

It's a young man's game

**Submission to the Education and Health Standing Committee's
Review and Report on the Mental Health of Fly-in, Fly-out Workers**

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Executive Summary

ReachOut.com by Inspire Foundation is pleased to have the opportunity to provide a submission to the Education and Health Standing Committee's Review and Report on the Mental Health of Fly-in, Fly-out workers.

Research has shown time and again that whilst men account for three out of every five Australian suicides, they remain reluctant to seek help for mental health difficulties. This reluctance, combined with the additional stresses associated with a fly-in, fly-out lifestyle, tragically means that poor mental health and suicide are significant issues within the male-dominated FIFO workforce.

Given that WA is expected to have 63,500 FIFO workers by 2015¹ it is therefore critical that solutions are offered to support their mental health that can overcome the barriers that exist to help-seeking, address the specific needs of FIFO workers, and be able to be deployed cost-effectively, at scale, to wherever a worker may be located.

This will call for a radically different approach to that on which the current mental health system in Australia is built. Our 2014 report *Crossroads: Rethinking the Australian Mental Health System* (which we produced in partnership with EY) advocated for a mental health system built on a foundation of self-help and peer-support, and it is our belief that the same approach should be applied to supporting the mental health of FIFO workers specifically.

We commend the Parliament for addressing this issue and make the following recommendations based on over sixteen years in providing innovative on-line mental health services, to the Committee:

1. Government **and** industry invest in and promote an industry-wide approach to mental health support that is built on self-help and peer-support.
2. Industry develops a workplace culture and practices that support help-seeking and good mental health.
3. Industry collaborate with workers to create work-practices and rosters that maximise autonomy and reduce extended separation from family and stress on relationships.

¹ Morris, R. (2012) Scoping Study: Impact of Fly-in Fly-out/Drive-in Drive-out Work Practices on Local Government, Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government, University of Technology, Sydney.

About ReachOut.com by Inspire Foundation

ReachOut.com by Inspire Foundation is the national not for profit organisation behind Australia's leading online youth mental health service, ReachOut.com. Launched in 1998 in response to Australia's then very high level of youth suicide, our mission is to help all young people be happy and well.

In Australia last year, over 1.4 million unique people accessed ReachOut.com, with visitors from regional and rural Australia particularly over-represented in our overall visitor numbers. We attribute our ongoing relevancy to our approach of working directly *with* young people to co-create our service offerings, and are currently focused on developing our online offerings by providing additional self-help e-tools (apps) to help young people take control of and improve their mental health and wellbeing. We have also 'exported' our service internationally, establishing ReachOut.com Ireland and ReachOut.com USA.

Since 2009 a particular focus of our work has been on how to better engage and support young men's mental health and wellbeing through the use of technology. To this end we have partnered with leading research organisations the Young and Well Co-operative Research Centre (Young & Well CRC), the Brain and Mind Institute, University of Sydney (BMRI) and Orygen Youth Health Research Centre (University of Melbourne) to undertake research and pilot new service offerings.

The information and recommendations contained in this submission have thus been informed by our extensive history in conducting research about, and delivering services to young men across Australia.

Contributing factors which may lead to mental illness and suicide amongst FIFO workers

The problem of poor mental health and suicide in Australia, broadly, and the FIFO workforce more specifically, is predominantly a male problem. Young men in Australia have higher rates of completed suicide, antisocial behaviour, and alcohol or other substance misuse problems than young women.² They are also less likely to seek help with only 13% of young men aged 16 to 24 years seeking help when experiencing a mental health difficulty

² Australian Bureau of Statistics. Mental health of young people. Canberra: ABS; 2010.

compared with 31% of young women³. With 75% of all serious mental health conditions starting before the age of 25⁴, this failure to seek help early can then lead to very significant consequences for men across their entire lifespan. Tragically, suicide can often be the result with men accounting for 3 out of every 5 suicides in Australia.

This problem in turn becomes especially pronounced in male dominated industries, with research from Mates in Construction⁵ finding that the likelihood of suicide amongst workers is twice as high than other people in Australia, whilst apprentices in the same industry are two and a half times more likely to suicide than other young men their age.

Concerned about the significant mental health and suicide consequences of low levels of help-seeking amongst young men, in 2010 we partnered with BMRI on an ARC Linkage Research project, to better understand *why* young men are less likely to seek help for mental health issues than young women. The research, involving 1038 young men from very diverse backgrounds, found that young men don't seek help because they have poorer mental health knowledge and higher mental health stigma than young women.⁶ In the words of young men themselves:

“I don't even know what mental health means.”

“It's a different thing if a guy seeks help than if a girl seeks help, other guys think, 'This guy's weak, he's a pussy,' things like that, while if a girl seeks help, guys are just like 'ah, it's a girl thing...'

“...men are meant to be the head of the family – like the rock – and if they're having problems, like, it's going to freak everyone else out sort of thing, so maybe they just don't want to admit it.”

The overwhelming message from young men was that when confronted with mental health difficulties their view was that they just needed to 'toughen up' if they were struggling. They felt societal pressure to be self-reliant, suppress emotions and manage their personal problems independently; whilst getting help when going through a tough time was something that 'chicks do'. Young men expressed a strong desire to fix problems themselves - they are reticent to speak to anyone about what is going on for them for fear of seeming 'weak'⁶. These findings have particular relevance to the FIFO workforce, where the strong 'toughen up princess' culture, combined with the fear of potentially being seen as unfit for work by their employer further perpetuates these beliefs, thus preventing many workers from seeking help, both formal and informal. In addition, there is a large body of research to show that

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Young Australians: their health and wellbeing 2007. Canberra: AIHW; 2007.

⁴ As above

⁵ Mates in Construction, <http://www.matesinconstruction.com.au/theproblem>

⁶ Ellis LA, Collin P, Davenport TA, Hurley PJ, Burns JM, Hickie IB. *Young Men, Mental Health, and Technology: Implications for Service Design and Delivery in the Digital Age* J Med Internet Res 2012;14(6):e160

when men *do* seek help it is often as a result of intervention from a female friend or relative⁷. In the context of FIFO work, however, this opportunity can often be lost, with protective relationships with friends and family put under stress.

Left untreated, mental health problems can not only become more severe, but often lead to other difficulties including social withdrawal, the breakdown of family and personal relationships as well as poorer education and employment outcomes, and over-representation in the justice system. Untreated mental health problems are also implicated in many cases of suicide, which tragically remains a leading cause of death amongst young people under the age of 30.

In addition to this ingrained reluctance to seek-help that exists for a majority of men, conversations with FIFO workers and their families that we have had over the last twelve months as we have worked with Rio Tinto on their 'Putting Families First' program, have revealed further factors that also contribute to poor mental health.

In particular, many workers spoke of feeling 'institutionalised', explaining that from the moment they walk up the plane steps to go on site, they have lost control over many aspects of their lives other than how well they do their job. They are told when to sleep, when to eat and have limited opportunities to socialise or participate in community activities. One worker also remarked that, 'it's a young man's game' referring to his view that the FIFO life better suits young, single men, with a greater degree of pressure and stress on FIFO workers who have families.

Whilst social connectedness, a sense of purpose and feelings of self-efficacy are well-known protective factors against poor mental health; the isolation, loneliness, monotony and lack of recreational opportunities that are a feature of many FIFO workers experience function in the exact opposite way - contributing to poorer mental health and increasing the risk of suicide.

⁷ Davies, J., McCrae, B. P., Frank, J., Dochnahl, A., Pickering, T., Harrison, B., ... & Wilson, K. (2000). Identifying male college students' perceived health needs, barriers to seeking help, and recommendations to help men adopt healthier lifestyles. *Journal of American College Health, 48*(6), 259-267.

Current initiatives by government, industry and community, and recommended improvements

The research outlined above clearly shows that any response designed to improve men/young men's mental health must:

1. recognise the low level of mental health literacy that exists amongst this cohort and seek to address it; and
2. be 'action-oriented,' providing men/young men with the tools they need to help fix the problem themselves and stay in control of their own mental health. Being in control is important to young men's sense of identity and develops self-efficacy.

At ReachOut.com we have specifically sought to respond to young men's preference for 'actionable help' through the development of e-tools (apps) that are not about 'talking about it' so much as 'doing something about it'. We use technology because it is where young people are, and what they use in every aspect of their daily lives. As a result, whereas young men are reluctant to ask for help for their mental health, they have no such hesitation in wanting to improve their physical wellbeing through goal setting, improving their sleep or challenging themselves with the aid of technology based tools that include fun, contest and personal achievement. Technology-based interventions also afford the additional benefits of being anonymous, and accessible 24/7 from almost any location around the country.

Examples of our work include WorkOut, which is like a personal trainer program that sets physical challenges that have a positive affect on mental wellbeing, and the mobile phone app Recharge, which assists users to regulate their own sleep patterns, a change which has been shown to help reduce depression. These tools educate the user by helping them make the connection between good physical and mental health, focus on tangible changes that can be made to behavioural patterns which improve mental health (such as exercise, relaxation, nutrition, and sleep), and all whilst giving the user a sense of control and empowerment enabling them to help themselves.

Given the industry's indications that the numbers of FIFO workers will continue to rise, it is clear that solutions must be offered to support their mental health that will both overcome the barriers that exist to help-seeking and be able to be deployed cost-effectively, at scale, to wherever a worker may be located.

This will call for a radically different approach to that on which the current mental health system in Australia is built. Our 2014 report *Crossroads: Rethinking the Australian Mental Health System* (which we produced in partnership with EY) advocated for a mental health system that particularly emphasised self-help and peer-support as strategies to overcome the barriers to help-seeking described above and ensure that mental health support is available to all at a manageable cost.

We would therefore advocate that technology-based self-help interventions, such as those described above and many others should be widely promoted and deployed to FIFO workers. Ideally, this promotion would be best undertaken through a peer-based approach, potentially based on a model like Mates in Construction, which has shown great effectiveness in that industry and can provide a vital link to further clinical support for those who require it.

Additionally, we believe that employers themselves have a very important role to play in promoting services and supports, and actively fostering a culture where it is okay to ask for help. Doing so is in employer's best interests - poor mental health amongst the workforce leads to direct productivity costs that are borne by industry. This was highlighted for example in the 2012 report *"Counting the Cost: The Impact of Young Men's Mental Health on the Australian Economy"* which we published with EY in 2012.

That report found that mental illness in young men aged 12 – 25 alone costs the Australian economy \$3.27 billion per annum or \$387,000 per hour, every year in lost productivity. In addition, Australia loses over 9 million working days per annum to young men with mental illness, who have, on average, an additional 9.5 days out of role per year.

Responsibility for supporting the mental health of FIFO workers, therefore, should not be seen as primarily falling on either the government or community sectors. Industry itself needs to both financially invest in the provision of mental health support, and proactively work to create a workplace culture and practices that encourage help-seeking and promote the factors known to protect against poor mental health.

Recommendations

In order to overcome barriers to help-seeking and deliver support that is available cost-effectively at scale, government and industry should work together to fund and facilitate access to self-help tools and peer-support, as well as actively working to address workplace culture and practices:

- **Government and industry should co-invest in, and promote an industry-wide approach to, mental health support that is built on self-help & peer-support:**
 - Peer-support - Could be based on initiatives such as Mates in Construction, which is a genuine industry response to preventing suicide based on a peer-to-peer support model. This program includes education and awareness raising as well as training to key personnel who are able to approach workers who may be identified by their co-workers as struggling. Peer to peer support models are particularly effective as there is a level of trust amongst people with a shared experience, and thus significantly reduce the barriers to taking the first step on a help-seeking journey. We recommend that this model be supported and extended to FIFO workers, whilst ensuring that referral pathways to both self-help and clinical help are well embedded in the model.
 - Promotion of tech-based self-help tools through formal workplace channels and peer support - Online tools and services such as ReachOut.com can be accessed anonymously from almost anywhere and provide information, support and referral. They also promote help-seeking and give workers a sense of self-efficacy and control over their mental health needs.
- **Industry and employers take steps to proactively create workplace culture and practices that encourage help-seeking and support good mental health:**
 - Mental health literacy - Developing resilience and being able to recognise the indicators of mental health issues should start from the time of appointment through the orientation and training process and be maintained throughout the period of employment with provision made to support workers who are made redundant. By making mental health as common and important as physical health in providing safe and productive FIFO workplaces, the stigma around mental health disorders may be significantly reduced.
 - Prevention and early intervention - e-tools that promote self-care can overcome many of the barriers to help-seeking, as well as reducing the need for crisis and clinical interventions. These tools should be designed in collaboration with FIFO workers that meet their specific needs.
- **Industry should consult with workers to create work-practices and rosters that maximise autonomy and reduce extended separation from family/stress on relationships.**
 - Special consideration should be given to work rosters, as well as on-site accommodation, meal, rest and leisure options.