

## OPINION

# *We must use this opportunity to reform mental health support*

By **Julia Gillard**

May 8, 2020 — 12.01am

The National Cabinet will on Friday consider a COVID-19 mental health response and recovery plan. This is an urgent, essential discussion. A mentally healthy Australia will be fundamental to helping us all deal with and recover from the economic and social aftershocks of the pandemic.

At Beyond Blue, we have and continue to see sharply increased levels of distress compared with the days before the pandemic. Since mid-March, Beyond Blue has observed an increase in the number of contacts to our help channels, including the new dedicated coronavirus mental wellbeing support service.

Weekly contact volumes are now consistently about 40 percent higher than they were in the two months prior to the crisis. We know this experience is shared by many other providers. Common themes – drawn from our online community and social threads – include loneliness, exhaustion, job and financial worries, and family stress.

All this is incredibly concerning, but there is a silver lining. The fact Australians are turning to organisations like Beyond Blue, ReachOut, Lifeline and Kids Helpline tells us people need support, but it also tells us people are prepared to seek support. If a crisis of this nature had struck a decade ago, many would have suffered in silence and not taken the first step on the road to managing their mental health.

At the same time need has increased across Australia, mental health professionals have responded including by changing the way they operate. Teams have mobilised quickly so they can stay connected to the people they work with, including through assertive outreach and keeping clinics open, but adapting them to keep everyone safe. More than half of Australia's registered psychologists are now offering telehealth consultations and there have been more than one million mental health telehealth consultations so far.

However, the data is telling us that there are some major problems to address. There has been no increase in the number of mental health services used since the pandemic hit. In fact, there has been a drop. We are all particularly worried about

the people who are not accessing support from the usual places and are disappearing from the system. We must become more creative and find new ways to reach them.

There is also a gaping hole waiting to be filled by low-intensity services, accessed for free without a doctor's referral, online or by phone. The COVID-19 pandemic has only underscored this need. Low-intensity supports bring with them the opportunity to redeploy workforces at a time when unemployment has reached a disturbing high.

In politics and management circles, the saying "never let a good crisis go to waste" is often repeated. Of course, the flaw in that axiom is there is no such thing as a good crisis and certainly the one we face now is causing pain right across the community. However, we would do well to be agile in our thinking about what we can learn from this experience that will improve mental health services and support for the long term.

Clearly, while digital and telehealth service delivery is not a silver bullet, its widespread adoption and refinement should be a big part of a modernised system.

Second, we went into this crisis with a mental health system in need of profound change. We have shown as a mental health community that we can swiftly design and implement reforms which impact behaviour, improve outcomes, and which the community will embrace. We have seen people connecting more often and in ways they have not before. Workplaces are adapting and governments are collaborating.

We need to keep this spirit alive as we work to build a mental health system in which people seeking support have options that match their needs. We must use this opportunity to close some of the structural gaps in the system and address affordability.

The COVID-19 crisis is profoundly affecting people who live with mental health conditions, and people who have never struggled before. Our response should not be more of the same. Indeed, the current shock can be what pushes us forward and delivers some of the changes people, families and communities have long needed.

The discussion by National Cabinet on Friday is one of the most important they will have. I hope they do seize the opportunity presented to flatten the curve of mental ill health and create a better system for the future.

*Julia Gillard is Chair of Beyond Blue.*