery of mental health and suicide prevention services for young people at risk for disengagement from education through the inclusion of selected education wellbeing policies.

Recommendation 2

The Strategy should adopt an integrated policy approach that addresses psychosocial domains and social determinants of mental ill-health. This should include Departments in addition to NSW Health.

5. WHAT COULD IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING ACROSS OUR COMMUNITIES?

6. WHAT ROLES SHOULD NSW GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES PLAY IN THAT?

PEER WORKFORCE

Recruiting mental health professionals with specialised training and interest in working with young people remains an ongoing challenge. Expanding the youth peer workforce presents a practical and evidence-based strategy to address these challenges and support the growing mental health needs of young people. Supporting youth peer workers not only strengthens the quality of care available to young people but also equips young people with transferable skills that support their future career development.

Peer workers are uniquely positioned to support young people experiencing mental ill-health, offering support that compliments traditional clinical care. The range of support offered by peer workers is diverse, including recovery planning and goal setting, mental health system navigation and advocacy. Youth peer support is distinct in its focus on:

- Support between people of similar ages
- Shared early experiences of mental health challenges and service use
- Understanding and addressing issues unique to young people(8)

The peer workforce delivers social, clinical and economic benefits for young people, their families and services.(7, 8) Both the NSW *Living Well in Focus 2020–2024 Strategy* and NSW *Strategic Framework and Workforce Plan for Mental Health* identify growing the peer workforce as a key area of mental health reform, however, there is no discussion or actions related to the development of a youth-specific peer workforce.(9, 10) The next Strategy should explicitly include this focus, recognising the unique role youth peer workers play in supporting young people experiencing mental ill-health. Expansion of initiatives, such as the NSW Government subsidy for the Certificate IV in Mental Health Peer Work would make this pathway more accessible, supporting the development of the youth peer workforce.

Recommendation 3

The Strategy should include targeted actions to expand and build the capacity of the youth peer workforce in NSW.

7. HOW WILL WE KNOW THAT WE ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE?

MEASURING PROGRESS

Orygen recommends that the Strategy develop a measurable implementation plan with youth-specific measures to enable ongoing assessment of its effectiveness. Mechanisms for measuring and reporting progress should be established from the outset. As highlighted in Orygen's recent submission into the *National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement*, evaluation processes can risk low engagement rates due to concerns regarding service contract renewal and reputational risk. In response, the Strategy should consider the potential for reporting templates that focus on identifying improvement based on evaluation findings. Improvement-focused framing can support enhanced engagement in evaluation processes that drive improved mental health outcomes for young people.

Recommendation 4

Develop an implementation plan as part of the new Strategy that includes measurable actions for monitoring and reporting. This should include dedicated actions for young people and youth mental health services.

INTERSECTION WITH NATIONAL POLICY

The Strategy should identify areas of intersection with the forthcoming *National Agreement on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention*, with mechanisms to adapt to national priorities in the new Agreement.

The Productivity Commission's interim report identified that there is currently limited joint planning between community mental health services funded by state and territory governments and those funded by the Australian Government. This fragmentation disrupts care pathways for young people experiencing mental ill-health, making it harder for them to access the support they need.

Recommendation 5

Consult with the Productivity Commission to strengthen alignment with national mental health priorities to support improved mental health support for young people.

This submission was written on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. Orygen acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to Country, which continue to be important to the First Nations people living today.

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