



**MAKE MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING  
FOR ALL A GLOBAL PRIORITY**

World Mental Health Day **10 October 2022**

**WMHD EDUCATIONAL MATERIAL**

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# Mental health and wellbeing – Oceania Region perspectives

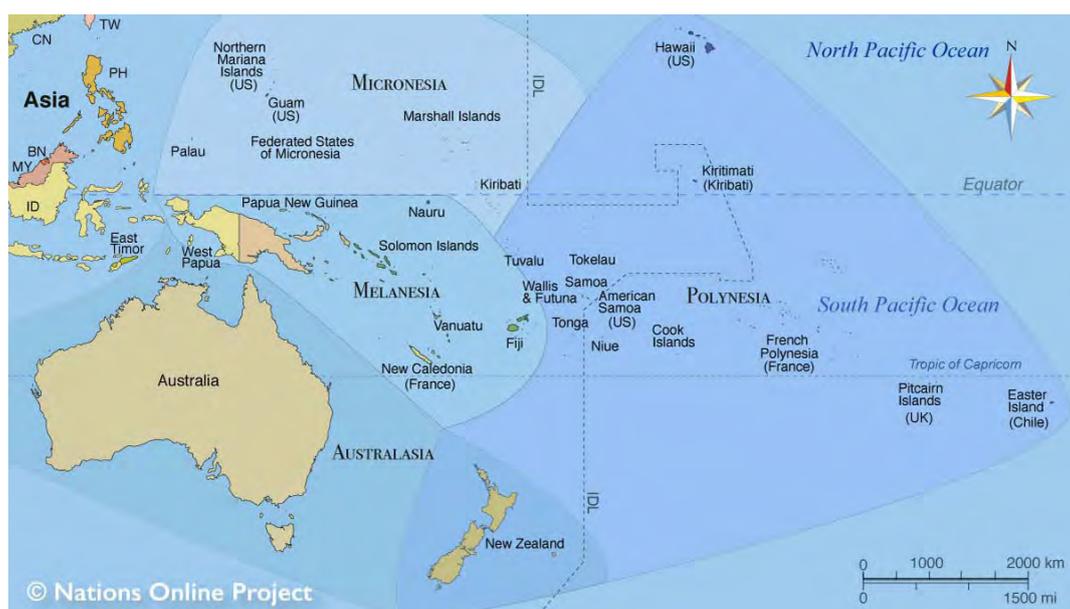
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The Oceania region of the World Federation for Mental Health (WFMH) includes Australia, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Zealand, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. The Pacific Islands are grouped into the areas of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. The Oceania region is a diverse region situated in the Indian, Southern and Pacific Oceans. The region covers an area just under 9 million square kilometres, accounting for 6% of the global land area, with a combined population of 43.7 million people. There are twenty-two independent countries and over 22,000 islands, many being inhabited. Image 1: Oceania Region Map.



Oceania Region map

From Nations Online Project <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/oceania.htm>

*Rise Beyond the Reef*, <https://risebeyondthereef.org> a non-profit organisation is helping Pacific Islander communities to bridge the divide between government and the private sector and creating sustainable opportunities reports:

- Fiji is the largest among these islands and has a population of approximately 850,000 people.
- Tuvalu, one of the smallest islands, has an estimated population of 10,500.
- Kiribati is one of the most remote and geographically dispersed with 33 islands spread over 3.5 million square kilometres of ocean, which is an area larger than India.
- The Solomon Islands has 1,000 small islands and atolls with a population of half a million people spread throughout. 83% of the population are in remote areas with 40% below the age of 14 years.
- Pacific island nations have similar economic challenges of limited natural resources, small size, and long distances to markets affecting growth.

Climate change and natural disasters are having a profound impact on the mental health of the region's populations. This year alone there have been rising sea levels for island nations, with people having to relocate to mainland areas as islands become inhabitable. Fiji has experienced tropical cyclones in recent years, causing flooding that has displaced thousands of people from their homes and impacted on the island's economy. The Honourable Minister Mr Inia Batikoto Seruiratu, Fiji's Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing stated during a plenary session of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore on 12 June 2022 that "The single greatest threat to our very existence is... human-induced, devastating climate change. It threatens our very hopes and dreams of prosperity." (Ref 1)

Tonga has experienced a volcanic eruption and resultant tsunami, there were intense storms, bushfires and flooding in Australia, and floods in New Zealand. Tuvalu, one of the smallest island nations with 10,500 people, has its highest point rising just 4.6 metres (15 feet) above sea level, with all infrastructure and settlements being coastal, and therefore subject to coastal erosion, cyclone damage, and storm surges. Tuvalu is also classified as a Least Developed Country. Climate change, in combination with other social and economic challenges, could ultimately mean Tuvalu becomes uninhabitable. (Ref 2) Kiribati, another low-lying atoll nation is also at risk. According to the United Nations University World Risk Index Vanuatu has been described as the world's most at-risk country for natural hazards, due to earthquakes, and storms. (Ref 3)

All Pacific nations in the Oceania Region initially closed their international borders and reduced their exposure to the COVID-19 virus. Most people of the sovereign states are now fully vaccinated, requiring government and other agencies to travel to 100's of islands or remote locations to support and vaccinate the populations. The virus spread, like other parts of the world, has becoming increasingly difficult to manage, with the new variants and the borders re-opening.

Isolation, COVID-19 pandemic fatigue of health care and essential workers, global conflicts, and economic hardship is being experienced in the region. The resultant poverty from the pandemic on families, communities and island nations who rely on tourism is evident. High unemployment, increased rates of anxiety and depression, substance use, stigma, and youth suicide are occurring.

Mental health services are under resourced in many Pacific nations, with limited research on what works in responding to each specific population group's needs. The past two years has seen high rates of psychological distress, and increased family and domestic violence. The issues are further compounded by the devastating impact of natural disasters that continue to occur in the Oceania region.

In Australia, it is recognised that family violence increases by 40% on the nights of major rugby league events. This is not dissimilar to spikes in domestic and other violence around other high-profile sporting events, like the World Cup (Ref 4). Compounding the isolation is a lack of consistent internet access or any strong access for island nations especially in the evenings. Fiji is seen as a leader and centre for teaching but internet access across the region is a major problem.

For many nations there are shortages of qualified health workers, inequitable distribution and retention of workers, skill mix poorly matched to population needs and financial constraints (Ref 5). Samoa has a half time psychologist for the country. Nurses are 75% of the health workforce in Pacific Island countries; 95% are women and 51% are under 35 years of age.

An Australian study (Ref 6) over a 2-week period during the second wave of the pandemic in Australia between August and October in 2020 found that over 10% of nearly 8,000 health care workers who were surveyed reported thoughts of suicide or self-harm. Almost 90% of the participants who had suicidal or self-harm thoughts, said they were suffering from burn-out through emotional exhaustion. Fewer than half of them sought help, which has major implications for the quality of patient care and treatment being provided.

Psychosocial skills across all nations are scarce. The University of Technology Sydney and WHO Collaborating Centre for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Development South Pacific Region developed a short course *Basic Psychosocial Skills: Training for COVID-19 Responders* to build resilience and mental health wellbeing for frontline healthcare staff in the Western Pacific region. (Ref 7)

There are many services working to improve mental health and wellbeing in Oceania. For example, Creating Futures <https://creatingfutures.org.au> has evolved over fifteen years from a conference to a movement that seeks to harness experience, expertise, innovation, and goodwill to build the capacities necessary to improve the mental health status of disadvantaged populations in Australasia and the Western Pacific. Creating Futures is an independent, task-focused collaboration of individuals and institutions built on a foundation of relationships of trust across time, terrain, sectors, and special interests.

Of significant benefit are the collectivist cultures and positivity of island nations in their capacity to look after family and community members. Pacific island nations have strong cultural and spiritual beliefs, indigenous knowledge, and resilience. Unfortunately, these individual and community strengths are being eroded by separation, financial hardship, and the breakdown of family and social networks.

The WFMH in collaboration with other organisations has established the *Oceania Mental Health Advisory Committee* a group of individuals and organisations from across the region. The purpose of the Committee is to actively work together to enhance mental health awareness, share information and resources, and support capacity building and professional development in the Oceania region, whilst promoting World Mental Health Day. Any proposed mental health initiatives are:

- Co-designed and collaboratively planned, while incorporating cultural, spiritual, and national specific needs and priorities
- Built on existing networks, institutional and professional strengths, and practical experience to enhance what is already working well
- Multi-directional – all countries have something to learn from each other through sharing knowledge and resources.

Through consultation on what nations in Oceania need or want for themselves, and collaboration the Oceania Committee considers strategies to support the region's priorities for mental health and wellbeing. Access to free wellbeing resources, technology support or learning tools are sought.

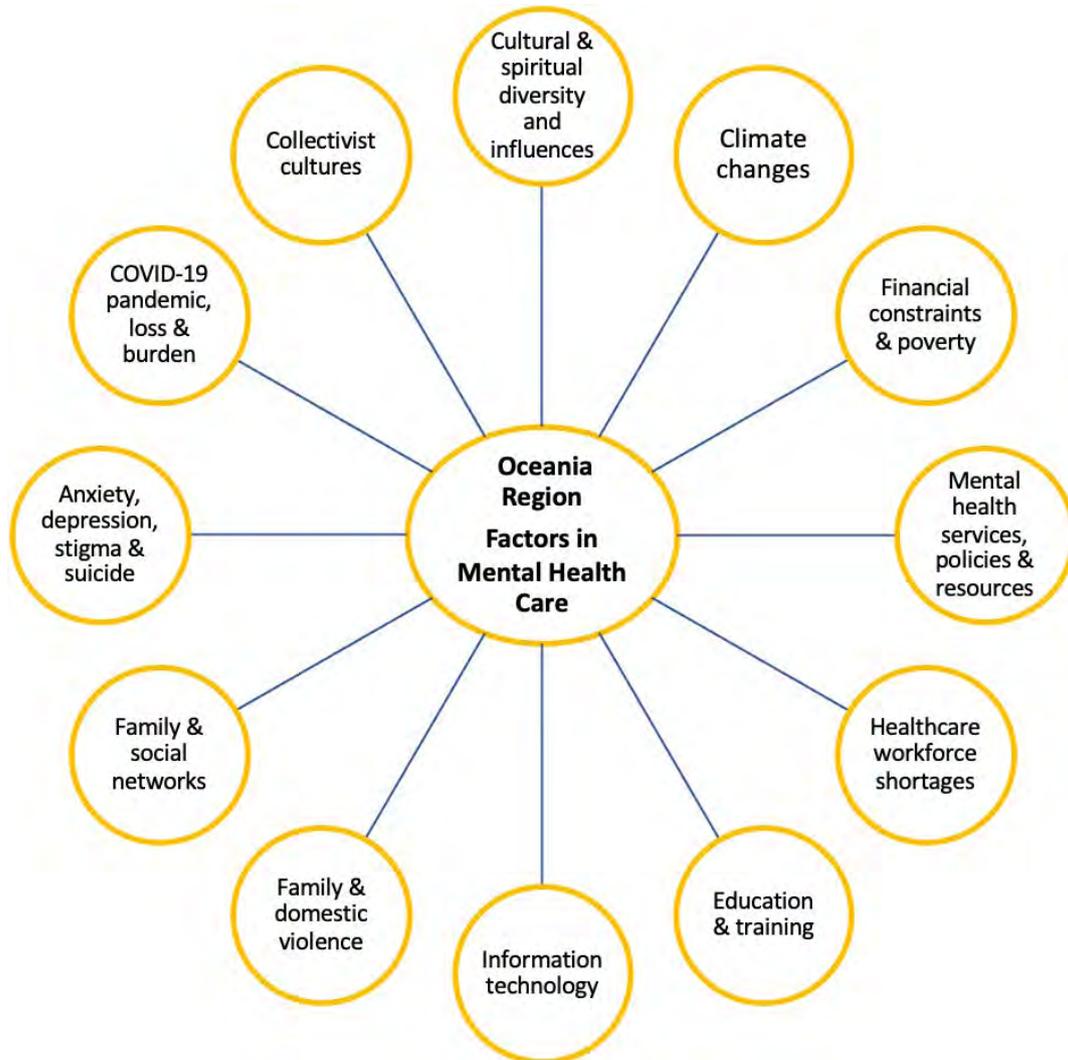
World Mental Health Day (WMHD) in October is an organising point. Coinciding with the WMHD 2022 theme *Make mental health and wellbeing for all a global priority* WMHD is celebrated on the day, for a week or a month, across the region. The WFMH has available the campaign toolkit at the WMHD website: <https://wmhdofficial.com/>

Committee members compliment and build on the workforce development areas and mental health awareness and education work of the World Health Organisation in the region. The WHO Collaborating Centre for Mental Health and its work in the Oceania region and the resolutions and future directions of the WHO Western Pacific Regional Mental Health Framework, once released, will guide future actions.

There are substantial challenges to ensuring mental health care, treatment and support is accessible to all nations in the region. However, the region has a diverse range of mental health resources with the increase in technology and working together will make mental health and wellbeing a priority for all. The Oceania region is a people rich and unique environment that requires multi-layered approaches in support of the mental health needs of the diverse populations. Research and mapping of the socio-economic and health care needs, improving access to workforce and health services, and inter-nation consultation and collaboration are required for resource and knowledge distribution, to ensure the safety of high-risk groups,

provide workforce training, and access to technology infrastructure. Ensuring each nation's autonomy, dignity and respect are of paramount importance.

Membership to the WFMH and the Oceania committee from residents of the region are welcomed.



**Factors in Mental Health Care for the Oceania Region**

**NOTES**

1. Reuters, Fiji Says Climate Change, Not Conflict, Is Asia's Biggest Security Threat, June 12, 2022, at 1:42 am.
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3. Exposed: Why Vanuatu is the world's most 'at-risk' country for natural hazards <https://www.dw.com/en/exposed-why-vanuatu-is-the-worlds-most-at-risk-country-for-natural-hazards/a-18319825>
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6. Marie Bismark, Katrina Scurrah, Amy Pascoe, Karen Willis, Ria Jain, Natasha Smallwood, Thoughts of suicide or self-harm among Australian healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, February 7, 2022 <https://doi.org/10.1177/00048674221075540>
7. University of Technology Sydney and WHO Collaborating Centre for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Development South Pacific Region, short course *Basic Psychosocial Skills: Training for COVID-19 Responders*. <https://open.uts.edu.au/uts-open/study-area/health/basic-psychosocial-skills-a-training-for-covid-19-responders/>

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