# The Mental Health Index<sup>™</sup> report

Australia | April 2021





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### April 2021 highlights

# Key insight: Half of Australians feel the need for mental health support

Australia's pandemic response has resulted in a country that has largely eliminated the coronavirus however, its vaccination rollout has been plagued by troubles and delays in shipment of vaccines.<sup>1</sup> Low case levels have buoyed the economy in Q1 2021<sup>2</sup> and restrictions are easing in many parts of the country.

### Half of Australians feel the need for mental health support

- 50% of Australians feel the need for mental health support
- Of those who have not taken action on mental health in spite of the need, 33% believe that affordable care is not available, while 33% report that they do not have time to seek care
- 21% report not knowing where to get care as a barrier. This group has the lowest mental health score
- 71% of people use exercise to improve their mental health, followed by healthy eating (53%), and a changing the way they think about things (37%)
- Men are more likely than women to report a lack of energy to seek care, no time to seek care, or that they do not know where to go to get care

<sup>1</sup> Teneo, March 31

<sup>2</sup> https://ihsmarkit.com/research-analysis/australian-economy-reboundsin-early-2021-Apr21.html

People believe the vaccine roll-out as important to improving their outlook

- 38% report that getting vaccinated against COVID-19 or reaching herd immunity would most improve their outlook
- 26% report that having no more restrictions of any kind would most improve their outlook for the future, and this group has the most favourable mental health score

### MHI Sub-scores/trend\*

Isolation	-12.6	•
Anxiety	-12.2	
Depression	-11.5	
Work productivity	-10.7	
Optimism	-10.6	
Psychological health	-4.9	•
Financial risk	1.6	▼

\*arrows relate to the prior month

- For the fourth consecutive month, full-time post-secondary students have the lowest mental health score
- In terms of the location of residence, the greatest increase in month-over-month stress is among people living South Australia, followed by Western Australia, and New South Wales
- People without emergency savings continue to experience a lower score in mental health (-24.0) than those with an emergency fund (-6.1)

### The Mental Health Index™

The Mental Health Index™ (MHI) is a measure of deviation from the benchmark<sup>3</sup> of mental health and risk. The overall Mental Health Index™ for April 2021 is -11 points. An 11-point decrease from the pre-COVID-19 benchmark reflects a population whose mental health is similar to the most distressed one per cent of the benchmark population.



**MHI Current** Month—April 2021 March 2021

3

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The benchmark reflects data collected in 2017, 2018 and 2019.

### Mental Health Index<sup>™</sup> sub-scores

The lowest Mental Health Index<sup>TM</sup> sub-score is for the risk measure of isolation (-12.6 points), followed by anxiety (-12.2), depression (-11.5), work productivity (-10.7), optimism (-10.6), and general psychological health (-4.9). The risk measure with the best mental health score, and the only measure above the benchmark is financial risk (1.6).

- Isolation, general psychological health, and financial risk scores declined from the prior month.
- With a 1.0-point increase, the depression score has had the greatest improvement from the prior month.
- Despite a 1.8-point decline from the prior month, financial risk continues to be the strongest of all sub-scores and is above the pre-2020 benchmark.

MHI Sub-scores⁴ 2021	April	March
Isolation	-12.6	-10.8
Anxiety	-12.2	-12.6
Depression	-11.5	-12.5
Work productivity	-10.7	-11.1
Optimism	-10.6	-11.5
Psychological health	-4.9	-4.7
Financial risk	1.6	3.4

The demographic breakdown of sub-scores is available upon request.

### Optimism

Similar to other mental health sub-scale scores, optimism scores from April to June 2020 improved. Following declines in July and August, improvement had been observed, reaching a peak in December 2020 (-10.6). Despite stable scores from December to April 2021, the optimism score remains nearly 11-points below the pre-2020 benchmark.



### General psychological health

Despite periodic improvements in June, October and January, the psychological health of Australians has is in decline. In April 2021, the psychological health is in the third consecutive month of decline, nearly 5 points below the pre-2020 benchmark.



### **Financial risk**

The financial risk continues to be the strongest sub-scale despite a significant decline from November 2020 to January 2021. With a 2.7-point increase, the financial risk score in February 2021 had the greatest improvement from the prior month. However, a slight decline in financial risk score is observed in March 2021 (3.4) followed by a more significant decline in April 2021 (1.6). Overall, financial risk has improved 5.5 points since April 2020 and remains above the pre-2020 benchmark.



### Mental Health Index<sup>TM</sup> (regional)

State mental health scores since April showed general improvement through July; however, all Australian regions showed declines from July to August. Mental health scores across all regions showed a general increase in September but since October, scores by state have held fairly steady between -12.0 and -9.0.

In April 2021, New South Wales and Victoria have shown improvement in mental health compared to the prior month, however, declines in mental health are observed for South Australia, Queensland, and Western Australia.

- Despite a 1.0-point decline from the prior month, the mental health score in Queensland remains strongest (-10.4).
- The lowest mental health score in April is observed in South Australia (-12.5), a 0.6-point decline from March.



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### Demographics

- Since the start of the MHI, we have found that women have significantly lower mental health scores than men. In April 2021, the mental health score of women is -13.1 compared to -8.7 for men.
- In twelve consecutive months of MHI results, we have observed that mental health scores have improved with age.
- We have seen differences in mental scores between those with and without children since April. March 2021 continues this trend with a lower score for those with at least one child (-11.9) compared to those without children (-10.8).

### Employment

- Overall, seven per cent of respondents are unemployed and sixteen per cent report reduced hours or reduced salary.
- Individuals reporting reduced salary compared to the prior month have the lowest mental health score (-24.9), followed by those not currently employed (-20.7), and those who report fewer hours compared to the prior month (-17.6).
- Managers have a higher mental health score (-9.4) than non-managers (-11.3); this is a change from last month where managers reported a lower score.
- Individuals working for employers with 5,001-10,000 employees have the highest mental health score (-6.0).
- Respondents working for companies with 51-100 employees have the lowest mental health score (-16.1).

### **Emergency savings**

Those without emergency savings continue to experience
a lower score in mental health (-24.0) than the overall group.
Individuals with an emergency fund have a mental health
score of -6.1.

Employment status	April 2021	March 2021
Employed (no change in hours/salary)	-8.6	-8.4
Employed (fewer hours compared to last month)	-17.6	-20.3
Employed (reduced salary compared to last month)	-24.9	-21.5
Not currently employed	-20.7	-16.8
Age group	April 2021	March 2021
Age 20-29	-19.9	-17.3
Age 30-39	-15.0	-15.6
Age 40-49	-11.5	-10.4
Age 50-59	-7.8	-8.1
Age 60-69	-2.9	-2.6
Number of children	April 2021	March 2021
No children in household	-10.8	-10.2
1 child	-11.3	-10.4
2 children	-12.7	-15.8
3 children or more	-11.3	-8.9

State	April 2021	March 2021
New South Wales	-11.1	-11.6
Victoria	-11.4	-11.8
Queensland	-10.4	-9.5
South Australia	-12.5	-11.9
Western Australia	-11.5	-8.9
Gender	April 2021	March 2021
Men	-8.7	-8.5
Women	-13.1	-13.0
Income	April 2021	March 2021
Household income <\$30K/annum	-26.3	-27.5
\$30K to <\$60K/annum	-13.2	-12.8
\$60K to <\$100K	-15.0	-13.3
\$100K to <\$150K	-6.9	-9.1
\$150K or more	-3.8	-4.4

Employer size	April 2021	March 2021
Self-employed/ sole proprietor	-10.6	-11.0
2-50 employees	-9.9	-9.8
51-100 employees	-16.1	-15.5
101-500 employees	-8.8	-11.1
501-1,000 employees	-12.3	-12.0
1,001-5,000 employees	-10.3	-9.5
5,001-10,000 employees	-6.0	-7.1
More than 10,000 employees	-9.2	-8.0
Manager	April 2021	March 2021
Manager	-9.4	-10.7
Non-manager	-11.3	-10.5

Numbers highlighted in orange are the most negative scores

in the group.

Numbers highlighted in green are the least negative scores in the group.

#### Available upon request:

Specific cross-correlational and custom analyses

### Mental Health Index™ (industry)

For the fourth consecutive month, full-time post-secondary students have the lowest mental health score (-20.2). This continues to be significantly lower than the next lowest scores, among individuals in Wholesale Trade (-18.5), and Arts, Entertainment and Recreation (-18.4).

Individuals in Public Administration (-8.0), Professional, Scientific and Technical Services (-8.2), and Healthcare and Social Assistance (-8.7) show the highest mental health scores this month.

Full-time post-secondary students, along with people employed in Administrative and Support services, and Educational Services have seen the greatest improvement in mental health since last month.

Changes from the prior month are shown in the table.

Industry	April 2021	March 2021	Change
l am a student	-20.2	-24.2	4.0
Administrative and Support services	-9.3	-12.3	3.0
Educational Services	-11.4	-12.8	1.5
Construction	-9.3	-10.7	1.5
Transportation and Warehousing	-14.0	-15.3	1.3
Retail Trade	-14.1	-15.0	0.9
Food Services	-12.0	-12.8	0.8
Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	-8.2	-9.0	0.8
Public Administration	-8.0	-8.6	0.6
Manufacturing	-10.1	-9.9	-0.1
Healthcare and Social Assistance	-8.7	-6.3	-2.4
Other	-12.8	-9.1	-3.7
Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	-18.4	-14.5	-4.0
Wholesale Trade	-18.5	-12.1	-6.4
Finance and Insurance	-9.5	-2.4	-7.1

### The Mental Stress Change score

The Mental Stress Change score (MStressChg) is a measure of the level of reported mental stress compared to the prior month. **The Mental Stress Change score for April 2021 is 54.4.** This reflects a net increase in mental stress compared to the prior month.

The current score indicates that 18 per cent of the population is experiencing more mental stress compared to the prior month, with 9 per cent experiencing less. A continued increase in mental stress since April 2020 indicates a significant accumulation of strain in the Australian population.



MStressChg Current Month—April 2021

54

MStressChg Current Month—March 2021

55.4

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### Mental Stress Change (percentages)

Mental Stress Change tracks everyone's stress changes each month. The percentages of those experiencing more stress, the same level of stress, and less stress for each month of the survey are shown in the graph.

For more than one year, the percentage of those experiencing more mental stress than the previous month has steadily decreased; however, the data showing this decline is too insignificant to lower the overall Mental Stress Change score to below 50 (the level at which stress is lower than the previous month). As the proportion of individuals reporting the same level of stress or more stress than the previous month continues to outweigh the proportion reporting less mental stress, the population will continue to feel the effects of significantly increased stress and will not be able to reach a more sustainable and healthy level of stress.

In April, 52 per cent of individuals reported an increase in mental stress. While those reporting increased month-over-month mental stress decreased to 18 per cent in April 2021, 73 per cent of respondents report the same level of mental stress and only 9 per cent report a decrease in mental stress.





### Demographics

- Since the start of the MHI, we have observed that younger people are experiencing a greater increase in mental stress compared to older respondents.
- We have also found that women have larger increases in mental stress than men. In April 2021, the mental stress change score of women is 55.5 compared to 52.8 for men.

### Geography

- The greatest increase in stress month-over-month was for respondents living in South Australia (57.4), followed by Western Australia (55.3), and New South Wales (54.5).
- Even those living in provinces where the increase in mental stress was less still had significant increases, including Queensland (53.5) and Victoria (53.4).

### **Employment**

- The greatest increase in mental stress is seen in employed people with reduced salary (63.4), followed by employed people with reduced hours (59.6), compared to unemployed people (54.7) and employed people with no change to salary or hours (53.0).
- The greatest increase in mental stress is observed among managers (56.2) while non-managers have a more modest increase in mental stress (53.3).

Employment status	April 2021	March 2021
Employed (no change in hours/salary)	53.0	53.7
Employed (fewer hours compared to last month)	59.6	62.8
Employed (reduced salary compared to last month)	63.4	65.9
Not currently employed	54.7	54.7
Age group	April 2021	March 2021
Age 20-29	58.2	55.7
Age 30-39	56.1	57.2
Age 40-49	56.1	57.2
Age 50-59	50.7	53.0
Age 60-69	51.2	51.6
Number of children	April 2021	March 2021
No children in household	52.9	53.9
1 child	55.9	56.4
2 children	57.1	59.4
3 children or more	59.4	57.5

State	April 2021	March 2021
New South Wales	54.5	56.1
Victoria	53.4	54.7
Queensland	53.5	55.5
South Australia	57.4	54.5
Western Australia	55.3	56.0
Gender	April 2021	March 2021
Men	52.8	54.6
Women	55.5	55.9
Income	April 2021	March 2021
Household income <\$30K/annum	56.5	58.0
\$30K to <\$60K/annum	57.3	57.5
\$60K to <\$100K	55.9	55.3
\$100K to <\$150K	54.1	56.7
\$150K or more	50.0	52.1

Employer size	April 2021	March 2021
Self-employed/ sole proprietor	54.6	53.3
2-50 employees	54.8	54.8
51-100 employees	55.7	55.4
101-500 employees	55.6	56.0
501-1,000 employees	51.3	60.6
1,001-5,000 employees	52.7	53.9
5,001-10,000 employees	50.9	58.3
More than 10,000 employees	55.5	54.5
Manager	April 2021	March 2021
Manager	56.2	56.2
Non-manager	53.3	55.0

Numbers highlighted in orange are the most negative scores

in the group.

Numbers highlighted in green are the least negative scores

in the group.

#### Available upon request:

Specific cross-correlational and custom analyses

### The Mental Stress Change (industry)

Mental Stress Change scores for individuals in Construction (48.8) and Manufacturing (49.2) reflects a stabilization of mental stress from month to month.

Individuals working in Arts, Entertainment and Recreation have the most significant increase in mental stress (62.0), followed by individuals employed in Wholesale Trade (60.3), and Real Estate, Rental and Leasing (57.5).

Mental Stress changes from the last two months are shown in the table.

Industry	April 2021	March 2021
Construction	48.8	55.1
Manufacturing	49.2	51.4
Food Services	51.7	51.7
Administrative and Support services	51.9	55.0
Educational Services	52.8	60.2
Healthcare and Social Assistance	53.0	55.6
Transportation and Warehousing	53.5	57.5
I am a student	54.5	51.7
Other	55.4	52.9
Public Administration	55.6	60.2
Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	55.7	56.2
Finance and Insurance	57.0	50.0
Retail Trade	57.5	53.7
Wholesale Trade	60.3	56.9
Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	62.0	52.1

### Spotlight

### Future outlook

With vaccines continuing to roll-out across Australia, there is cause for optimism. Respondents were asked what would most improve their outlook for the future.

- More than one-quarter (26 per cent) report having no more restrictions of any kind would most improve their outlook for the future and this group has the most favourable mental health score (-7.4).
- Nearly one-quarter (23 per cent) report that getting vaccinated against COVID-19 would improve their outlook, followed by fifteen per cent reporting population reaching herd immunity.
- Respondents under the age of 40 are more than 60 per cent more likely than those above 40 to report that getting vaccinated would most improve their outlook.

#### Event that would most improve my outlook for the future



#### MHI score by event that would most improve my outlook for the future

No more restrictions of any kind (26%) Me getting vaccinated (23%) Population reaching herd immunity (15%) All businesses reopening (12%) Being at my worksite (6%) Unrestricted social gatherings (5%) My outlook will not improve (10%) Other (5%)



### **Supports and barriers to improving mental health** Steps to improving mental health

In March 2021, we reported that that forty-one per cent of Australians were less likely to seek mental healthcare than prior to the pandemic or were undecided about accessing mental healthcare. This reluctance exists despite continued availability of mental healthcare.

Respondents were asked if they were taking steps to improve their mental health.

- More than one-third (34 per cent) have taken steps to improve their mental health, while another sixteen per cent have not taken steps but want to.
- The least favourable mental health scores are seen among the sixteen per cent who have not taken steps but want to (-26.3), followed by those who have taken steps to improve their mental health (-16.8).
- Individuals under 40 are thirty per cent more likely than those over 40 to have taken steps to improve their mental health.

#### Have you taken steps to improve your mental health?



MHI score by whether respondents have taken steps to improve their mental health



### Supports to improve mental health

More than one-third of people report taking steps to improve their mental health. Respondents were asked to select the supports that they have used to manage their mental health.

- Nearly three-quarters (71 per cent) of people use exercise to improve their mental health, followed by healthy eating (53 per cent), and a change in the way of thinking about things (37 per cent).
- The most favourable mental health scores are reported by people who talk to religious leaders as a means of mental health support (-5.2), followed by those talking to their co-worker/manager (-5.9).
- Women are nearly twice as likely than men to report talking to friends and family members for support.

#### Supports to improve mental health



#### MHI score by supports to improve mental health



### Barriers to improving mental health

Sixteen per cent of people report that they have not taken steps to improve their mental health but would like to. We asked this group about barriers to mental health care.

- Thirty-three per cent believe that affordable care is not available, followed by thirty-three per cent reporting that they do not have time to seek care, and twenty-one per cent not knowing where to get care.
- The lowest mental health scores are seen among twenty-one per cent of people not knowing where to get care (-36.2), followed by thirteen per cent of people who report lack of available care/ long wait for care (-35.0), and thirteen per cent of people who report discomfort sharing (-33.3) as a barrier.

#### Barriers to mental health improvement



#### MHI score by barrier to taking steps to mental health improvement



One-third of people report having no time to focus on improving their mental health. Thirty-eight per cent of those under the age of 50 report having no time as a barrier to improving their mental health compared with twenty-one per cent of those over the age of 50.

People reporting "no time" as a barrier to improving mental health





### Gender differences

- Men are more likely than women to report a lack of energy to seek care, no time to seek care, or that they do not know where to go to get care.
- Men with children are fifty per cent more likely than men without children to report no time to improve their mental health.
- Women with children are fifty per cent more likely than women without children to report a lack of energy to seek care.

### Key gender differences in reported barriers to improving mental health





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### Overview of the Mental Health Index™

The mental health and wellbeing of a population is essential to overall health and work productivity. The Mental Health Index<sup>™</sup> provides a measure of the current mental health status of employed adults in each geography compared to benchmarks collected in 2017, 2018 and 2019. The increases and decreases in the MHI are intended to predict cost and productivity risks and inform the need for investment in mental health support by business and government.

### The Mental Health Index<sup>™</sup> report has three parts:

- The overall Mental Health Index<sup>™</sup> (MHI), which is a measure of change compared to the benchmark of mental health and risk.
- 2. A Mental Stress Change (MStressChg) score, which measures the level of reported mental stress compared to the prior month.
- 3. A spotlight section that reflects the specific impact of current issues in the community.

### Methodology

Data for this report is collected through an online survey of 1,000 Australians who are living in Australia and are currently employed or who were employed within the prior six months. Participants are selected to be representative of the age, gender, industry, and geographic distribution in Australia. The same respondents take part each month to remove a sampling bias. Respondents are asked to consider the prior two weeks when answering each question. The Mental Health Index™ is published monthly starting in April 2020. Benchmark data was collected in 2017, 2018 and 2019. Data for the current report was collected between March 22 to April 2, 2021.

### Calculations

To create the Mental Health Index<sup>™</sup>, the first step leverages a response scoring system turning individual responses to each question into a point value. Higher point values are associated with better mental health and less mental health risk. Everyone's scores are added and then divided by a total number of possible points to get a score out of 100. The raw score is the mathematical mean of the individual scores.

To demonstrate change, the current month's scores are then compared to the benchmark and the prior month. The benchmark comprises data from 2017, 2018 and 2019. This was a period of relative social stability and steady economic growth. The change compared to the benchmark is the Mental Health Index. A score of zero in the Mental Health Index™ reflects no change, positive scores reflect improvement, and negative scores reflect decline. A Mental Stress Change score is also reported given that increasing and prolonged mental stress is a potential contributor to changes in mental health. It is reported separately and is not part of the calculation of the Mental Health Index. The Mental Stress Change score is (percentage reporting less mental stress + percentage reporting the same level of mental stress \*0.5) \* -1 + 100. The score reflects a comparison of the current to the prior month. A Mental Stress Change score of 50 reflects no change in mental stress from the prior month. Scores above 50 reflect an increase in mental stress and scores below 50 reflect a decrease in mental stress. The range is from zero to 100. A succession of scores over 50, month over month, reflects high risk.

### Additional data and analyses

Demographic breakdown of sub-scores, and specific crosscorrelational and custom analyses, are available upon request. Benchmarking against the national results or any sub-group is available upon request. Contact MHI@lifeworks.com

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### About LifeWorks

LifeWorks is a global leader in delivering technology-enabled solutions that help clients support the total wellbeing of their people and build organizational resiliency. By improving lives, we improve business. Our solutions span employee and family assistance, health and wellness, recognition, pension and benefits administration, retirement and financial consulting, actuarial and investment services. LifeWorks employs approximately 7,000 employees who work with some 24,000 client organizations that use our services in more than 160 countries. LifeWorks is a publicly traded company on the Toronto Stock Exchange (TSX: LWRK).

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