



Most Rev Anthony Randazzo
Bishop of Broken Bay

Message for BBNeighbourhoods
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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In the past, the topic of mental health and wellbeing tended to have a negative label attached to it. That is an unfortunate situation and hopefully one that is consigned to the history books.

This year, the Australian Catholic Bishops have chosen mental health as our theme for the 2020-2021 Social Justice Statement. The theme was chosen long before COVID-19 took hold of the world and few could have predicted that along with threats to our physical well-being, the pandemic would profoundly impact the mental health of many people. There have been many instances where people experience anxiety and even despair. Anxiety has certainly become a widespread consequence of the manifold changes our Church and society has undergone in just a few months, particularly bearing heavily on the most vulnerable.

I believe that the Holy Spirit was at work, guiding the bishops to encourage our communities to understand mental health better, overcome some of the barriers and stigma from the past that may still be attached to mental ill-health and be more aware of those who most need our support.

Our challenge and our mission is to recognise Jesus Christ in the most vulnerable people in our community of the Church and in society. Often, they are the people who are ill in body, mind, or spirit. This time provides us with the opportunity to ensure that they do not slip between the gaps in our works of mercy and in our systems of care.

Jesus sought out the ones who were lost and forgotten and healed them of their ailments, but he did not stop there. He welcomed them back into the community of the Church to live a life of fulfilment and hope ([John 10:10](#)). Let us imitate Jesus in our passionate and relentless seeking of those who need our attention and welcome them into our parishes and communities with tender care ([Romans 15:7](#)).

I highly recommend the 2020-2021 Social Justice Statement: *To Live Life to the Full: Mental Health in Australia Today*. I believe that the Statement will be of great use for ongoing education and formation in our community of the Church as we engage with others in mercy and love. I offer you this brief summary by way of introducing the Statement to you and hope that it will be of benefit to us all, as together we seek the Kingdom of God, in this world and the next.

+Anthony



Summary of the Statement

To Live Life to the Full: Mental Health in Australia Today

What does your mental health mean to you?

- Mental well-being is not simply the absence of illness, but having the capacity to thrive, to participate in the fullness of life to which Jesus invites us.
- We need the bonds of family, friends and the broader community; we need the economic means to live well and plan for the future; we need culture to make sense of the world; we need connection and relationship with God to flourish.

The Mental Health of our People and Communities

- Just under a quarter of the population are at risk of experiencing a mental illness.
- Though much more visible in our health care system, there is still a stigma attached to those who are living with mental ill-health.
- Young people: Mental illness typically emerges in adolescence and early adulthood; three quarters of people develop ill-health first experience its symptoms before the age of 25. Of the 3,000 people sadly lost to suicide each year, young people aged 15-24 years of age are most vulnerable.
- Older people: Older Australians have the best mental health across the lifespan; despite this, the experience of social isolation can cause depression; grief for deceased spouses, loss of independence and change can increase distress; people aged over 75 receive some of the lowest levels of mental health care.
- Family life: Many social stresses can have an impact on family life. These include increasing demands of work, economic hardship, relationship difficulty, mental and emotional impact of separation and divorce, and domestic violence.
- Communities and crises: In the space of one-year, Australians have faced tumultuous upheavals, unprecedented in our times. These include prolonged drought (suicide rates in remote communities are 66% higher than major cities), devastating bushfires, and the COVID-19 pandemic which has caused workplaces and churches to close, people to be isolated from others, and a prolonged period of anxiety and fear with no promise of an end. The number of people at risk of mental ill-health has increased during this period.
- The real cost of mental ill-health: While the economic impact is significant, the real cost of mental illness is felt in the stigma and discrimination experienced by the most vulnerable, which denies a person's human dignity and their membership in the Body of Christ.
- Members of the Body of Christ: Our parishes, organisations and communities should be places of acceptance, care, and healing, not places of rejection or judgement. Jesus Christ actively draws near to those who are sick, poor, have disabilities, are marginalised or despised. Like Jesus, we need to attend carefully to human frailty, recognise Christ in all people, and welcome and value those who are suffering.



The Great Project of Community Integration

The program of 'deinstitutionalisation'

- In the late twentieth century, Australia began closing its mental health hospitals and institutions and reintegrating people into the community.
- The aim was to foster a supportive community, where mental health was de-stigmatised and social integration and opportunity for advancement were guaranteed.
- This however relied upon a major redirection of funding from institutions to the development of community services which has never been fully achieved.
- There is still a severe lack of specialist community mental health services and around the clock care which means many people are falling through the gaps.
- Catholic organisations have gone a long way to bridging this gap over the years, but still more is needed.
- The gap has also been filled by informal carers – often family and mostly women who have given much devotion, relationship and care but have often themselves as a result, been subject to high levels of psychological distress. Carers experience clinical levels of depression at a rate over 75% higher than the general population.
- Two groups most vulnerable to mental ill-health are the homeless and those in prison. These are the ones most likely to fall through the system.

Caring for the whole person-in-community

- Suffering from mental ill-health is not a sign of lack of faith or weak will. Jesus himself suffered psychological distress ([Luke 22:44](#); [Matthew 26:37](#); [Mark 14:33](#); [John 12:27](#)). In the Old Testament some great figures also suffered in this way such as Elijah, Naomi, and Ruth.
- A holistic approach is often needed because human beings are a unity of body, mind, and spirit, we are persons-in-community. People experiencing mental ill-health need to be accompanied in their experience. In so doing we will notice the action of God in their lives and learn what they have to teach us. The well, the sick and the suffering are all called to be witnesses in their own way.

We are all in this together

- As the COVID-19 pandemic has made painfully clear, we are one human family.
- The test of our society's commitment to the common good is the care we show for the people who are most vulnerable or disadvantaged.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities continue to be over-represented in disadvantage including lower life expectancy, poverty, imprisonment, and ill-health, both physical and mental.
- Refugees and asylum seekers are especially at risk of mental ill-health and demand a more humane and compassionate response from the Australian community.



Moving forward as Church and as a Society

- Poverty, discrimination, trauma, and violence frequently result in or contribute to mental ill-health.
- The leaders of the Church say sorry for the failings to protect and care for children and vulnerable adults through the trauma of sexual abuse, and the treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and commit to share in the responsibility to address these situations.
- Together as a Church we commit to building up structures that might better mediate God's grace as part of our mission to transform the world.

Called to Live Life to the Full

- It is through connection with God, and the quality of relationship into which this calls us, that we will experience the fullness of life in body, mind, and spirit, both personally and communally.
- We are called to restore the Body of Christ by making mental health a key priority, acknowledging and including people living with mental ill-health within our communion and the heart of Australian society.

“Whoever suffers from mental illness always bears God’s image and likeness in themselves, as does every human being. In addition, they always have the inalienable right not only to be considered as an image of God and therefore as a person, but also to be treated as such.”
Saint John Paul II *Address to mental health workers, 1996.*