# STRATEGIES TO INCREASE RURAL MENTAL HEALTH HELP-SEEKING: NOW AND FOR THE FUTURE

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## Objective

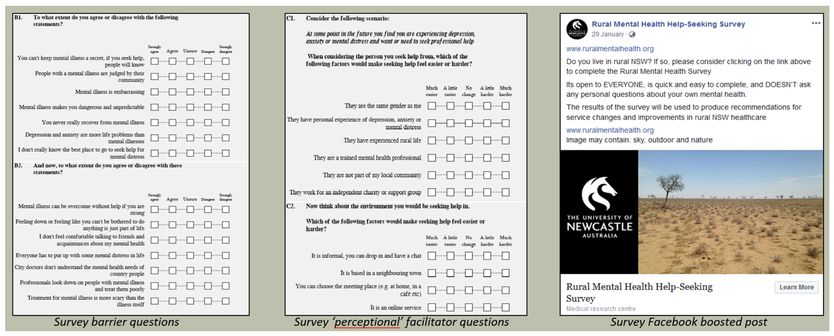
People living in rural areas are less likely than their urban counterparts to seek professional help for psychological distress. Research suggests that 'attitudinal' barriers such as stigma and stoicism can delay or prevent people from seeking help. The aim of this study was to discover what rural Australians believed would make help-seeking for mental distress easier and what practical changes might be made to the approach and nature of current mental health services to minimise or circumvent barriers to help-seeking. The research sought to complement current anti-stigma and mental health literacy campaigns by looking for ways to reduce barrier impact within service delivery.

## Methodology

The study used a cross-sectional survey to assess rural mental health help-seeking barriers, as identified via a qualitative systematic review (Cheesmond, Davies and Inder, 2019), and adherence to a series of potential facilitators to mental health help-seeking. A perceptional approach using 'theoretical scenario' style questions was used to allow residents to express facilitator preference irrespective of mental health experience. The survey was distributed to small rural towns in New South Wales via a targeted social media campaign.

## Rationale

- Research suggests that enduring mental health is rare and that the majority of us will experience mental unwellness at some point in our lives (Schaefer et al., 2017).
- Some of the help-seeking barriers revolve around feelings of embarrassment or discomfort when talking about our own mental distress.
- If you do research asking for people's current mental health and experiences you may well exclude this group of people.
- By using a cross sectional approach and asking people what they might do in a future scenario we hoped to include some people who have experienced, or will, experience these barriers.
- Therefore the research was designed to reach more of the people who are less likely to seek help and find out what they think would make mental health help-seeking easier.

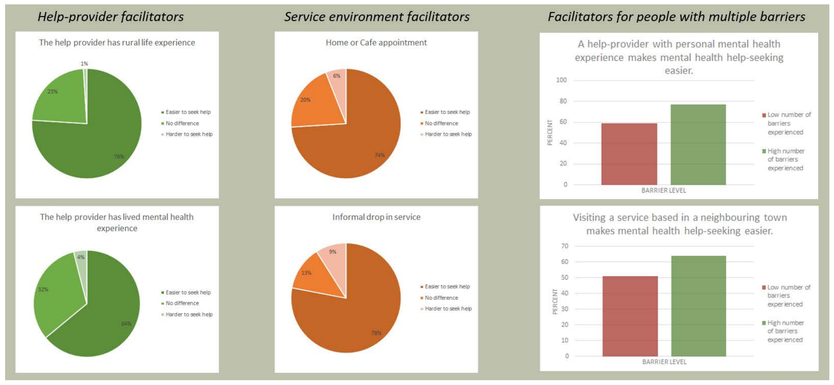



*Survey barrier questions* | *Survey 'perceptional' facilitator questions* | *Survey Facebook boosted post*

## Results

A high proportion of participants felt that both rural life experience and personal experience of mental illness were positive service-provider attributes that would make it easier to seek help for mental health concerns. Service flexibility was also considered a facilitator with the majority of participants expressing that a drop-in service and/or an informal venue such as a café would make it easier to seek help.

For participants who experienced high numbers of barriers and might therefore feel least able to seek help, facilitators included a worker with personal mental illness experience and a service based away from the community they lived in.




Cheesmond, N. E., Davies, K., & Inder, K. J. (2019). Exploring the role of rurality and rural identity in mental health help-seeking behavior: A systematic qualitative review. *Journal of Rural Mental Health, 43*(1), 45-59. doi:10.1037/rmh0000109
Schaefer, J. D., Harrington, H., Houts, R., Caspi, A., Moffitt, T. E., Belsky, D. W., . . . Poulton, R. (2017). Enduring mental health: Prevalence and prediction. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 126*(2), 212-224. doi:10.1037/abn0000232

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Residents of rural New South Wales feel it's **easier to seek help** for mental distress from a help-provider who has: **rural life experience** and/or **lived experience of mental illness**

## Facilitators to rural mental health help-seeking:

In A Neighbouring Town
Lived Experience
Not Part Of My Local Community
Rural Life Experience
Online Service
Drop In Service
Cafe Or Home Appointment

## Recommendations

- Increased funding for rural medical school programs and allied health programs
- Incentivised funding and support for rural students who wish to study medicine or allied health and return to practice in a rural environment
- Development of a rural peer support worker first-contact network to complement current services
- Increased focus on flexible service provision and promotion

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