



Psychotherapy & Counselling
Federation of Australia

Addressing the needs of LGBTQI+ people in the National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan 2020

PACFA Submission to the National Mental Health Commission, July 2020

About PACFA

The Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia is a leading national peak body and professional association for counsellors and psychotherapists in Australia. PACFA aims to represent the profession to communities and government, and to develop the evidence-base for counselling and psychotherapy. PACFA promotes the development and practice of counselling and psychotherapy for practitioners and professional associations with diverse approaches. PACFA fosters professional identity, supports training and research, provides professional regulation and ethical standards, and works to ensure public accountability.

About the LGBTQI+ Leadership Group

The LGBTQI+ Leadership Group aims to raise awareness and advocate for LGBTQI+ issues within PACFA and the mental health sector to promote best practice in counselling and psychotherapy work with LGBTQI+ people. This includes developing LGBTQI+ relevant practice resources and professional development, as well as promoting best practices and policy development that meet the needs of LGBTQI+ people.

Our concerns: the mental health and wellbeing of LGBTQI+ people in the National Plan

COVID-19 has directly affected the lives of all Australians. However, the significant risks and challenges posed by the pandemic will have a far greater impact on the health, wellbeing and livelihood of individuals and communities already subject to structural disadvantage and discrimination, including LGBTQI+ people and communities.

Alongside other marginalised groups, the health and wellbeing of LGBTQI+ people has already been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, both in Australia and internationally (Rainbow Health Victoria 2020, LGBT Foundation 2020). Initial research into the mental health impact on LGBTQI+ populations in Australia reveals multiple emerging concerns including mental health, loneliness, discrimination in healthcare, strained family relationships, and lack of connection with the LGBTQI+ community (Hirst, 2020).

It is imperative that Australia's ongoing mental health response to the COVID-19 pandemic prioritises the needs of LGBTQI+ communities alongside those of other disadvantaged, stigmatised and marginalised people.

We are therefore very concerned that the *National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan 2020* (the Plan) fails to adequately recognise and address the needs and experiences of LGBTQI+ communities and uses language which may serve to further stigmatise LGBTQI+ Australians.

In particular, we are concerned that the phrasing of “life choices” in the plan (p. 30, para. 3) can unintentionally promote the harmful stereotype that all LGBTQI+ people are living one homogenous “lifestyle”, instead of recognising that LGBTQI+ people come from all faiths, backgrounds, and ways of life. Application of this term to “LGBTI” people obscures the important distinctions between sexuality (LGB), gender identity (T), and physical characteristics (intersex) in a way that can exacerbate existing confusion about the distinct and specific needs of each of these separate, but sometimes overlapping, populations.

Research documents that the belief in people’s LGBTQI+ experience being a “choice” is strongly associated with support for discrimination on the basis of sexuality, relationship status, gender identity, and intersex status—all protected categories in Australian federal anti-discrimination legislation. Use of this “life choices” rhetoric has been weaponised by campaigns seeking to deny legislative anti-discrimination protections to people with LGBTQI+ lived experience. This term also obscures the ongoing access barriers LGBTQI+ people encounter from mental health professionals and systems when seeking care. We also note several places in the document where marginalised groups’ needs are mentioned but people with LGBTQI+ lived experience were omitted.

We believe that the Plan in its current form not only fails to address the diverse needs of LGBTQI+ communities but may instead serve to place individuals at greater risk of discrimination when accessing services. PACFA requests a meeting with the National Mental Health Commission to discuss our concerns and make recommendations for strengthening our national approach to providing crucial mental health supports to LGBTQI+ people and communities.

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References

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