

# PREVENTION UNITED

Joining forces to prevent mental health conditions



## STAYING AHEAD

Your guide to preventing depression and anxiety

# ABOUT PREVENTION UNITED

**Prevention United is a mental health charity with a difference. We believe mental health conditions are not inevitable.**

Nearly **1 in 2 Australians will experience a mental health condition in their lifetime.**

These conditions can be profoundly distressing and disruptive to people's lives.

Our mission is to prevent these conditions from developing in the first place.

A growing body of research is showing that **prevention is possible.**

We can use similar approaches to how we've successfully prevented many physical health conditions like diabetes, heart disease and cancers and make a significant difference.

Prevention United is leading a new approach. We're joining forces with individuals, families, organisations and communities to prevent mental health conditions by fostering strengths and reducing risks.

**Join us and let's get serious about prevention.**

## ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

This booklet is for people wanting simple and practical tips to promote their mental wellbeing and reduce their risk of experiencing a mental health condition.

The strategies recommended are strictly based on the latest research evidence for what works.

This booklet is mainly for individuals, but Prevention United understands the big picture and the fundamental importance of creating a society that fosters mental wellbeing in its people.

You can find out more about our work in this space at **[preventionunited.org.au](https://preventionunited.org.au)**.



# MENTAL HEALTH OR MENTAL ILLNESS?

When you hear the words ‘mental health’ you might think of conditions such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia.

In fact, these are **mental health conditions** (also referred to as mental disorders or mental illnesses).

Because of the confusion between mental health and mental health conditions, many people prefer to use the term **mental wellbeing** when referring to ‘good’ or ‘positive’ mental health.

Whether high or low, we all experience some level of mental wellbeing. This level changes depending on your circumstances at the time.

If you have high levels of mental wellbeing then you’re said to be **flourishing**. If you experience low levels you’re said to be **languishing**.

It is important to note that languishing is not the same as having a mental health condition, and people living with mental health conditions are still able to flourish.

Ultimately mental wellbeing is about feeling good, having positive relationships, functioning well, and feeling that you have purpose and meaning in your life.

# WHAT IS PREVENTION?

Most people know that good hygiene, sanitation and immunizations can prevent infections. They also know if they eat healthily, exercise regularly and don't smoke, they can reduce their chances of developing diabetes or experiencing a heart attack or a stroke.

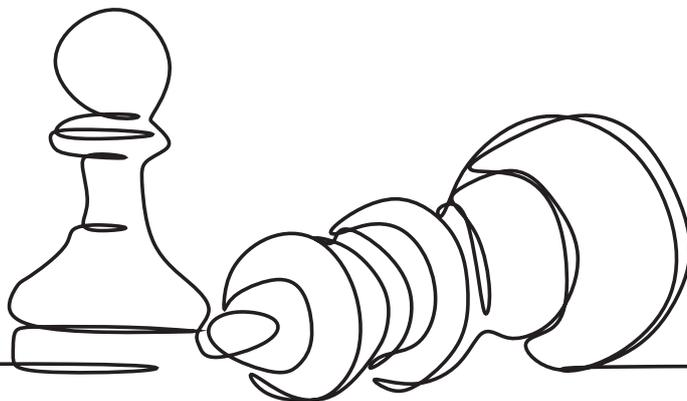
## WHAT MOST PEOPLE DON'T REALISE IS THAT MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS CAN ALSO BE PREVENTED.

In essence, there are two ways that we can prevent mental health conditions. We can reduce people's exposure to the factors that contribute to these conditions and/or increase their exposure to the factors that protect against these conditions.

## PREVENTION REQUIRES ACTION BY INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES.

We can assist individuals to enhance their resilience, and take steps to promote and protect their own mental wellbeing in the face of life's challenges.

We also need organisations, communities and governments to create more mentally healthy environments that reduce people's exposure to the factors that are harmful to their mental health – such as discrimination, bullying, isolation, excessive work stress or unemployment.





# STAYING AHEAD

The good news is that there are lots of actions you can take to promote mental wellbeing and prevent mental health conditions.

To keep things simple we've grouped these actions into a word that's easy to remember: **AHEAD.**

The following pages offer some information and strategies designed to help you get AHEAD of mental health conditions.

## **AWARENESS**

Being aware of your personal risks and strengths.

## **HEALTHY LIFESTYLE**

The basics of wellbeing - good for your body and your mind.

## **EMOTIONAL FLEXIBILITY**

Working with your emotions to maintain a positive balance.

## **ADVERSITY SUPPORT**

Connecting with others to support you through tough times.

## **DIRECTION**

Fostering purpose and meaning in your life.

# AWARENESS

Any one of us can experience a mental health condition. But certain circumstances can increase the chance of it happening to us. When we are aware of these risks, we are in a better position to be proactive in protecting our mental wellbeing.

## KEY RISKS INCLUDE:

01.

### Family history

If several of your close relatives have experienced mental health conditions, you may be at higher risk.

But even if you've inherited the genes linked to a particular condition, genes can be turned on or off depending on your own actions and the social environments around you.

02.

### Trauma and negative early life experiences

High levels of stress during childhood or adolescence can lead to problems – either at the time they occur, or later in life.

Negative experiences include:

- Child neglect or abuse
- Exposure to domestic violence
- Bullying and cyberbullying
- Living in poverty

03.

### Transitions and major life events

Serious challenges such as the death of a child or partner, separation and divorce, retrenchment and unemployment, or becoming homeless can affect our mental wellbeing.

Even transitions we expect to feel excited about - like starting a new job or becoming a parent - can be unsettling and take us out of our comfort zone.

Major life events are often high-pressure situations. It's important to maintain or ramp-up your strategies for keeping mentally well to counteract the extra stress.

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YOUR MENTAL  
WELLBEING IS  
NOT FIXED OR  
PREDETERMINED.  
IT CAN ALWAYS GROW  
AND GET STRONGER.

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## PERSONAL STRENGTHS

One way to build mental wellbeing is to tune into and work with our strengths.

We all have strengths and positive qualities. We might be funny, brave, creative, kind, curious, athletic, good with our hands, or have a love of learning.

It's important to recognise that your strengths will be *different* to others, not better or worse.

Your answers to these questions will give you clues about what your strengths might be:

- What comes easily to you?
- What do you spend your downtime doing?
- What role do you usually play in a group?

- What's most important to you in life?
- What qualities or skills did you use to overcome a difficult situation?

Once you've identified your strengths, your challenge is to find opportunities each day to use them more often.

- How can you make using a strength part of your daily routine?
- How can you help others using a strength?
- How can you use a strength to deal with a current problem?

Research shows our mental wellbeing is enhanced the more we're able to use our strengths in daily life.

# HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

These lifestyle basics provide the foundations for health and wellbeing. While they might seem obvious, don't underestimate the difference they can make to how you feel each day.

## 01.

### Exercise

A recent study found that just 1 hour of exercise a week was enough to prevent 12% of new cases of depression.

Exercise helps by:

- Giving you a focus that takes your mind off problems.
- Changing the brain's neurotransmitters and the balance of hormones.
- Getting you active and involved with others.

Aiming for 45 minutes of moderate to high intensity exercise three times a week is ideal, but it's ok to start small and build up.

Anything you can do to get active is better than nothing, and the best exercise is the type you enjoy and will keep doing.

## 02.

### Sleep

Sleep gives our brain and body a chance to rest and repair.

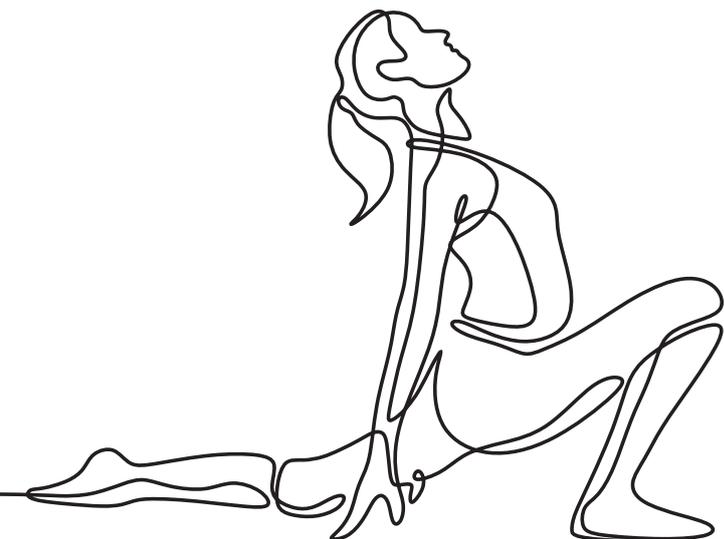
Research shows that we're better able to manage our emotions after a good night's sleep.

Tips for getting that elusive good night's sleep include:

- Having a consistent bedtime wind-down routine.
- Going to bed and waking up around the same time each day.
- Avoiding caffeine, stimulants or screens before bedtime.
- Getting enough physical activity during the day.
- Avoiding daytime naps.

If you haven't been able to fall asleep after 20 minutes, get up and sit in a dim room until you're feeling tired again. Repeat until you fall asleep.

It can also help to get your thoughts out of your head and onto a notepad so you can let them go.



## 03.

### Nutrition

A healthy diet provides the nutrients we need to keep everything in our body working smoothly.

Recent studies have found a link between bacteria in our gut, our immune system and our brains.

Eating a lot of “junk” or processed foods can create bad gut bacteria, generating chemicals that can affect the brain.

To reduce your risk, try:

- Eating plenty of fruits, vegetables, legumes, wholegrain cereals, nuts, and seeds.
- Eat foods rich in omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids such as fish or flaxseed oil.
- Cut down on fast food, takeaways, and sweets.

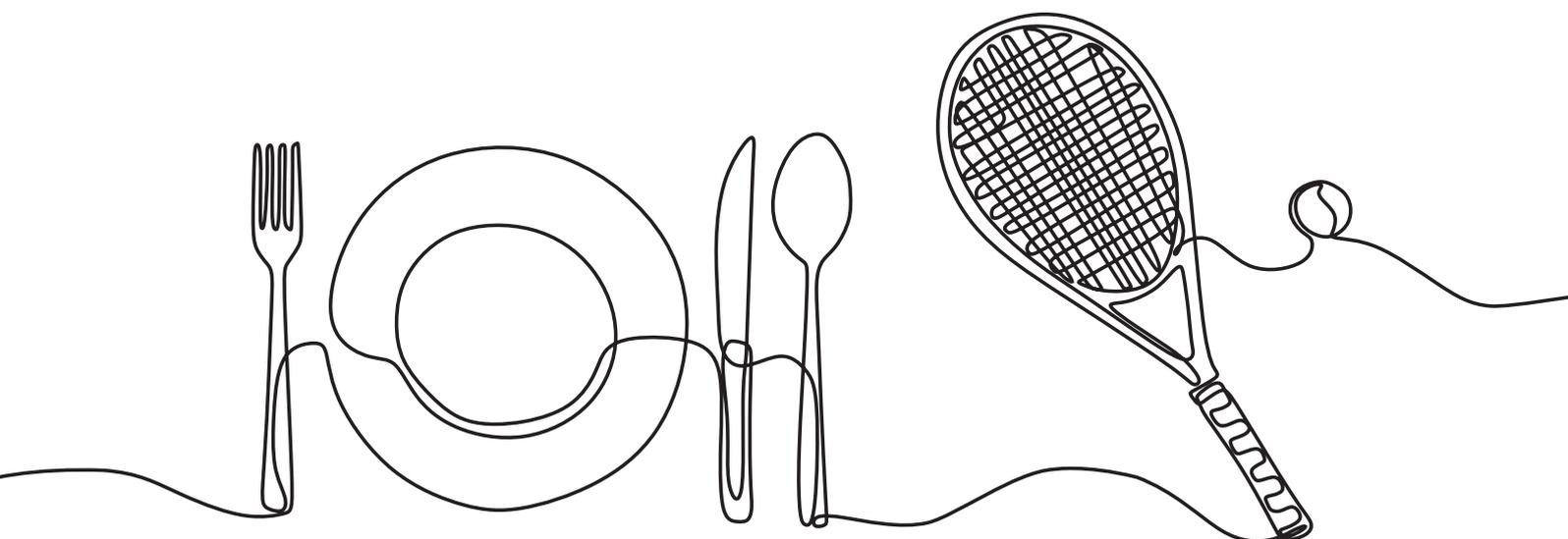
## 04.

### Stress management

Stress is part of life but recognising and dealing with it before it becomes excessive is a major part of promoting mental wellbeing.

Here are some strategies people find useful:

- Writing down what’s in your control vs out of your control at the moment – and reducing the demands you’re facing that are within your control.
- Connecting with other people who might listen and understand.
- Reducing the physical effects of stress by slow deep breathing, relaxation or meditation.
- Scheduling activities into your week that you find pleasurable so your life doesn’t become consumed by what’s making you stressed.
- Looking at your interpretation of events to ensure you’re keeping things in perspective.
- View challenges as opportunities for learning and growth, rather than threats.



# EMOTIONAL FLEXIBILITY

**Pleasant emotions are a key part of mental wellbeing, but it's not always possible to feel happy. Anger, worry and stress are natural responses to difficult situations life puts us in.**

But unpleasant moods that hang around too long can affect your relationships and day-to-day functioning. It's about keeping a positive balance overall. Here are some ways to keep in touch with your emotions without letting them take over.

## 01.

### Mood monitoring

Learning to monitor your mood helps you to reflect on how you're feeling and to recognise and react to persistent unpleasant emotions.

Ways to record your mood include keeping a diary, using an app, or simply paying attention to the way you feel on a regular basis.

You don't need to focus on your emotions every minute of the day. Just try to notice how you feel generally, and how it changes over time.

## 02.

### Helpful thinking

How we think has a powerful influence on how we feel and behave.

One person may fail an exam and think it shows they are 'stupid' or a 'complete failure'. Another person may fail an exam and think they are capable but didn't perform their best on the day.

The first person is likely to feel sad and demoralised. The second is likely to feel annoyed but uses the experience to learn and motivate themselves to do better next time.

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UNPLEASANT EMOTIONS CAN HELP YOU IDENTIFY PROBLEMS AND MOTIVATE YOU TO MAKE CHANGES FOR THE BETTER.

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## LEARNING TO RECOGNISE AND REFRAME UNREALISTIC OR EXAGGERATED THOUGHT PATTERNS CAN HELP YOU IMPROVE YOUR MENTAL WELLBEING.

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Unhelpful thought patterns can contribute to conditions such as depression and anxiety.

It helps to examine your thoughts to see if they're helping or hindering how you feel.

Ask yourself:

- What's the evidence this thought is true?
- What would I tell a friend in the same situation?
- What information am I ignoring or discounting?
- What are other ways of interpreting this situation?
- Is it helping me to think this way?

*More information on unhelpful thought patterns can be found at our website*

**[www.preventionunited.org.au](http://www.preventionunited.org.au)**

### 03.

#### Problem solving

Sometimes it can help to work problems through logically. Structured problem solving involves some key steps:

1. Create a list of problems. Define the problems in specific terms.
2. Rank the problems in order of priority.
3. Choose the top problem and start brainstorming solutions.
4. Write down the pros and cons of each solution.
5. Choose the best (or least worst) solution and give it a go.



## 04.

**Gratitude**

Reflecting on the positive things in life and giving thanks to people that have helped you can boost your mental wellbeing.

Keeping a gratitude journal can help us to remember good things that happen to us. Expressing gratitude to others can be as simple as an email or card telling a person what it is specifically you appreciate about them.

**TO GET STARTED, SPEND TIME EACH NIGHT WRITING DOWN THREE THINGS THAT WENT WELL THAT DAY.**

Research shows doing this simple activity for one week was enough to increase mental wellbeing six months later by almost 10%.



## 05.

**Mindfulness**

Mindfulness has been shown to improve mental wellbeing and reduce stress.

Mindfulness is about trying to focus on the present moment

It's not about completely emptying your mind of any thoughts, but rather **observing** those thoughts in an accepting and **non-judgemental** way.

You could try sitting quietly and paying attention to your breathing, being outdoors and focusing on the surroundings, or immersing yourself in a task.

**60-second mindful breathing**

1. Breathe in and out slowly, in through the nose and out through the mouth.
2. Focus your awareness on your breath as it enters your nose and into your lungs, giving you oxygen.
3. As you breathe out, imagine the air releasing back into the world.
4. Repeat for one minute.

Pay attention to how you feel afterwards. Your mind may feel calmer, your body more relaxed.

If you have time, you can build your mindful breathing up to two, three or even five minutes.

# ADVERSITY SUPPORT

**Mental wellbeing is a personal experience but it's strongly influenced by the people around us.**

Having people in your life that you can turn to for practical and emotional support is extremely helpful.

## RELATIONSHIPS & COMMUNITY

Connecting with others gives us lots of positive things: information, advice, practical assistance, companionship, enjoyable experiences, and emotional support.

On the other hand, feeling lonely, or having few people you can spend time with or call on for help, can increase our risk of mental health conditions like depression.

Being connected is not just about the number of people you have in your life – it's also about the quality of these relationships. Supportive relationships in which we feel equal, valued and respected are good for our mental wellbeing.

Good communication, where there's give and take and a balance between listening and talking, is another key element.

While some people just click and get along, creating strong, supportive and enduring friendships can take effort. But it's worth it.

Connecting with others is an important way to make us all happier and more fulfilled.

Here are some tips for starting new friendships and deepening existing friendships:

- Ask questions. Get to know the other person better by asking about their life.
- Be an active listener. Show the other person you want to genuinely understand what they think and feel.
- Be prepared to open up in return. Being vulnerable and sharing personal information is how relationships deepen.





- Prioritise the time to get together regularly. Life gives us a long “To Do” list but we need to put our relationships with others at the top of it. Schedule regular catch ups with others in your weekly routine so it just happens without you needing to think about it.
- Don't be afraid to ask for assistance. Give others a chance to be there for you.
- Find others going through similar challenges to you and share your experiences with people who ‘get it’.

## HELP SEEKING

Everyone goes through tough times, so there's no shame in feeling like you're not coping.

Remember that the vast majority of people in your life will understand what you're going through and want to help – but you have to let them in first.

Recognising when you're doing it tough and reaching out for assistance is a crucial part of prevention. It's important that you don't wait until things have reached breaking point or you're in crisis.

It's especially important to seek support if you're experiencing a mental health condition. Early intervention contributes to quicker and more complete recovery and reduces the risk of complications.

It can be hard to know where to turn for help. We encourage you to turn to those you feel safe with – your friends and family, your work colleagues or boss, a general practitioner or mental health professional, or simply ring up a help line like Lifeline or Beyond Blue. There's always someone there to listen and help you through tough times.

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REMEMBER, SEEKING HELP IS A SIGN OF STRENGTH, NOT WEAKNESS – SO DON'T FEEL WORRIED, EMBARRASSED OR ASHAMED TO ASK.

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# DIRECTION

**Victor Frankl, Austrian psychologist and holocaust survivor, once said, “Those who have a why to live, can bear almost any how”.**

While pleasant emotions and positive relationships are components of mental wellbeing, so too is how we function and live our life.

This includes:

- Feeling good about yourself and comfortable in your own skin.
- Feeling in control of your situation.
- Being able to manage responsibilities in your life.
- Having a sense of purpose and meaning in your life.
- Getting on and being connected to others.
- Growing as a person and feeling fulfilled.

While trying to feel pleasure can be our natural focus, it's important not to underestimate the benefits of living a life of meaning and contribution. This can lead us into situations that are more effortful, challenging and uncomfortable but also provide a deep foundation for enduring mental wellbeing and feelings of a life well lived.

## GOALS

Thinking about and deciding what you want to achieve in life can motivate you and give you a reason to get up in the morning.

When setting your goals, it's okay to be ambitious but you also need to be realistic. Too easy and you leave no room for personal growth. Too hard and you're setting yourself up to fail. It's about striking a sweet spot where you feel stretched but also achieve success.

Hitting your goals gives you a sense of pride, satisfaction and fulfilment. It can bolster your self-esteem and help you feel that you're in charge of your destiny.



Tips for goal setting:

- Write your goals down. This process helps visualise what you want to achieve more clearly.
- Break down your goals into a series of smaller, more achievable steps. A few early successes build your momentum towards your medium and long-term goals.
- Be specific about what you will do, when and how. Use positive language rather than negative language. For example reframe “I want to stop spending so much money” into “I want to save X amount by Y date so I can do Z”.
- If you achieve your goal, celebrate. But if you don't hit your goal, be kind to yourself. Reassess if the goal is realistic or still relevant to you.

## CONTRIBUTION

Mental wellbeing comes from doing what's good for us, and also what's good for others.

Studies show that performing 'random acts of kindness' increases our happiness – at least temporarily.

We also know that people who volunteer experience better life satisfaction and lower levels of psychological distress than people who don't.

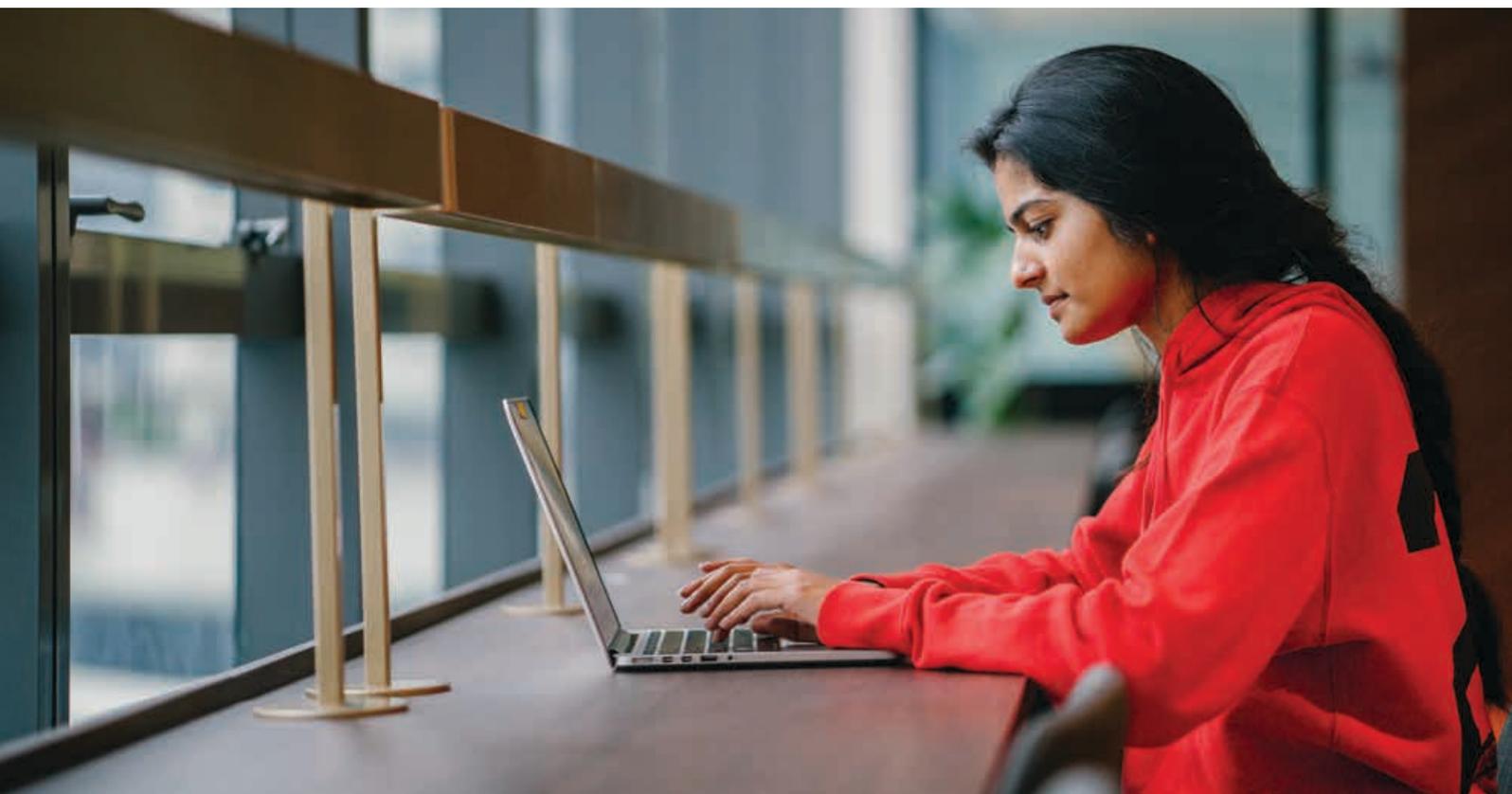
Some ideas for volunteering:

- Retirement homes, animal shelters, op shops, sports clubs.
- Teaching a class at your local community centre.
- Organising a food drive for people experiencing homelessness.

Giving to others is a win-win, as it boosts your mental wellbeing as well as the people you're helping.

However, some people can be too selfless and neglect themselves in favour of others.

**TRY AND BE AWARE OF YOUR OWN NEEDS. LIKE AN AEROPLANE EMERGENCY, YOU'RE BEST PLACED TO HELP OTHERS AFTER YOU'VE PUT YOUR OWN OXYGEN MASK ON.**



# A FINAL WORD

When it comes to mental wellbeing, we generally wait until people become unwell before we take action. This must change.

It's time for a new approach.

## IT'S TIME TO GET SERIOUS ABOUT PREVENTION.

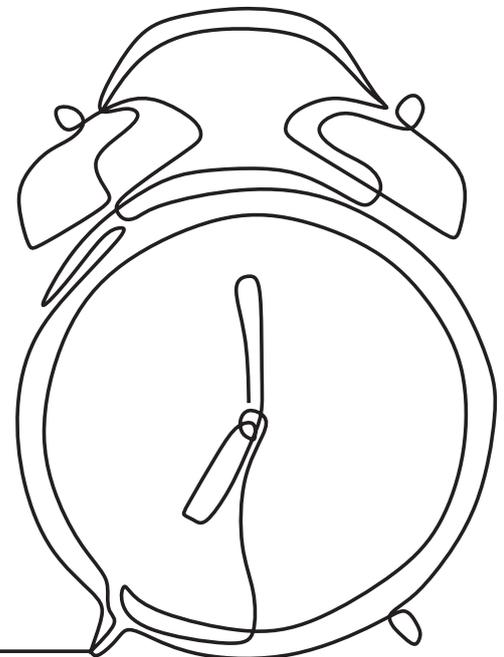
Join forces with us, and stop mental health conditions before they start.

## HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

1. Learn more at our website and sign up to our newsletter.
2. Follow us on social media.
3. Donate to Prevention United or fundraise for us.
4. Get in touch.

[info@preventionunited.org.au](mailto:info@preventionunited.org.au)

[PREVENTIONUNITED.ORG.AU](http://PREVENTIONUNITED.ORG.AU)



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