



# Finding help for someone with a mental health problem

A resource for workers in the community care system

An initiative of Carers Victoria  
Respite Connections Mental Health Program  
March 2011



Respite  
Connections

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This directory is an initiative of Carers Victoria Respite Connections Mental Health Program. It was compiled by Chris McGrath, in consultation with other local services and mental health program staff.

This resource is not a complete list of existing services and supports - there will doubtless be many gaps and some overlap in services listed.

However, it is intended to be a “user friendly” entry to a complex system. It is designed to be used electronically, to sit on your computer desktop: and it is hoped that by providing active links to relevant websites, the information will be kept current.

Since the release of the first edition of the guide, there have been several new services established, and a number of organisations have contacted us to update their service information.

We will continue updating this resource regularly, and invite organisations who would like to have their information included or edited in the next version to contact the Mental Health Team at Carers Victoria Respite Connections on ph: 03 9396 9550 or email:

[rc@carersvictoria.org.au](mailto:rc@carersvictoria.org.au)

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## INTRODUCTION

Finding help for yourself or someone else who is experiencing distress from a mental illness, or who is in a mental health crisis, may be a challenge.

It can be difficult to know where to start, or how to find the organisation that offers the support and services you are seeking.

The mental health “system” is in fact, a complex configuration of many different services, comprising of public and private, government, hospital and community based components,

This guide will focus largely on the public mental health system. It will provide information about a range of services offering different types of specialised support to families and individuals impacted by mental illness.

It gives active links to the information sites of the major mental health services in Victoria.

It also provides information and links to organisations which offer a range of general health, personal and social supports. Although not mental health specific, these additional supports may be useful to someone living with a mental health problem.

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# THE VICTORIAN MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM

As noted, the Victorian Mental Health System is comprised of public and private, government and non-government, hospital and community elements.

This guide will focus largely on the public system, providing information on a range of services which offer different types of support.

It may be useful to think of the services or supports provided by organisations within this system as fitting into one of two major “streams”.

1. Clinical mental health services
2. Community based services

Each of these “streams”, or categories, has a slightly different focus.



## 1. Clinical Mental Health Services

These services provide direct and specific support for the **treatment and management of a person’s illness and its symptoms** – e.g. medication supervision, specific therapy and inpatient service (acute hospital or rehabilitations beds) when required. There are also a number of community programs managed within the clinical mental health system offering initial assessment, intervention and treatment (eg CATT Community Assessment Treatment Teams) as well as ongoing community case management etc.

The clinical Mental Health System is divided into a number of geographical regions throughout Victoria – 13 metropolitan and 8 rural regions. Each regional service (called an Area Mental Health Service) offers a range of treatment options for people in that geographical area.

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It should be noted, that not everyone with a mental illness will receive treatment for their condition via the specialist clinical mental health system.

Many people are linked for support and management needs through GP's and/or through the private health system – some of these options will be outlined later.

## **2. Community based organisations**

These organisations provide a range of services to help people **manage the impact of a mental illness on their lives.**

This category includes community health and general support services which offer support that may be suitable to the needs of someone with a mental illness, as well as specialised mental health rehabilitation services.

Community Based Organisations are usually managed by non-government organisations, and offer different types of support – including social activities, peer support, housing support, outreach programs, respite and pre-employment training.

The specialised services are known as **Psychiatric Disability and Rehabilitation Support Services (PDRSS).**

- The types of support offered by these community organisations do vary from region to region; and the regions covered by the different services do not necessarily correspond with the boundaries of the clinical public mental health areas.
- This resource provides information and links to many community based organisations offering a range of general health, personal and social supports which may be useful to someone living with a mental health problem. As noted, some of these will be specialist mental health services, and others are general community or welfare agencies.

Many people with mental illness find that they need some support in both areas i.e. treatment for the symptoms of their illness as well as some support with managing the impact of living with a mental health condition – and so receive treatment from both service types.

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## HELPFUL HINTS WHEN CONTACTING ANY SERVICE:

- Always ask whether the organisation you contact covers your geographical region. Services often have strict funding boundaries and strict entry criteria, so it saves time at the outset to check whether you, or the person you are advocating for, is eligible for services from this organisation
- Keep a pen and paper handy to note the name of the person you spoke with, the service they are from, and any details of any further information they provide. Your first contact may just be the start of a paper trail before you find the service you need, and it is useful to be able to keep track of your progress.
- When requesting assistance or support from a service for a client, try and present your information client clearly.

One useful way of ensuring that you communicate your message clearly when contacting mental health services, is the **ABCD** approach:

**A** – ALERT. Report what has alerted or alarmed you about the situation, or the person or people involved. Describe what raised your concerns for this person.

**B** – BEHAVIOUR. Describe specifically what troubling behaviours you have noted – when, where, how often they are occurring etc.

**C** – CONVERSATION. Report exactly what the person is saying. Use quotes.

**D** – Details. Now is the time to report any other detail which may be relevant eg. known history including medication – past and present, family history, previous illnesses etc.

The Mental illness Fellowship has an excellent downloadable factsheet - "[Collaborating with Professionals for the best outcome](#)" with good information on getting the best from your contact with mental health services.

If the situation is an emergency, and the person you are caring for is in danger of harming themselves or someone else, you may need to call 000.

Be very clear and give specific details of your situation and the risks involved (the ABCD approach described above may be useful, and request immediate assistance.

Other useful crisis numbers are listed at the end of this resource.

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## WHERE TO BEGIN?

This will depend on the needs of the person requiring support or treatment. If the person is already linked in to a mental health service or community agency, try and make contact with the case manager or co-ordinator of the treating agency.

### The Mental Health Advice Line

If you are unsure of where to begin in seeking assistance, the [Mental Health Advice Line](#) may be a useful starting point.

The Mental Health Advice Line is a new service funded by the Department of Health. It is a state-wide telephone information service available to all Victorians seeking mental health information, advice and referral for themselves or another person.

The service is staffed by mental health professionals who provide expert mental health advice 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, including public holidays.

Call **1300 280 737** for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria. (Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate.)

### The General Practitioner (GP)

Family GPs can also be a good place to start- for general information or for a referral to an appropriate mental health specialist. There are now Medicare rebates available for some specialist mental health services via a GP referral.

GPs are listed on the [Human Services Directory](#). You can search by name, special interest or postcode. This database is kept up-to-date by DCA (Database Consultants) on behalf of the Department of Health.

The following link connects to the “[Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners](#)” through the MBS (Better Access) initiative, and outlines the type of mental health support available under Medicare.

GPs can also assess and treat many of the common mental illnesses in the community, they can obtain second opinions from specialist MH practitioners and services, and they can monitor treatments and watch for signs of relapse, and of course provide treatment for the physical health issues that often accompany mental illness. GPs usually do this best if there is some continuity of care, and good communication back and forth from the Mental Health service, or in collaboration with other mental health practitioners.

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## Other Mental Health Professionals who may assist

In the same way that a person with diabetes may have a “treatment team” that consists of a GP, an specialist endocrinologist, a kidney specialist, a diabetes educator, a podiatrist, optometrist and a physiotherapist, someone with a mental illness may also need support from a number of different professionals and services.

The **Beyond Blue** website has a [Directory of Medical and Allied Health Practitioners in Mental Health](#) which can assist with finding a mental health professional in your area.

These may be GP's, Psychologists, Social workers or Occupational Therapists who have a particular interest in mental health issues.

The Australian Psychological Society website has a [“Find a Psychologist”](#) page which lists a range of psychologists who specialise in treating different mental health conditions.

Information is also given on whether they are registered with Medicare rebate.

### **A note about confidentiality**

Workers and carers need to remember that because of confidentiality a GP or mental health professional may not be able to give specific details about a person's situation, but carers should be empowered to seek out general information about mental illness from the treating professional that will enable them to best support their client/family member.

For information on the issue of client confidentiality under the Mental Health Act which covers the provision of services in the Public Mental Health system, read the Chief Psychiatrists guidelines around confidentiality. [Working together with Families and Carers](#).

These guidelines state that as partners in providing care, family carers are entitled to receive information from mental health services to support their caring role.

Please note that the current Mental Health Act is currently under review, and conditions around confidentiality will be adjusted.

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## SECTION 1: CLINICAL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

### Adult Mental Health Services

Adult specialist mental health services within the public health system are aimed primarily at people with serious mental illness or mental disorder who have associated significant levels of disturbance and psychosocial disability due to their illness or disorder. Commonly these will be people with a diagnosis of a major mental illness, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, but will also include some people with other conditions such as severe personality disorder, severe anxiety disorder, or those who present in situational crisis that may lead to self-harm or inappropriate behaviour towards others.

Increasingly, adult mental health service consumers have more than one disorder, with drug and alcohol related disorders (dual diagnosis) being most prevalent.

Most area mental health services offer a number of different programs – including community based case management, mobile support, and Crisis and Assessment Teams (CATT) as well as a number of inpatient/hospital beds.

All of these services are accessed via a central ‘Psychiatric Triage’ number which offers 24 hour information, assessment and referral service in each region.

Connect to the [DHS information site](#) for a list of the public adult mental health services available in each region of Victoria, and their contact details. The site also gives the Psychiatric Triage number in each region.

*It is again worth noting that although it is a major part of Victoria’s specialist mental health system, many people receive support and treatment for their mental illness from services other than the clinical mental health service.*

*If you are told that the person you are seeking assistance for is ineligible for treatment via your area mental health service, be sure to ask for information/advice on what other appropriate services exist in your region.*

*[The Mental Health Advice Line](#) can also provide information about when, how and where to access mental health support for someone: ph: 1300 280 737*

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## **Aged Persons Specialist Mental Health Services**

Aged persons mental health services are primarily for people with a long-standing mental illness who are now over 65 years of age, or who have developed functional illnesses such as depression and psychosis in later life.

They also provide services for people with psychiatric or severe behavioural difficulties associated with organic disorders such as dementia.

Connect to the [DHS information site](#) for a list of public mental health services which provide specialist support and treatment to people over 65 in each region of Victoria, and their contact details.

## **Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (0-18 Years)**

Specialist child and adolescent mental health services are provided for children and adolescents up to the age of 18 years with serious emotional disturbance. This includes young people with a diagnosable psychiatric disorder whose condition is considered seriously detrimental to their growth or development and/or where there are substantial difficulties in the person's social or family environment.

Young people from 16 to 18 years of age may receive a service from either child and adolescent mental health services or adult area mental health services depending on their needs.

Connect to the [DHS information site](#) for a list of public mental health services available for young people in each region, and their contact details.

## **State-wide Specialist Mental Health Services**

In addition to the local area services, a number of specialist services are delivered on a state-wide basis. These services offer an additional level of expertise or service response for people with particular clinical conditions or high level needs.

These include services which specialise in specific conditions such as

- personality disorders
- eating disorders
- dual diagnoses (i.e. mental illness and substance use)
- family therapy

Connect to the [DHS website](#) which describes the function and contact details for a number of public specialist mental health services which offer service on a state-wide basis.

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## **Dual Diagnoses – i.e. mental illness and substance use**

Dual Diagnosis refers to situation where a person experiences both mental illness and a substance use disorder. Mental illness and substance use often interact to make each diagnosis worse and to have adverse effects on many areas of functioning (including work, relationships, health, and safety).

Recovery from mental illness can be more challenging for people with a dual diagnosis, and treatment and support may be needed to address both issues.

The DHS website [Alcohol and other drugs services in Victoria](#) lists the range of alcohol and drug related services available in Victoria include community alcohol and drug services, forensic treatment, needle and syringe program, and support services

## **Forensic Mental Health Services**

Forensicare is the trading name for the Victorian Institute of Forensic Mental Health.

Forensicare provides inpatient and community services to mentally ill offenders in Victoria.

The [DHS website](#) lists the inpatient and community supports to mentally ill offenders in Victoria.

## **The Mental Health Court Liaison Service**

The [Mental Health Court Liaison Service](#) (MHCLS) is a court-based assessment and advice service provided by Forensicare, the Victorian Institute of Forensic Mental Health.

The aim of the MHCLS is to provide court assessment and advice services to magistrates in relation to people who may have a mental illness appearing before the Magistrates' Courts.

In the metropolitan courts, Forensicare senior mental health clinicians provide the on-site services with an on-call consultant forensic psychiatrist.

There are also five part-time, country-based Mental Health Court Liaison positions

There are a number of other community services which provide support to mentally ill offenders. These include:

## **Australian Community Support Organisation Specialist Mental Health Service (ACSO)**

[ACSO](#) is a specialist state-wide program that provides direct support to people who are disadvantaged by the nature of their mental illness issues, and also by the nature of their contact with the criminal justice system. The program provides assistance with accommodation material aid, advocacy and on-going support.

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## SECTION 2: COMMUNITY BASED SERVICES

### Psychiatric Disability Rehabilitation and Support Services (PDRSS)

The non-government [psychiatric disability rehabilitation and support services](#) sector is a core component of **specialist mental health services** and complements the clinical mental health services.

**PDRSS** are managed by non-government organisations and **focus on addressing the impact of mental illness on a person's daily activities** and the social disadvantage that may result from illness.

They work within a recovery and empowerment model to maximise people's opportunities to live successfully in the community.

There are a range of PDRSS across the state providing different types of support programs including

- day programs and social support
- housing support
- outreach
- peer support and self help
- planned respite. This may include support or activities for the person with the illness, as well as respite options for the carer/family.

The link will connect to a DHS information page which provides detail on the type of services offered by PDRSS across the state and their contact details.

(Further details for a number of different PDRSS may also be listed in different sections of this resource relating to particular programs they may offer eg, family/carer support etc)

### Youth Specific Services

Connect to the [DHS information site](#) for details about the types of public mental health services available for young people in each region, including some community based services. The "cut-off" ages between child and adolescent services (CAMS), youth services and adult services may differ between regions and services.

There are a number of other youth specific services that sit within the general health service sector. Many of the community organisations listed in the [General Community Support Organisations](#) of this resource also provide youth specific supports in some regions. [Local councils](#) frequently offer youth support services.

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[headspace](#) provides mental and health wellbeing support, information and services to young people and their families across Australia.

With 30 one-stop-shops, headspace has a range of youth-friendly health professionals who can help with

- General health
- Mental health and counselling
- Education, employment and other services
- Alcohol and other drug services.

There are a number of excellent **websites** which provide youth- friendly information on mental health and wellbeing. They offer links to appropriate services and very good downloadable factsheets etc.

These include:

[www.ybblue.com](http://www.ybblue.com)

[www.ruok2day.org](http://www.ruok2day.org)

[youthcentral](#) is the Victorian Government's web-based initiative for young people aged 12-25, with information and articles on youth health, wellbeing, community events and related issues.

[COPMI](#) - Children of Parents with Mental Illness information for family members where a parent has a mental illness, and for people who care for and work with them

[headroom](#). Promoting positive mental and emotional health for kids and the adults in their life.

## Family and carer supports

This section provides information for workers who are seeking support for carers. [Section 4](#) of this guide *Because you care* has additional information aimed especially for carers and caring families who may be accessing this guide.

It is important that workers recognise the role of the carer in the life of any client with a mental illness. People with mental illness tend to have better outcomes if they have a supportive and informed caring network around them.

Carers should be equipped with information so that they know:

- how to support the person that they are caring for,
- how to contact services if they need to,
- how to access the support that is available to them in order to understand their own needs and consider their options, and
- what to do in a crisis.

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There are a number of organisations which offer supports and services to assist families in managing the impact of mental illness on their lives.

These agencies offer services such as counselling, information and peer support to carers/families and to people with a mental illness. Other services may include phone support, education programs, support groups and referrals. Services may also provide advocacy on behalf of carers at an individual level and/or at a broader systems levels.

Respite (taking a break from care responsibilities) is also often provided through these agencies or accessed via the Commonwealth Carer Respite Centre in each region.

The following links are to organisations that provide support and services to families and carers of someone with a mental illness.

[Carers Victoria](#) is the statewide voice for family carers, representing and providing support to carers in Victoria – offering counselling, advice, advocacy, education and training.  
Carer Advisory Line: 1800 242 636 (free call except from mobile phones)

The [Carers Victoria Respite Connections](#) mental health program provides support, advocacy, information and respite opportunities to carers in the western metropolitan region of Melbourne, who care for someone with a mental illness

The mental health team can be contacted on 9396 9550, or directed via the Carers Advisory Line Free call 1800 242 636. Additional information is also available via the Carers Victoria website.

This resource is an initiative of Respite Connections Mental Health Program which provides support to carers in the Western Metropolitan region.

Carer support organisations offering similar services operate in each region.

[Commonwealth Carer Respite and Carelink Centres](#) (CCRCs) provide free information about community aged care, disability and other supports, and can coordinate access to respite services for carers via their own regional carer service.  
Free call 1800 052 222

[Carer consultants](#) are people who have previously or currently care for a person with a mental illness. They are employed by public mental health services, and have a good knowledge of the mental health system and the issues that are faced by families and other carers. They provide emotional support, information and referral to families and carers. The following link will access information on the public mental health area consultant in each region.

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[Mental Illness Fellowship](#) (MIF) offers a range of services and supports for people with mental illness and their families. Excellent downloadable fact sheets and carer education programs.

Helpline: 03 8486 4222

[ARAFEMI](#) (Association of Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill) offers a range of supports to assist people with a mental illness to live in the community as well as support to families and carers, including Victoria's Carer Advocate.

ARAFEMI Carer Helpline: 1300 550 265

[Mind](#) offers a range of programs including; residential rehabilitation, outreach services, transition to independent living, transition to stable and secure accommodation, respite for carers, volunteer and mentor programs, individual service packages and programs that foster healthy living, creative expression and participation in employment.

03 9455 7900

## Community Health Directory

The [Community Health Directory](#) includes Community Health Services and other Community Health Program funded services in Victoria. Although not specialist mental health services, they offer a range of programs which may be relevant – including counselling, family support and youth services. The following link will connect to a directory of services covering:

- **Stand-alone Community Health Services** – independently managed CHSs
- **Integrated Community Health Services** (CHCs) - which are part of larger health services or hospitals
- **Multipurpose Health Services** - rural services funded under the joint State and Commonwealth Multi Purpose Services (MPS) program which allows smaller communities to coordinate health services according to their needs
- **Women's Health Services** - funded via the Victoria Women's Health Program
- **Some statewide services** - specialist services which operate across Victoria including:
  - Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture
  - International Diabetes Institute
  - Centre for Adolescent Health and Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health
- **Other types of services**

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## SECTION 3: OTHER COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS AND SUPPORTS

### Support agencies

The following agencies operate throughout Victoria and provide a range of services and supports to individuals and families. Like many of the organisations listed in Section 2, they may not specialise in mental health support, but many of the services they offer are appropriate for individuals and families impacted by mental illness. These may include counselling, groups, financial counselling, employment training and support, and youth services. Some services also offer material aid.

The types of services vary from region to region, and it is always important to check on whether the agency provides support in your region when seeking assistance for yourself, client or family member.

If you are told you or your client is ineligible due to regional funding boundaries, use the opportunity to ask which similar organisation does operate in your region.

[Anglicare](#)

[Aspire Foundation](#)

[Baptcare](#)

[Brotherhood of St Lawrence](#)

[Centacare](#)

[Community Connections](#)

[Drummond St Family Relationship Centre](#)

[Familycare](#)

[Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service](#)

[Hanover Welfare Services](#)

[Homeground](#)

[Jesuit Social Services](#)

[Karingal](#)

[Lantern](#)

[Lifeworks](#)

[Pathways](#)

[Mackillop Family Services](#)

[Melbourne City Mission](#)

[Salvation Army](#)

[St Vincent de Paul Society](#)

[Wesley City Mission](#)

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## Local Councils

[Local councils](#) also offer a range of services and supports to individuals and families. Although not mental health specific, they can become a part of the support network for someone with a mental illness.

Use the link above to help you locate your local council website for information on services in your region.

## Support for people from non-English speaking backgrounds

[The Victorian Transcultural Psychiatric Unit \(VTPU\)](#) is a state-wide unit which supports regional mental health and psychiatric disability support services in working with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) consumers and carers throughout Victoria. Great downloadable mental health fact sheets in community languages.  
(03) 9288 3300

[Action on Disabilities in Ethnic Communities](#) (ADEC) aims to assist people with disabilities from ethnic backgrounds, their carers and families to access services and ensure that service systems are inclusive and responsive to their needs.  
Ph: 1800 626 078

The [Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture](#) (VFST), or '**Foundation House**' as it is also known, provides a range of services to people from refugee backgrounds whom have survived torture or war related trauma.  
Ph: 03 9388 0022

[The Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria](#) (ECCV) is a member driven, state-wide, peak advocacy body representing ethnic and multicultural communities in Victoria  
Ph: 03 9349 4122

[AMES](#) provides a range of supports and services to migrants and refugees  
Ph: 13 26 37 (13 AMES)

[New Hope Foundation](#) aims to assist newly arrived refugee and humanitarian entrants who are living in poverty across Victoria  
Ph: 03 9510 5877

[Multicultural Mental Health Australia](#) (MMHA) is a national program funded by the Australian Government to improve awareness of mental health and suicide prevention in culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities  
Ph: 02 9840 3333

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Many of the services listed in the [General Community Support Organisations section](#) also provide specific services and supports for people from refugee or other CALD backgrounds in some regions.

## Employment

There are many people with mental illnesses who would like to work, and who are not currently in employment. Meaningful employment is a major contributor to positive mental health outcomes.

A number of the [PDRSS](#) organisations listed above provide some pre-vocational training and support.

[Disability employment assistance services](#) provide specialised employment help for people with a disability, injury or illness.

A person does not have to be receiving, or be eligible to receive, a payment from Centrelink to use disability employment assistance services. In most cases a person must be assessed by a Job Capacity Assessment Provider before they can access these services.

## Centrelink

The [Centrelink website](#) provides information on financial supports etc.

## Resources, advocacy, self-help, peer-support

[SANE](#) - national charity working for a better life for people affected by mental illness through campaigning, education and research.

[beyondblue](#) is part of the national depression initiative - aims to provide clear and comprehensive information about depression. It also has a list of GP's who have a special interest in working with people who have mental health issues.

[ADAVIC](#) (Anxiety Disorders Association of Victoria) offers a range of services such as support groups, phone support, workshops and seminars, an on-line bookstore and resource centre for people who suffer from anxiety related disorders, their carers and friends and family.

Ph: 03 9853 8089

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[GROW](#) is a community organisation working towards mental health through mutual help and a 12-step program of recovery.

Ph: 1800 558 268

[Eating Disorders Foundation of Victoria](#) (EDV) connects those lives are affected by eating disorders with the people, services and the hope they need for recovery.

Ph: 1300 550 236

[Butterfly Foundation](#) provides support for Australians who suffer from eating disorders and negative body image issues and their carers.

Ph: 1800 33 4673 (1800 ED HOPE)

[Reconnexion](#): provides specialist treatment services and supports – including counselling and group work for people suffering anxiety, depression or related disorders.

Ph: 1300 273 266

[Mental Health First Aid](#) is a 12 hour training course developed in order to help people provide initial support for someone with a mental health problem. It is now auspiced by ORYGEN Research Centre at the University of Melbourne, Dept of Psychiatry. MHFA training courses are available to individuals, community groups and organisations. There is also a Youth Mental Health First Aid course for those who work with young people.

[VirtualClinic](#) is an Internet-based research clinic and is a joint initiative of the University of New South Wales and St Vincents Hospital, Sydney. It develops free education and treatment programs for people with anxiety and depressive disorders.

[Voices Vic](#) is a network of professionals, carers and voice hearers that work together to reduce the distress which can be associated with hearing voices. It is auspiced by Prahran Mission and offers information, support groups and education.

### **Legal assistance**

The [Mental Health Legal Centre](#) provides a free and confidential legal service to anyone who has experienced mental illness in Victoria where their legal problem relates to their mental illness.

Telephone advice line Mon/Wed/Fri 3-5PM or Tue/Thurs 6.30 -8.30PM

Ph: 03 9629-4422, Country Callers: 1800-555-887

[Office of the Public Advocate](#): protects the rights of Victorians with a disability.

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## Consumer rights and advocacy

The [Victorian Mental Illness Awareness Council](#) (VMIAC) is a Victorian not-for-profit organisation whose purpose is to provide support, advocacy and referrals to people who are experiencing, or have experienced in the past, emotional or mental distress. VMIAC also provides information and education about mental health services to consumers of mental health services and the wider community.

Ph: 9380 3900

[Consumer Consultant Network](#) program provides an important means of improving service quality and responsiveness through the involvement of consumers with direct experience of mental health services.

[Seniors Rights Victoria](#) is the primary, government-funded destination for older Victorians, their friends and family members seeking information and support relating to elder abuse. SRV works in partnership with legal, health and aged care service providers to improve awareness of elder abuse.

Ph: 1300 368 821

## Other useful support numbers

[Mental Health Advice Line](#) Ph: 1300 280 737

[Lifeline](#) Ph: 131114

[Suicide call back service](#) The Suicide Call Back Service is a free nationwide telephone support service for people at risk of suicide, those who are caring for them including professionals, and those bereaved by suicide.

Ph: 1300 659 467

[Suicide line](#) Ph: 1300 651 251

[Kids Help Line](#) Ph: 1800 55 1800

[Men's Help Line](#) Ph: 1300 78 99 78

[Family Drug Help](#) Ph: 1300 660 068

[Counselling Online](#) is a free service for anyone seeking help with their own drug use or the drug use of a family member, relative or friend. Counselling Online is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across Australia.

**G-Line (Gambling Problems)** 24 Hour phone support and counselling for gambling problems

Ph: 9696 2112 or 1800 622 112

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## SECTION 4: BECAUSE YOU CARE ~ ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FOR CARERS AND FAMILIES

Anyone who has experienced the symptoms of a mental illness or who is recovering from a period of mental illness faces many challenges. This can also be an immensely stressful and often bewildering time for their family and friends, and those who care about them. The term “carer” is used here to describe someone who provides care and support to a relative or friend who has a mental illness.

This section of the guide aims to outline some of the issues affecting those who care for, or care about a person with a mental illness. It discusses how carers can best support their loved one, as well as providing information on how to find the best support for themselves and links to services that offer support to carers and carer families.

Much of the information and resources listed in this section has already been included in other parts of the guide, as a number of organisations provide service support for both the person with the illness as well as their carer. However because carers often play such a significant role in the life of someone with a mental illness, it is valuable to include a section that addresses some of the specific issues that affect carers.

Getting the right support and information for yourself as a carer is often the key to getting the right support to the person you are caring for.

### Who are carers and what do they do?

Carers come from all walks of life - all cultures and all religions. Some young carers are only 10 years of age – caring for parents or siblings who are unwell, while other carers may be nearing 90 and have cared for a family member for many years.

The way in which being a carer impacts on a person can depend on the carer’s age as well as their relationship with the person they are caring for. Carers may be spouses, parents, sons or daughters, siblings, friends, nieces or nephews or neighbours.

Some people are 'full-time' carers while others balance both a job and caring responsibilities. Many carers live with the person they care for although some live nearby or are caring from a distance. Statistics indicate that more carers are women but there are many men who are carers too.

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It can be difficult to identify a carer because many people don't use this word to describe themselves or what they do. This is especially the case with young carers, and carers from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds where the term "carer" is not a familiar one. Many carers do not receive a Carer Payment or Carer Allowance from Centrelink. Nevertheless, they are still carers.

*"Once I was acknowledged as a carer  
I felt better about myself and what I was doing."*

### **What do carers do generally?**

The role of each carer is different depending on the needs of the person they care for, and the relationship they share.

In general, carers may help with some or all of the following:

- Organising and assisting with medical appointments
- Encouraging and supporting with activities of daily living
- Encouraging and supervising medication
- Shopping
- Transport
- Banking
- Preparing meals
- Housework/gardening/home maintenance

### **What else do carers of someone with a mental illness do?**

Carers of someone with a mental illness often face additional demands and take on extra responsibilities. Many of these roles and responsibilities may be more subtle and less measurable than the chores listed above, but are still a vital part in the support system of someone with a mental illness.

The type of additional roles undertaken by carers of someone with a mental illness may include:

- Monitoring general health and wellbeing
- Provide emotional support and comfort
- Provide information, encouragement and reassurance
- Advocate for the best treatment and support for their family member throughout multiple complex service systems
- Closely monitor their family member's safety
- Support their family member to live as independently as possible

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## Self care

Caring for a person with any illness can be hard work. Due to the nature of some mental illnesses, caring for someone with an enduring mental health condition can be particularly tough. It can also be exhausting, unpredictable, frustrating and at times heartbreaking.

Self care is vital for carers, and is often neglected, with carers prioritising the needs of the person they are supporting. It is important to maintain a healthy and well balanced lifestyle for your own sake, but also to enable you to effectively continue in your caring role.

[Carers Victoria](#) can help link you to carer supports and resources in your region that may assist you in caring for yourself, while you care for your family member.

Carer Advisory Line Ph: 1800 242 636 (free call except from mobile phones)

## Isolation and stigma

Sometimes caring for a loved one with a mental illness can be very isolating.

Society generally still feels uncomfortable about mental illnesses, and they are not seen in the same way as other illnesses such as heart disease and cancer. Sensationalist media reports or inaccuracies, and other misunderstandings often lead people to believe that an individual with a mental illness has a weak character or is inevitably dangerous. This can create a situation of fear, and many people do not offer support to families who have a family member with a mental illness in the same way that they would to someone who has any other type of health problem.

Carers themselves are often reluctant to tell other people about the type of illness that may have affected their family member because they fear that others will not understand, or may judge them.

These negative stereotypes deter people from acknowledging the early signs of mental health problems in themselves or a loved one, and many people do not seek help until symptoms are pronounced and there has been considerable disruption to their lives.

Because one of the keys to effective treatment and management is early identification of mental health problems, it is important to resist the impact of stigma, and to feel comfortable seeking help for your family member, as well as support for yourself.

Two important messages for carers:

1. You did not cause your family members mental illness
2. There are things that you can do to improve your family situation

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## **Finding networks and supports for you.**

One of the most important things you can do as a carer is to learn about mental illness. The more information you receive about mental health conditions - signs and symptoms, treatment options and supports- the better equipped you will be to cope with the pressures of providing ongoing care.

Information about how particular illnesses can affect a person can help carers to better understand why a loved one is behaving or acting in a particular way. Sometimes, the behaviour of a person with a mental illness is misunderstood or misinterpreted; it can be easy to become frustrated - believing that if the person tried hard enough they could “just snap out of it”.

### **Information about mental illnesses**

These are some of the best sites to access information about mental illness, signs and symptoms, and how they can affect a person:

[Mental Illness Fellowship](#)

[Beyond Blue](#)

[Sane Australia](#)

[Black Dog Institute](#)

For additional information on organisations and services that provide support and information about mental illness, see the section on [Resources, advocacy, self-help, and peer-support](#)

Talking to other carers can be the first step in building the networks that can both support and empower you as a carer. It can be helpful to realise that you are not alone, and that your feelings and responses are shared by others in similar circumstances. You can learn from both what other carers say was helpful, and what they know doesn't help. Consider contacting a carer organisation or joining a self-help group.

[Carer Support Groups](#) can be one way to reduce the isolation often experienced by carers. Carer Support groups offer support, time out from the caring role, an opportunity to share information, and recognition of the role of carers and their contribution to the community. They provide also offer important social and emotional support. This link will access a list of carer support groups around Victoria.

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## **[Carer Consultants](#)**

If your family member is receiving treatment in the public mental health system, you may find it useful to make contact with the local carer consultant. The following link will help you locate the carer consultant in your region.

**[Carers Victoria](#)** is the state-wide voice for family carers, representing and providing support to all carers in Victoria – offering counselling, advice, advocacy, education and training.

Carer Advisory Line: 1800 242 636 (free call except from mobile phones)

Carers Victoria has also developed a resource for carers of older people: “Surviving the Maze”. It has over 60 information sheets, packed with tips, strategies and practical suggestions for carers. While the focus in this resource is on carers of older people, some of the information around the impact of caring is also relevant to carers of someone with a mental illness.

Contact the Carer Advisory Line on 1800 242 636 (free call except from mobile phones) to request the information sheets be sent to you - or to find out about other information sheets in this series.

## **Financial assistance/information**

### **[Centrelink](#)**

Centrelink supports carers with a range of payments, and can also provide you with information about other possible assistance

### **[Carer Support Fund](#)**

If your family member is being treated within a public mental health service or program, you may be eligible for assistance for costs you may have incurred as part of your caring role via the Carer Support Fund. For further information, talk to your family member’s case manager, or use the above link

**[No Interest Loans Scheme](#)** (NILS) provides interest-free loans for individuals or families on low income.

**[Victorian Carer Card](#)** has a wide range of discounts and benefits on offer from businesses, the local government and community organisations. Cardholders are also entitled to free travel on public transport on a Sunday plus two return off-peak travel vouchers each year.

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## Getting help for your family member

The main section of this guide is designed to assist community workers and those who are supporting someone with a mental illness, to find appropriate services and supports in any particular region.

Please refer back to the main index of this guide for information on the types of services that are available in Victoria for someone with a mental health problem.

- Do read the information in the section [Helpful hints when contacting any organisation](#)
- Remember the [ABCD](#) approach of presenting your concerns, and always have a pen and paper ready to record the details of any contact.
- Getting support and information for yourself can be the first step to getting the best support for your family member.

As noted, the mental health system can initially seem very confusing, and some people will need support from a number of different services or practitioners to manage their mental health condition. In the same way that a person with diabetes may have a treatment team that consists of a GP, a specialist endocrinologist, a kidney specialist, a diabetes educator, a podiatrist, optometrist and a physiotherapist, someone with a mental illness may also need a number of different people on their treatment team.

If you are unsure of where to start, or what sort of help your family member may need, the [Mental Health Advice Line](#) can provide information about when, how and where to access mental health support for someone.

### **A special note around carers and confidentiality**

Carers also need to remember that because of confidentiality, doctors may not talk to them specifically about all the details of a loved-ones' illness, but the carer should be empowered to seek out general information about mental illness from their GP or their family members mental health practitioner.

A carer who comes in and says "I know you can't talk to me about X's illness, but can you give some tips generally on how to help someone with depression / anxiety / psychosis...etc?" or "can you give me some strategies that I can use to help X recover?" may get a more useful answer than if they come in and want to ask about details that may appear to compromise doctor-patient confidentiality.

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For further information on the issue of client confidentiality under the Mental Health Act which covers the provision of services in the Public Mental Health system, read the [Chief Psychiatrists Guidelines around Confidentiality](#).

These guidelines state that as partners in providing care, family carers are entitled to receive information from mental health services to support their caring role.

Please note that the current Mental Health Act is currently under review, and conditions around confidentiality will be adjusted.

## Advocacy

Sometimes it is useful to have additional assistance in advocating for your needs or the needs of the person you are caring for.

Mental Health Carer Support workers who work within Carer Respite Centres can work with you to help you feel more confident and empowered in negotiating with organisations for the appropriate support and services.

Contact the [Commonwealth Respite and Carelink Centre](#) in your region.

ARAFEMI – the Association of Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill have specific [Carer Advocate](#) position. The Carer Advocate offers carers one-to-one advocacy support as well as collective advocacy as required, and works closely with carers to raise concerns with service providers.

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