Relationships Australia Monthly Website Survey

August 2020 Survey: Mental health and relationships

Introduction

Mental health refers to an individual's state of well-being and considers how individuals can cope with the normal stresses of life and contribute to their community (Beyond Blue 2020). It is well-accepted that the state of a person's mental health can affect every aspect of our lives. Although the term 'mental health' refers to an individual's well-being as opposed to ill-health (Beyond Blue, 2020), in public discourse, the term 'mental health' is often described used to describe the spectrum of mental health disorders.

Mental illnesses include a wide range of diagnosable conditions and can represent some forms of mental ill-health (Beyond Blue 2020). They are extremely common. One in five Australians aged 16-85 experience a mental illness in any year (Black Dog Institute 2020a). Throughout our lifetimes, almost half of the Australian population will experience mental illness at some point (Department of Health 2020). Despite this, 54% of people with mental illness do not access any treatment (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2014).

During COVID-19, mental health has received increased public attention and services have received a significant boost in funding. Despite this, accessing mental health services remains difficult for many. Recent government inquiries, even before COVID-19, have highlighted growing concern about the 'missing middle', where people with issues considered 'too complex' to be addressed by a GP through the limited Medicare rebated scheme, but do not qualify for (or cannot afford) more acute services (Productivity Commission 2019). This has been further exacerbated during COVID-19, where people are less willing to visit GPs and hospitals and mental ill-health is on the rise (Black Dog 2020b).

The state of a person's mental health is subject to change over time, and it is therefore important that people are able to recognise fluctuations in their own well-being. Additionally, because our support networks can play an important role in accessing mental health services, it is also important that we can recognise and respond to signs of mental ill-health in others. As people become more aware of mental health in general, their ability to recognise mental ill-health in others can improve (Black Dog Institute 2020a). However, recognising that someone is suffering is only part of the solution. Knowing how to continue the conversation, support the person and refer on if necessary is a crucial part of assisting someone in the journey to mental health.

This month's survey explored our respondents' ability to recognise and respond to mental ill-health, their help-seeking patterns and the effect mental health has on intimate relationships.

Key Findings

1 People are more capable of recognising their own ill-mental health, but feel more comfortable discussing and addressing another's mental health.

- 96% of people say that they can tell if their mental health is suffering, 95% of people said they know when a close companion's mental health is suffering (figure 2). These figures have not changed significantly since 2015 (figure 3).

- People feel most comfortable talking about their mental health with their partners and friends and least comfortable with their neighbours and colleagues (figure 4).

- 99% of respondents felt confident in addressing another's mental ill health. However, less than 60% of respondents thought they would receive tangible support when discussing their mental health with people close to them (figure 8).

2 When seeking help, people prefer professional support to be in person, or from people close to them. Despite this, many remain sceptical of the support their close contacts can provide.

- The majority of respondents (66%) prefer to seek professional help in person. Only 19% would seek professional help online (figure 6).

- 11% of respondents said they would not seek help at all, and 9% said if they were suffering, they would not know where to go to receive help (figure 6).

- 64% of respondents indicated that they would seek help from 'people close to them' (figure 6). However, 45% said they felt 'uncomfortable' or 'very uncomfortable' talking to one or more of their close contacts about their mental health (figure 7).

3 Partners are an important source of support, yet mental health issues can significantly affect the health of an intimate relationship.

- 70% of people reported feeling 'very' (30%) or 'somewhat' (40%) comfortable talking about their mental health with their partner.

- 86% agree that their mental health affects the health of their relationship (figure 9). Despite this, 50% of people would would not let the fact that another person was suffering mental ill-health dissuade them from beginning or continuing a relationship with that person (figure 10).

Results

Almost 700 people responded to our August 2020 survey, exploring people's mental health literacy. 76% of respondents identified as women and 48% of respondents were aged 30-49 years. As for previous surveys, the demographic profile of survey respondents is consistent with our experience of the groups of people who access the Relationships Australia website.

Figure 1. Respondent Demographics
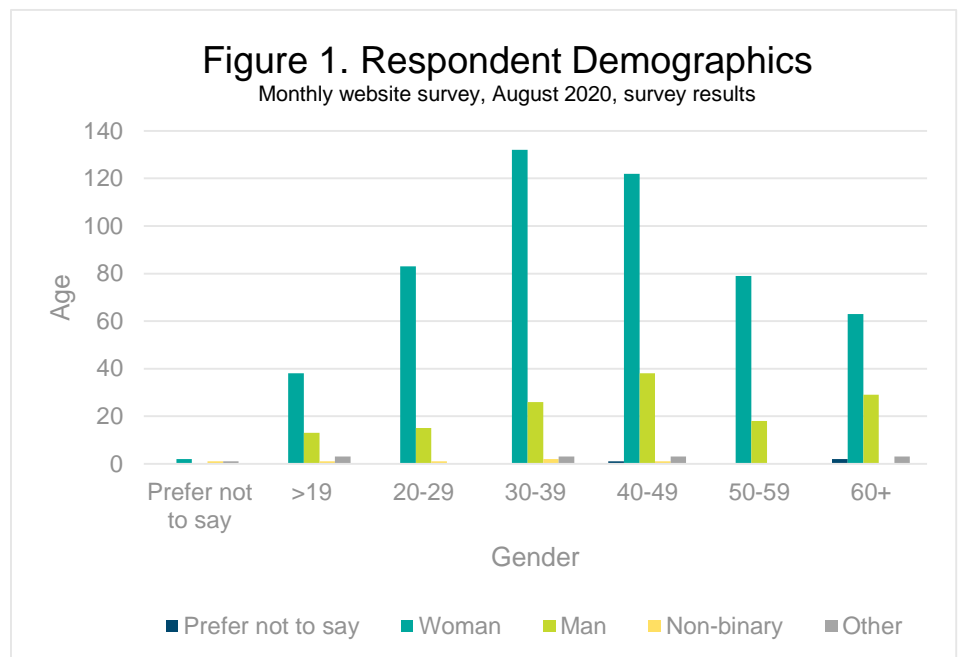Monthly website survey, August 2020, survey results

Figure 2 demonstrates that people have a greater ability to recognise when their own mental health is suffering compared with the ability to recognise when a close companion is suffering. 96% of people said they either always (46%), or sometimes (50%), know when their own mental health is suffering. Although 95% of people said they know when a close companion's mental health is suffering, only 29% felt they could 'always' notice this change, while the majority (66%) could 'sometimes' identify this shift. Promisingly, only 20 people felt they could either 'rarely' or 'never' recognise when theirs, or another's, mental health was suffering. This is explored further in figure 4.

Figure 2. Ability recognise ill-mental health
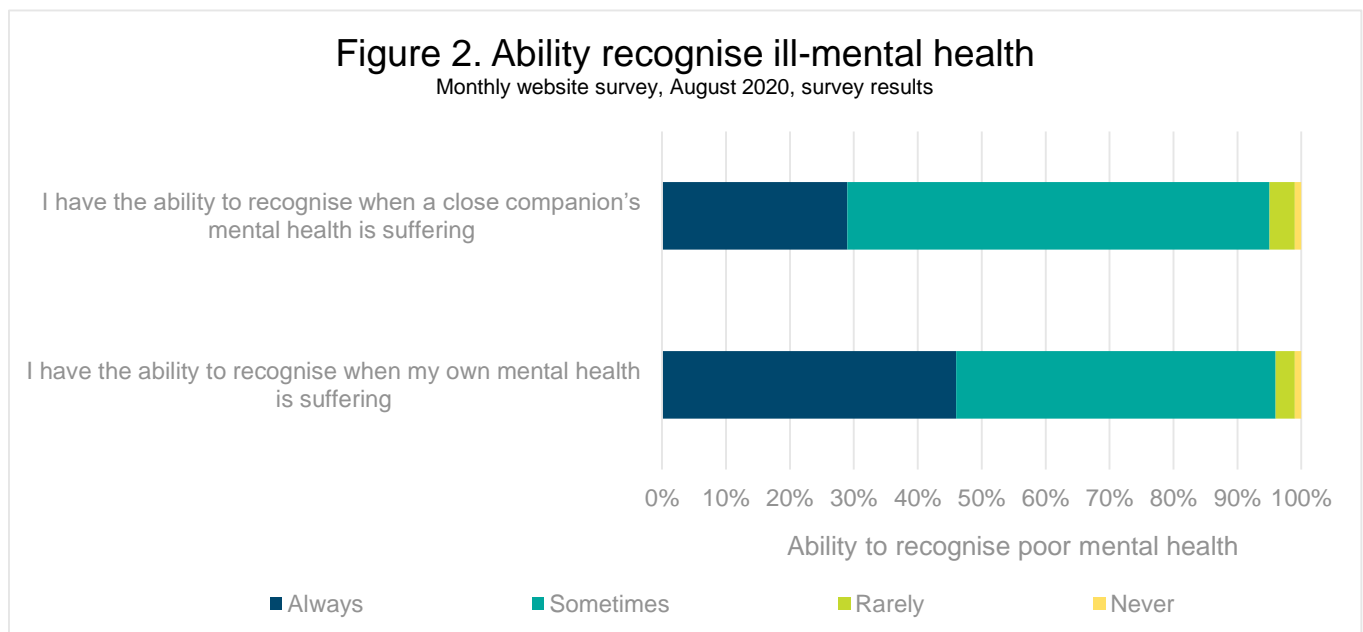Monthly website survey, August 2020, survey results

Figure 3 compares the findings from this survey with a survey we conducted in 2018. Across the timeframes, there was very little difference in people's ability to identify issues with their own, and others', mental health. This suggests that despite COVID-19's effect on mental health, this has had little effect on our respondents' ability to recognise ill-mental health.

Figure 3. Ability to recognise poor mental health
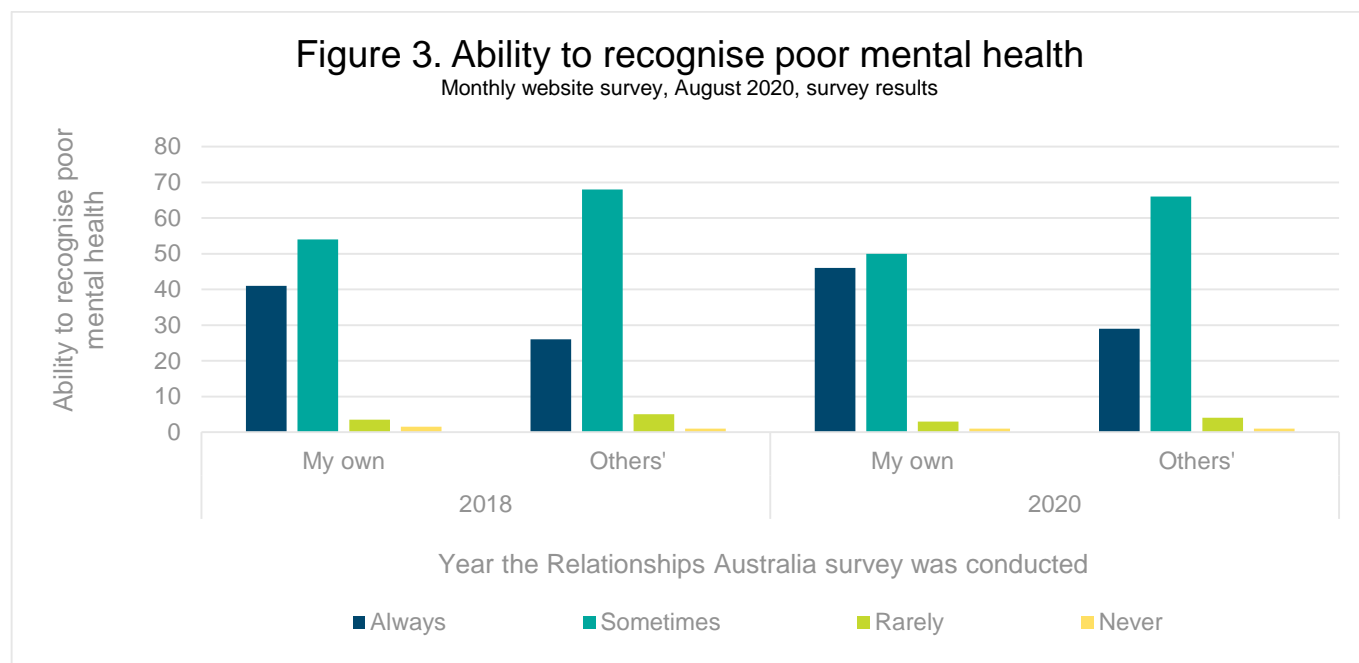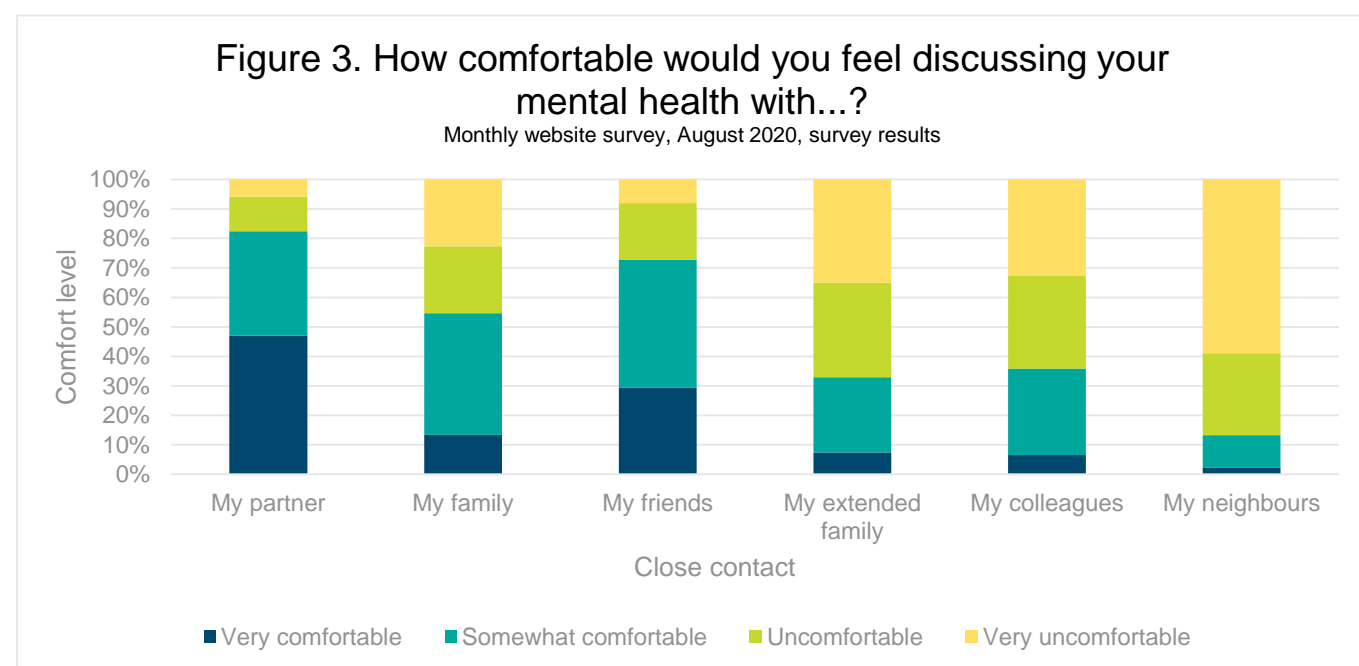### Monthly website survey, August 2020, survey results

Figure 4 illustrates that people feel most comfortable talking about their mental health with their partners and friends and least comfortable with their neighbours and colleagues. 70% of people reported feeling 'very' (30%) or 'somewhat' (40%) comfortable talking about their mental health with their partner. Just over half (53%) of respondents said they would feel comfortable discussing their mental health with their immediate family, whereas only 31% reported feeling comfortable

Figure 3. How comfortable would you feel discussing your mental health with...?
Monthly website survey, August 2020, survey results

discussing their mental health with their extended family. Additionally, more people were comfortable discussing their mental health with their friends (72%) than their family (53%). Additionally, 33% of respondents reported feeling comfortable talking about their mental health with their colleagues.

The small proportion of respondents who felt 'very comfortable' talking about their mental health with their neighbours (2%), also reported feeling 'very uncomfortable' talking about it with their family. This suggests that these respondents may have sought out alternative relationships to discuss their well-being, where other relationships were not available or not considered suitable.

Conversely, those who felt 'very comfortable' talking about their mental health with their colleagues (6%) were 1.5 times more likely than the average respondent to feel 'very comfortable' having these discussions with their partner and friends. This suggests that people who feel comfortable discussing their mental health at work feel generally at ease discussing their mental health with many of their close contacts.

Despite these findings, in general, figure 3 suggests that mental health remains a personal topic for most people. While respondents may be comfortable sharing with one or two close contacts, most felt uncomfortable discussing their mental health with their larger circles. Reassuringly, those who felt uncomfortable discussing their mental health with typically close support networks (e.g. their partner) mostly had other people close to them with whom they felt comfortable discussing their mental health.

Figure 4. How comfortable would you feel discussing their mental health with...?

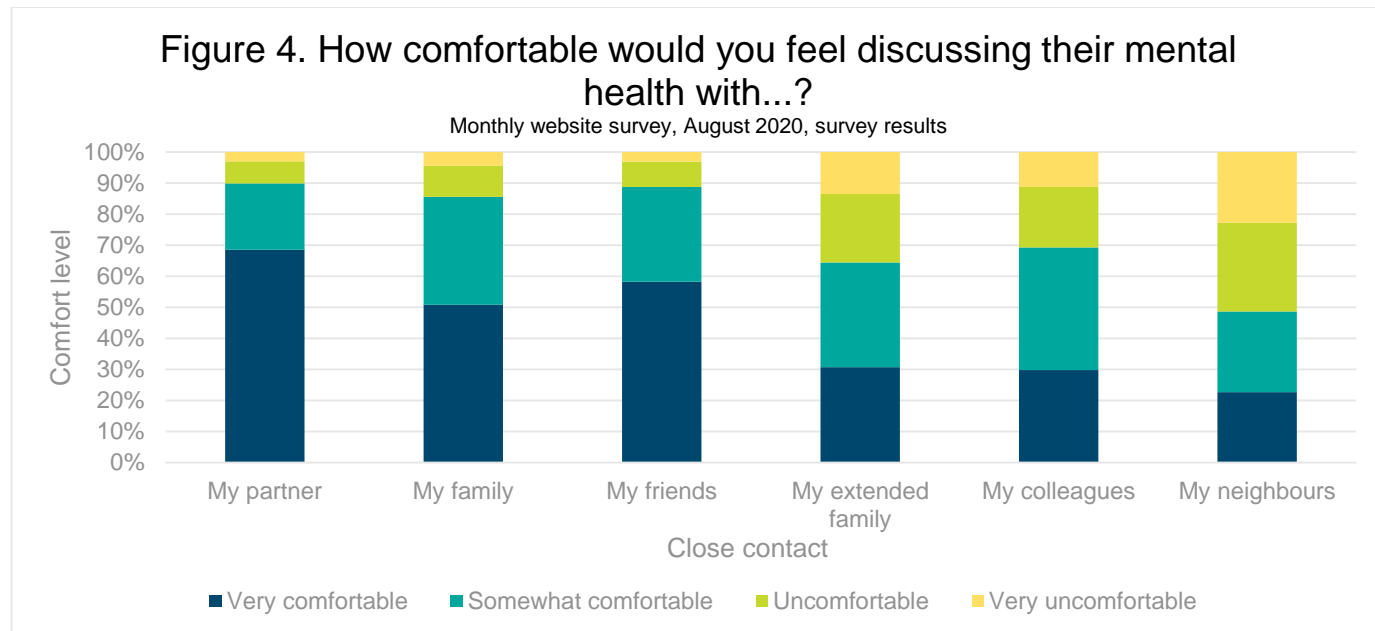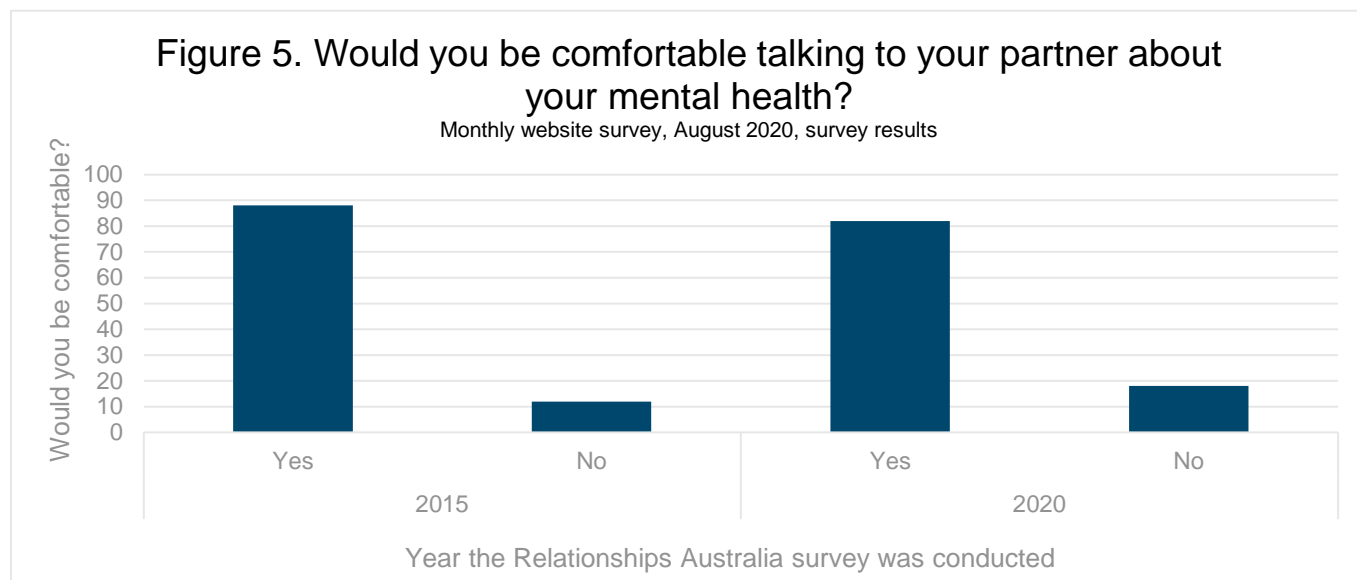Monthly website survey, August 2020, survey results

Figure 4 explores how comfortable respondents feel talking to others about their mental health. Across the board, people felt more comfortable speaking about another's mental health than they did their own. The largest discrepancies were found in the comfort levels of people speaking to their family (13% versus 49% feeling 'very comfortable'), extended family (7% versus 29%), colleagues (6% versus 28%) and neighbours (2% versus 21%). This suggests that while people feel some discomfort discussing their own mental health with people outside of their close family and social circles (figure 3), they will still lend an open ear if they are approached for support.

Later in the survey (figure 6), we explore what actions people would take once this conversation had begun.

In 2015, Relationships Australia conducted a similar survey exploring people's willingness to discuss their mental health with their partner. Figure 5 illustrates that 88% felt comfortable speaking with their partner about their mental health in 2015, versus 82% in 2020. Furthermore, in 2020, 79% of people who felt 'very comfortable' discussing their mental health with their partner

Figure 5. Would you be comfortable talking to your partner about your mental health?
Monthly website survey, August 2020, survey results

said they did not feel 'very comfortable' talking about their mental health with any other close contact listed. This suggests that partners remain the strongest source of support for a majority of respondents, and that this has not been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.
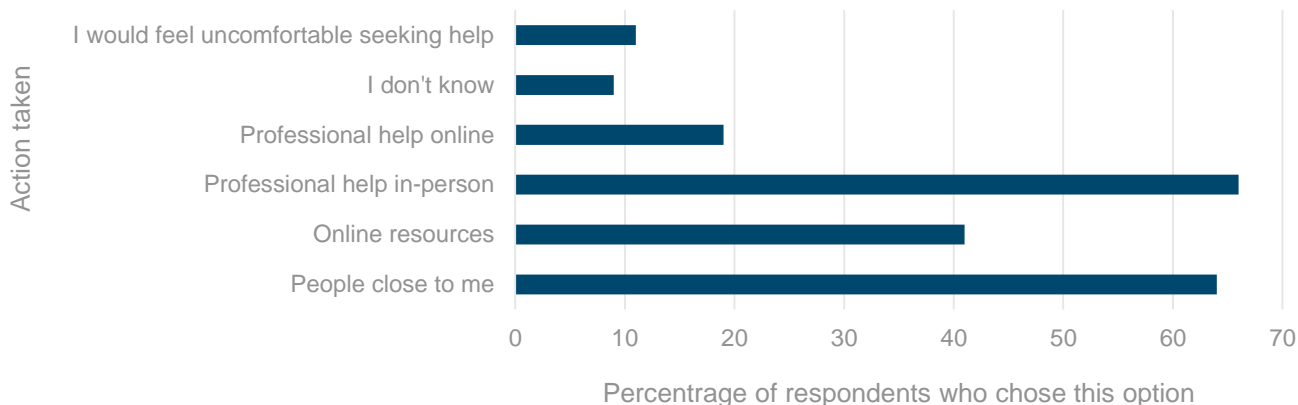
Figure 6 explores where people would go to seek help if their mental health were suffering. 66% of people indicated a preference to seek professional help in person. Conversely, only 19% of respondents said they would seek professional help online. Given the increase in online mental health services, especially in response to COVID-19, this preference against online assistance potentially presents a barrier to achieving equitable mental health support for people, and reinforces the need to ensure a suite of services, and service formats, remains available across the country.

11% of respondents said they would feel uncomfortable seeking help from any source and 9% identified that they would not know where to seek help, leaving 20% of respondents without proper support in combatting issues of mental ill-health.

Others mentioned gaining support from self-care activities such as exercise and meditation, as well as gaining guidance from religious sources.

Figure 6. If my mental health were suffering, I would most likely seek help from (select all that apply):
Monthly website survey, August 2020, survey results

Although figure 6 demonstrates that finding support from people close to them is the second most favoured form of mental health support (64%), figure 7 illustrates that 45% of those who chose this option had, earlier in the survey, said they either felt 'uncomfortable' or 'very uncomfortable' talking to one or more close contacts about their mental health. This reinforces the view that discussions around mental ill-health are deeply personal and can be uncomfortable, and that many may be turning to a select few contacts for support. As such, it is important people understand how to effectively support people when having conversations about mental health.

Figure 7. I would seek help from people close to me
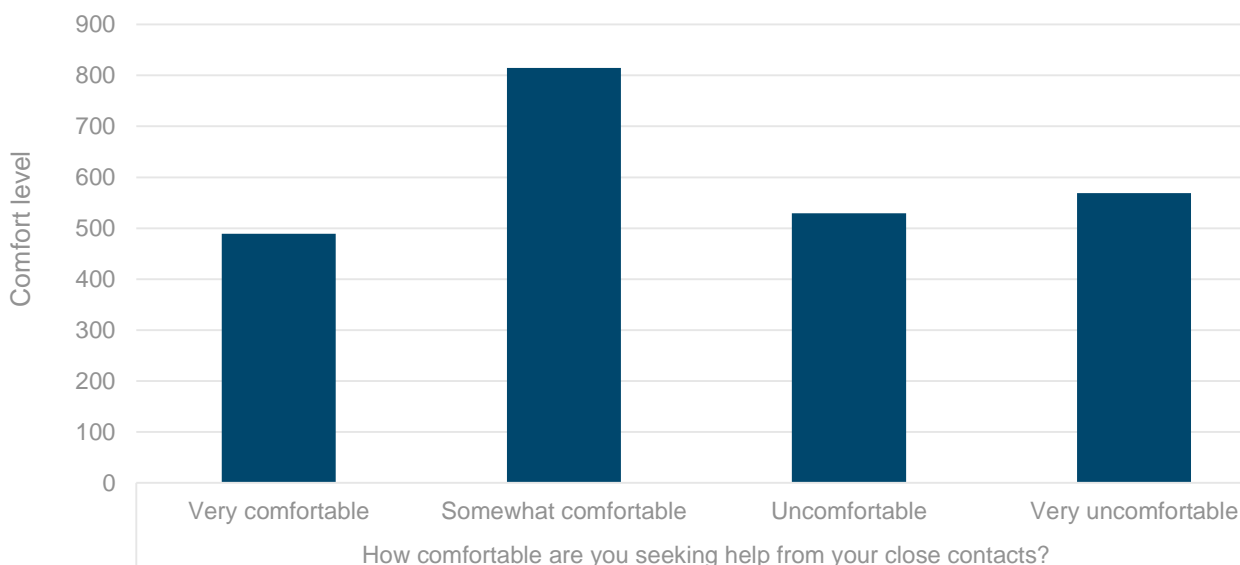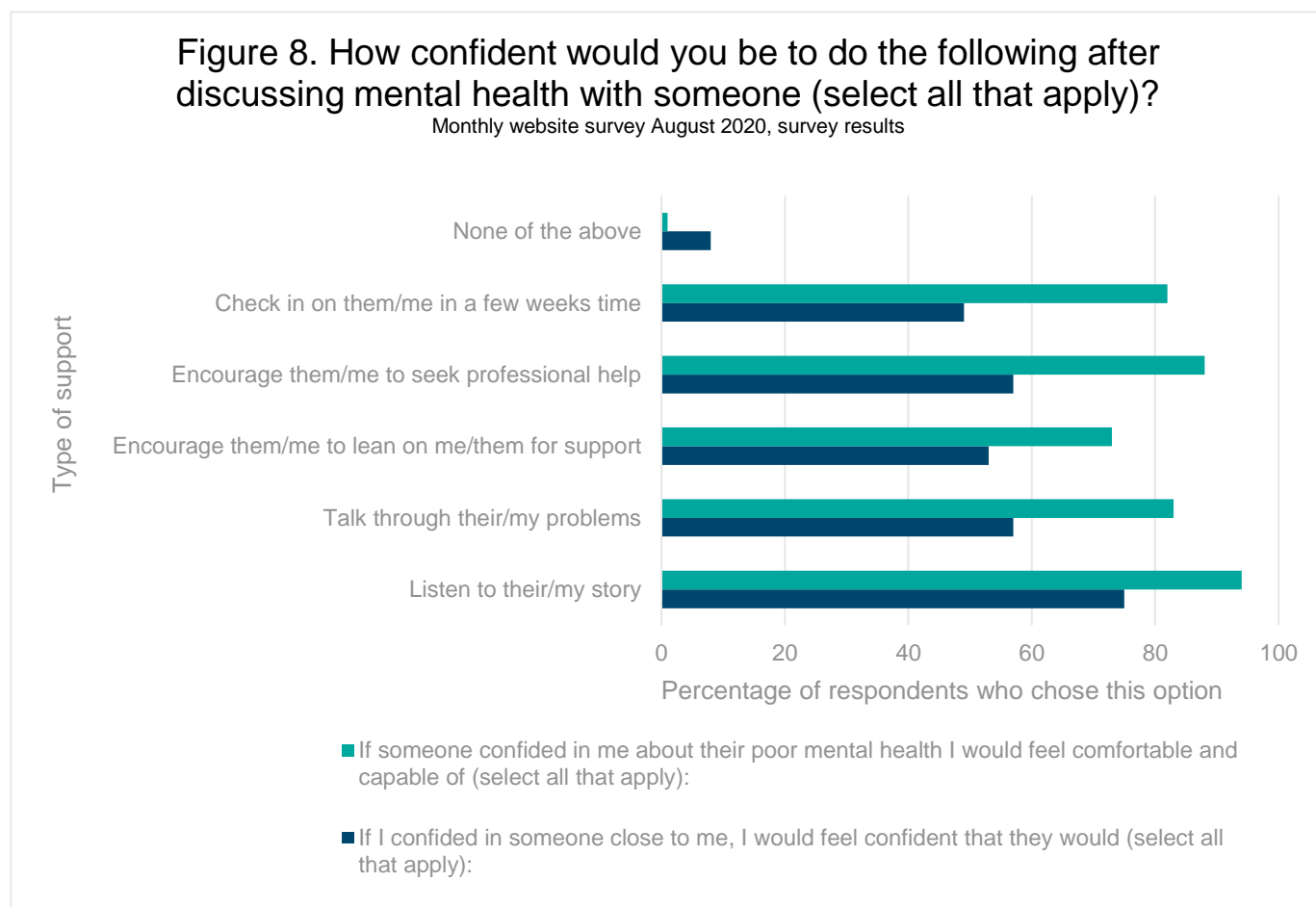Monthly website survey, August 2020, survey results

Figure 8 delineates this concept further, exploring people's perceived capacity to respond to, refer on and support people during and following a discussion about mental health. Across each category, people felt more confident in their own ability to respond to someone confiding in them than the support they may receive if they were the one confiding. This discrepancy provides some insight as to why, in figures 3 and 4, people felt more comfortable supporting people around them rather than disclosing their own mental health challenges.

Figure 8. How confident would you be to do the following after discussing mental health with someone (select all that apply)?
Monthly website survey August 2020, survey results

Promisingly, most respondents felt confident they could both support and receive support in varying formats; however, most were more confident in the supporters' ability to provide immediate help (eg. listen to their story – 75%) as opposed to more long-term support (eg. check in on them in a few weeks' time – 49%). Similarly, people were most inclined to encourage professional help seeking as opposed to leaning on the support person for assistance or to talk through their problems. While professional help is an important consideration, people's aforementioned (figure 6) preference for gaining support from people close to them (64% said this was where they would seek help), suggests that more needs to be done to equip people with the skills to discuss mental health and effectively refer people to professional help when needed.
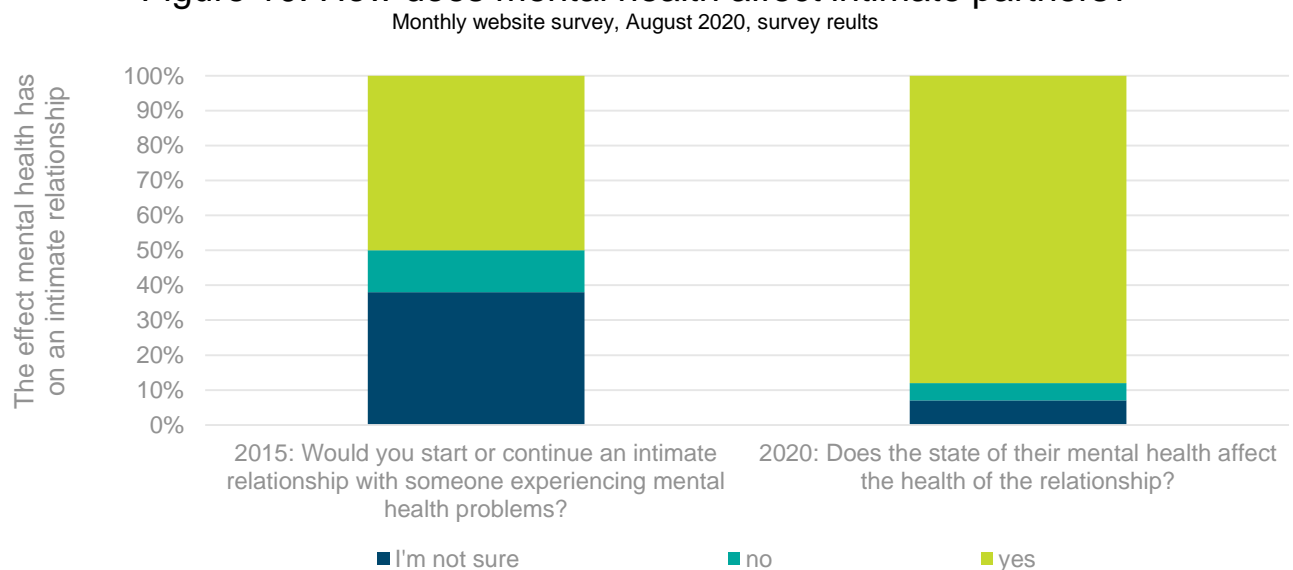
Figure 9 illustrates that 88% agree that their mental health affects the health of their relationship. Comparatively, 84% agree that their partner's mental health affects the health of their relationship. Again, this points to a consistent belief that people's own mental health struggles are more burdensome on those around them than other people's issues (in this case; their partners).

Figure 9. Does the mental health of yourself/your partner affect the relationship?
Monthly website survey, August 2020, survey results

Finally, figure 10 looks at the effect mental health has on people's intimate relationships. In 2015, we asked people if they would start or continue an intimate relationship with someone experiencing mental health problems. 50% said 'yes', 12% said 'no' and a further 38% said 'I'm not sure'. In 2020, we asked if people thought the state of their own, or their partners, mental health affected the state of the relationship (aggregated data from two questions). 88% said 'yes', 5% said 'no' and 7% said 'I'm not sure'. This suggests that while many realise the effect mental health has on relationships, it is difficult to predict how this may influence decisions about

Figure 10. How does mental health affect intimate partners?
Monthly website survey, August 2020, survey reults

beginning or continuing an intimate relationship. In short, the decision may depend on many other circumstances.

This report explores people's ability to recognise and respond to their own and others' mental ill-health and the effect this has on relationships. The findings suggest that, in general, people feel their own mental health issues are more burdensome than others'. Additionally, people feel more comfortable assisting other people with their mental health than receiving support for their own issues. Although people have some support networks available to them, respondents appear to recognise a continued stigma and discomfort about discussing mental health in less intimate social or public settings. While there is a recognition that professional mental health support services are necessary, people's support networks are important as an enabler to reach these services. As such, increasing people's confidence and ability to respond to mental health discussions is an important aspect of addressing mental health issues. If you're looking for assistance and advice as to how to keep the conversation going, visit RUOK? Day.

References

Beyondblue.org.au. 2020. *Beyond Blue.* [online] Available at: <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/what-is-mental-health> [Accessed 8 September 2020].

Blackdoginstitute.org.au. 2020a. *Facts & Figures About Mental Health.* [online] Available at: <https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/1-facts_figures.pdf> [Accessed 8 September 2020].

Blackdoginstitute.org.au. 2020b. *Mental Health Ramifications Of COVID-19: The Australian Context.* [online] Available at: <http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/20200319_covid19-evidence-and-reccomendations.pdf> [Accessed 8 September 2020].

Mance, P. 2018. 'July 2018: Recognising and responding to poor mental health'. *Relationships Australia.* [online] Available at: <https://www.relationships.org.au/what-we-do/research/online-survey/july-2018-recognising-and-responding-to-poor-mental-health/> [Accessed 8 September 2020].

Mance, P. 2015. 'October 2015: Mental health stigma'. *Relationships Australia.* [online] Available at: < https://www.relationships.org.au/what-we-do/research/online-survey/october-2015-mental-health-stigma/> [Accessed 8 September 2020].

Pc.gov.au. 2020. *Productivity Commission Draft Report Into Mental Health.* [online] Available at: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/draft/mental-health-draft-overview.pdf> [Accessed 8 September 2020].