

# Co-benefits of a healthy lifestyle for mental wellbeing

## Advice for municipal public health and wellbeing planning

### Purpose

This paper summarises the co-benefits of action to address the four focus areas of the [Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2019–2023](#) (increasing healthy eating, increasing active living, reducing tobacco-related harm and tackling climate change and its impacts on health) and improving mental wellbeing. It provides information to support councils in the development of their next municipal public health and wellbeing plan and to have regard to the focus areas of the [Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2019–2023 \(VPHWP 2019–2023\)](#).

### Background

Victorians have faced real challenges over the last 18 months with the bushfires that ravaged many communities and the impacts of the global pandemic brought about by coronavirus (COVID-19). Such traumatic events can impact our mental wellbeing by increasing feelings of depression, anxiety, isolation and loneliness. For some people, the immediate stress-response can lead to ongoing mental health issues (Black Dog Institute, 2020).

Through the municipal public health and wellbeing planning process, councils will engage with their communities to identify immediate and future needs and ways to respond whilst reconciling this with the focus areas outlined in the *Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2019–2023* (VPHWP 2019–2023). The *Municipal public health and wellbeing planning 2021–2025 Advice Note 1* encourages councils to concentrate their next municipal public health and wellbeing plans on the focus areas listed in the VPHWP 2019–2023. However, it also acknowledged that these actions could be integrated with the response, relief and recovery efforts.

### Focus areas of the VPHWP 2019–2023 (healthy eating, active living, tobacco-related harm and tackling the health impacts of climate change) and mental wellbeing

Taking actions to improve healthy eating and active living, address the health impacts of climate change, and reduce tobacco-related harm are shown to improve mental wellbeing and reduce the risk of developing a mental illness. For example, as little as 60 minutes of physical activity per week can prevent up to 17 per cent of incidences of depression (Schuch et al. 2018); and people who eat a diet that is rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains and fresh fish are up to 35 per cent less likely to experience depression. Conversely, a diet high in processed and nutritionally poor foods can increase the risk of developing depression by up to 60 per cent (Food and Mood Centre, 2020). Quitting smoking is associated with improved mental health, quality of life and reduced feelings of depression, stress and anxiety (Taylor et al. 2014). Promoting acts to engage with and preserve our natural environment can have mental health benefits and help overcome feelings of climate anxiety, stress and hopelessness (Hayes et al. 2018). Further, extreme weather events, such as bushfires and extreme heat, which are occurring at greater frequency and severity due to climate change, can have direct impacts on mental illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression (Hayes et al. 2018 and Bryant et al. 2014).

Being physically active, eating a healthy diet, quitting smoking and engaging with the natural environment also play an important role in improving health outcomes for people diagnosed with a mental illness (Cook et al. 2014, Czosnek et al. 2019 and Firth et al. 2019(b)). As such, addressing the focus areas of the VPHWP 2019–2023 is important across the spectrum of preventing and managing mental illness and promoting mental wellbeing.

Our mental health and our physical health are connected. That is, people experiencing poor mental health may be at increased risk of poor physical health and developing chronic health conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease (Firth et al. 2019). Likewise, people with poorer physical health, including overweight and obesity, may be more likely to experience poorer mental health (Luppino et al. 2010). In Victoria, by the time children are two years old almost one-quarter are at an unhealthy weight. Recent data suggests close to 50 per cent of Australia's young adults 18-24 years of age are now overweight or obese. By middle age, approximately three-quarters of Victorians are at an unhealthy weight (AIHW, 2020).

Finally, there will be many people living in communities who have worked as first responders or in front-line healthcare roles during the bushfires and coronavirus (COVID-19). Managing the impacts of this exposure on those community

members and the cascading impacts across communities will be important in coming years. For example, managing the effects of bushfire and coronavirus (COVID-19) on people's employment status, housing, finances and personal relationships.

Taken together, councils can be reassured that concentrating efforts on the focus areas of the VPHWP 2019–2023, including increasing healthy eating and active living, reducing tobacco-related harm and tackling climate change and its impacts on health, will also have a positive impact on community mental wellbeing.

## What actions can be taken?

### Increasing active living

- Walkable communities, such as 20-minute neighbourhoods, are likely to increase active living and improve mental wellbeing. Walkable communities provide destinations and places for people to meet and socialise that can be reached on foot or bicycle. Community activation events can revitalise local neighbourhoods, businesses and bring people together. [High quality parks and green spaces may provide respite from the daily world](#), with physical activity in green space potentially providing added mental health benefits. [Activation plans to implement findings from the 20-minute pilot neighbourhoods](#) can provide examples of community initiatives that contribute to creating healthy, liveable local neighbourhoods.
- Prioritising active travel through investment in infrastructure that increases the safety, accessibility and appeal of walking and cycling may be particularly important as we emerge from coronavirus (COVID-19). The Municipal Association of Victoria has created a [resource hub](#) to support council action in this area. The [Walk, Cycle Greater Bendigo Strategy](#) has been showcased as an action that contributes to both climate change and active living benefits.
- Create diverse community-based opportunities for people to be active. Efforts should be directed to creating cross-sector partnerships to leverage the co-benefits of physical activity and mental wellbeing. For example, integrating initiatives such as the [Virtual Y](#) with initiatives that tackle mental wellbeing; or supporting local sporting clubs and recreation centres to implement initiatives that promote mental wellbeing, such as the Orygen's [Supporting mental wellbeing in community sport](#), Black Dog Institute's [Mental fitness program](#) or Movember's [Ahead of the game](#).
- Consider including mental wellbeing in evaluations of existing group-based community physical activity programs, such as the [Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale](#) (WEMWBS) (Tennant, et al. 2007).
- In council-operated leisure and recreational centres, prioritise access for groups that are less likely to be active. For example, people living with a disability, culturally and linguistically diverse groups and women and girls. [The Women's Participation in Sport and Active Recreation in Melbourne's West: Action Plan for change](#) provides an example of how this can be achieved.

### Increasing healthy eating

- Councils are uniquely positioned to support local food system change. Council policies, services and procurement practices can increase community access to the food and drinks that support both physical and mental health, and that are more sustainable. Councils can encourage and support communities to consume healthier food and drinks by embedding the [Healthy Choices food and drink policy guidelines](#) into council owned or operated facilities and food supply contracts (such as, aquatic and recreation centres). The [Healthy Eating Advisory Service](#) provides specialist support for organisations implementing Healthy Choices.
- The [Healthy Schools and Healthy Early Years Achievement Program](#) is a statewide initiative that supports schools and early years services to create healthier environments. It focuses on key preventive health areas, such as healthy eating, active living and tobacco control.
- Councils can support childcare service to follow the [Victorian nutrition guidelines for childcare](#).
- Council-provided maternal and child health and childcare services can support maternal and childhood nutrition as well as maternal and family mental wellbeing. For example, initiatives such as [INFANT](#) or other parent groups provide an opportunity for families to meet and share information about local support services.
- Opportunities to integrate healthy eating into existing local approaches to improving mental health and wellbeing are encouraged, such as running "[sugary drink free](#)" events.
- Councils can seek opportunities to reduce the advertising of unhealthy food and drinks in local fundraising, sponsorship deals and outdoor advertisements.

- The [Healthy Heart of Victoria](#) initiative which promotes health and wellbeing across the Loddon Campaspe region via three main components (active living census, infrastructure and activations and health brokers) has also launched – [Be active. Eat well. Stay connected](#) – an integrated approach to physical health and mental wellbeing.

## Tackling climate change and its impacts on health

- Actions to tackle climate change and its impacts on health strongly intersect with other focus areas, especially increasing active living and healthy eating, and can also contribute to improving mental wellbeing. Considering links to climate change when addressing the other focus areas and integrating climate change into planning across all areas of council will lead to more coordinated and effective responses.
- Enhancing urban planning and design of the built environment and open spaces to improve walkability and encourage more walking and cycling, will reduce greenhouse gas emissions and provide physical and mental health benefits for the community.
- Implementing urban greening and cooling strategies to increase tree canopy cover and vegetation, green walls and roofs, and public open space can increase carbon capture, improve air quality, cool local environments and provide shade. These initiatives also provide opportunities for physical activity and being outdoors where connection with nature has physical, mental, cultural and social health and wellbeing benefits. The [Reimagining Bendigo Creek Plan](#) illuminates the inter-relationship between climate and health through the principles of catchment, connection and culture.
- Actions to increase healthy eating can also have benefits for climate change and mental wellbeing. Councils can implement a wide range of healthy and sustainable food system initiatives in their local community to help mitigate emissions, improve access to fresh, healthy and affordable food, and improve health outcomes.
- Councils can implement actions such as promoting and supporting participation in home gardening activities and community gardens, which help people to stay healthy and active, spend time outdoors in nature and increase community connection, positively impacting mental wellbeing and reducing stress and anxiety.
- Councils can promote and support conversations about climate change with the community, especially with children and youth, including about proactive action that can be taken to address climate change and its impacts on physical and mental health.
- [Tackling climate change and its impacts on health through municipal public health and wellbeing planning: Guidance for local government, 2020](#) contains information on climate change and health actions (DHHS, 2020).

## Reducing tobacco-related harm

- In settings that are working to improve mental wellbeing or address mental illness, ensure people who smoke have access to resources and support that encourage quitting, including pharmacotherapies (such as nicotine replacement therapy) and access to the [Quitline](#).
- Councils have the power to enforce the *Tobacco Act 1987* and are knowledgeable about tobacco control. Councils are encouraged and supported to implement smoke-free policies and environments. There is a need to tailor policies and campaigns to specific communities and population groups, which is reflected in the increasing focus on Aboriginal people, pregnant women, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual communities.
- In addition to obligations under the *Tobacco Act 1987*, consider extending smoke-free areas to de-normalise smoking. This may be articulated within specific policy actions or events that are designed to support recovery and community mental wellbeing.
- <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/tobacco-reform> contains information about the *Tobacco Act 1987* and current laws. Councils should contact [tobacco.policy@dhhs.vic.gov.au](mailto:tobacco.policy@dhhs.vic.gov.au) for access to the password protected area of this website.

## Integrated lifestyle interventions

- Lifestyle interventions, such as adapted versions of *Life! helping you prevent diabetes, heart disease and stroke program* (Life!), are recommended for people at risk of or with existing mental illness, to address physical mental health (Firth et al. 2019). In Victoria, Life! provides free access to eligible people who are at risk of Type 2 diabetes or cardiovascular disease.
- Councils provide many local opportunities for healthy eating and active living that could support transition from established lifestyle programs to ongoing engagement in community activities and events that promote healthy

behaviours. This may include adopting an approach which support inclusive environments that promote healthy behaviours for all (for example refer to the [active living section Melbourne's West Action Plan](#)).

## Other resources

- [Victorian public health and wellbeing plan – guidance](#) website for guidance related to the priorities of the plan.
- [Evidence review: the primary prevention of mental health conditions](#)
- [Evidence review: The arts and creative industries in health promotion](#)
- [Healthy Parks, Healthy People](#)

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