2   AN OVERVIEW OF MENTAL DISORDERS IN AUSTRALIA

2.1   Prevalence of mental disorders in the Australian population

The 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing found that nearly half (45.5%) of the Australian population aged 16-85 years had experienced an anxiety, affective or substance use disorder at some stage in their lifetime (Table 2-1). This is equivalent to almost 7.3 million people.

In the 12 months prior to interview one in five (20.0%) of the population had mental disorders. This is equivalent to almost 3.2 million Australians experiencing mental disorders in the previous 12 months, and many of these will have experienced more than one mental disorder over the 12 month period.

Anxiety disorders were the most common class of mental disorder in the 12 months prior to interview. One in seven (14.4%) Australians had an anxiety disorder in the previous 12 months. One in 16 had an affective disorder (6.2%) and one in 20 had a substance use disorder (5.1%).

Based on these prevalence figures, nearly 1 million people experienced affective disorders, over 2.3 million anxiety disorders and over 800,000 substance use disorders in the previous 12 months.

Table 2-1: Prevalence of lifetime and 12-month mental disorders

	Lifetime prevalence		12-month prevalence	
	(%)	Population estimate	(%)	Population estimate
Affective disorders	15.0	2,405,000	6.2	996,000
Anxiety disorders	26.3	4,205,000	14.4	2,303,000
Substance use disorders	24.7	3,960,000	5.1	820,000
Any mental disorder	**45.5**	**7,287,000**	**20.0**	**3,198,000**

Note: Totals are lower than the sum of disorders as people may have had more than one class of mental disorder in the 12 months.

2.2   Prevalence of mental disorders in different population sub-groups

A number of social and demographic characteristics are strongly associated with the prevalence of mental disorders.

2.2.1 Sex and age

The 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing found that males were less likely than females to have experienced mental disorders in the 12 months prior to the survey (17.6% for males compared to 22.3% for females) (Table 2-2).

Females were more likely than males to have experienced anxiety disorders (17.9% compared to 10.8%) and affective disorders (7.1% compared to 5.3%). However, males were more than twice as likely as females to have substance use disorders (7.0% compared to 3.3%).

Table 2-2: Prevalence of 12-month mental disorders by mental disorder class and sex

	Male (%)	Female (%)
Affective disorders	5.3	7.1
Anxiety disorders	10.8	17.9
Substance use disorders	7.0	3.3
Any mental disorder	**17.6**	**22.3**

Note: Totals are lower than the sum of disorders as people may have had more than one class of mental disorder in the 12 months.

The 2007 survey found that people in the younger age groups were more likely to experience mental disorders. Figure 2-1 shows how the prevalence of mental disorders declines with age from more than one in four (26.4%) in the youngest age group (16-24 years), to around one in twenty (5.9%) in the oldest age group (75-85 years). This pattern of the prevalence of mental disorders declining with age was true for both males and females.

Figure 2-1: Prevalence of 12-month mental disorders by age and sex
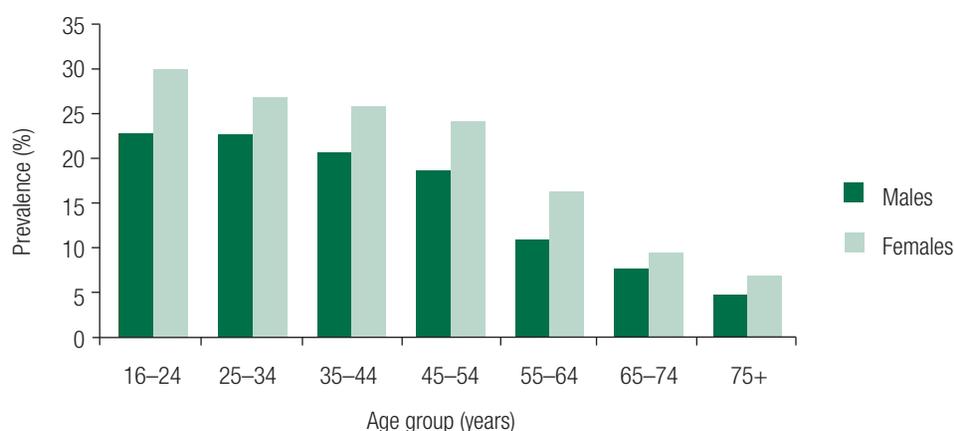
2.2.2 Social and demographic characteristics

The prevalence of mental disorders was examined among different sub-groups of the population. These sub-groups were defined according to marital status, labour force status, education and country of birth. Whether people had previous experiences of homelessness and had been incarcerated at some point in their lifetime were also collected. While it is possible to find out from this survey about sub-groups of the population in which the prevalence of mental disorders is relatively high, it is not possible from the survey results to draw conclusions about the causal relationships between these social and demographic factors and the onset of mental disorders.

The prevalence of 12-month mental disorders in population sub-groups defined by social and demographic characteristics is presented in Table 2-3. These prevalence rates for marital status, labour force status and education were adjusted for age due to the fact that both the presence of mental disorders and these social and demographic factors are strongly related to age.

2.2.2.1 Marital status

People who were married or in de facto relationships had a lower prevalence of mental disorders (14.7% in males and 19.3% in females) compared to people who were never married (22.4% in males and 26.2% in females). One quarter of people who were separated, divorced or widowed (25.7% in males and 25.2% in females) had 12-month mental disorders. However, the casual relationship between having

mental disorders and people's marital status is not possible to determine from the survey. People with mental disorders may be less likely to marry or the stress of divorce or separation may impact on people's mental health.

2.2.2.2 Labour force status

People who were employed had the lowest prevalence of mental disorders (18.7%). However, the prevalence of mental disorders was similar for unemployed people and those not in the labour force (25.8 and 26.8% respectively). Those not in the labour force cover a broad range of people, including people in caregiving roles not in employment, retired people and those on long-term disability and sickness benefits.

The exact causal nature of this association is not possible to determine from the survey. The presence of mental disorders may make it more difficult to find and maintain employment, while the stress of job loss may trigger the onset or exacerbate the symptoms of a mental disorder.

2.2.2.3 Education

The prevalence of mental disorders was higher among those with lower levels of education, particularly for females. The prevalence of mental disorders was 24.9% for those who did not complete school compared to 20.2% for those with school qualifications only and 19.5% for those with post-school qualifications.

2.2.2.4 Country of birth

People who were born in Australia had a higher prevalence of mental disorders (19.5% in males and 24.0% in females) compared to those born overseas. The prevalence of mental disorders in people born in other English-speaking countries was 17.7% for males and 19.9% for females. However, the prevalence of mental disorders was much lower for people from non-English speaking countries (8.4% in males and 16.2% in females).

The exact nature of this relationship is difficult to determine and may be explained in part by what is termed the 'healthy migrant effect'. People who successfully migrate are more likely to be physically healthier than the remainder of the population. This may also be true for mental disorders.

Table 2-3: Prevalence of 12-month mental disorders by sex, marital status, labour force status, education and country of birth.

	Males (%)	Females (%)	Persons (%)
Marital status			
Married/De facto	14.7	19.3	17.3
Separated/Divorced/Widowed	25.7	25.2	25.7
Never married	22.4	26.2	24.3
Labour force status			
Employed	17.7	19.5	18.7
Unemployed	23.9	26.6	25.8
Not in the labour force	23.9	28.3	26.8
Education			
Post-school qualification	17.6	21.5	19.5
School qualification only	16.0	25.1	20.2
Did not complete school	22.9	26.7	24.9
Country of birth			
Australia	19.5	24.0	21.8
Other English-speaking country	17.7	19.9	18.7
Non-English speaking country	8.4	16.2	12.6

Note: Numbers presented for marital status, labour force status and education are age-standardised.

2.2.2.5 Homelessness

Three percent of the total population living in private households reported that they had been homeless at some point in their life. The prevalence of 12-month mental disorders was over two and a half times higher (53.6%) in this group compared to the general population (20.0%). While homelessness is often associated with psychotic illness and substance use disorders, affective disorders and anxiety disorders were also found to be significantly higher among people who reported prior homelessness (27.7% and 39.4% respectively) than the general population (6.2% and 14.4% respectively).

2.2.2.6 Incarceration

Just over two percent (2.4%) of the total population reported being in jail, prison or a correctional facility at some point in their lifetime. People who reported a previous history of incarceration were twice as likely (41.1%) to have had mental disorders in the previous 12 months when compared to the general population (20.0%).

Affective disorders were three times higher among people with a history of incarceration compared to the general population (19.3% compared to 6.2%), anxiety disorders twice as high (27.5% compared to 14.4%) and substance use disorders four times higher (22.8% compared to 5.1%).
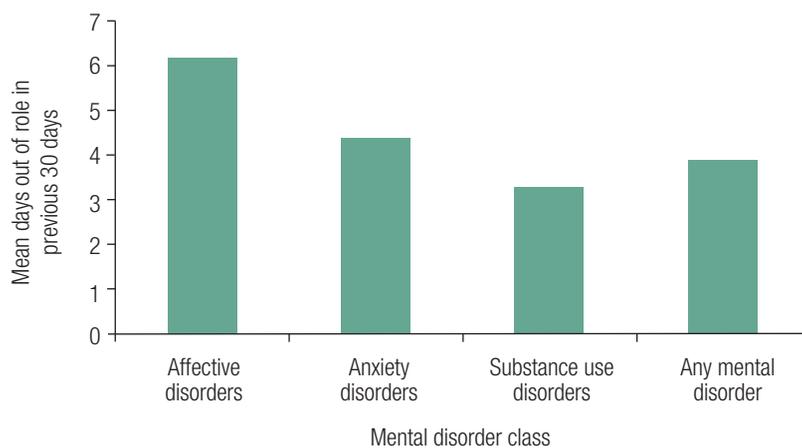
2.3   Impact of mental disorders

One of the key aims of the survey was to determine the impact of mental disorders on the Australian population - that is how disabling mental disorders are and how they affect people's functioning and day-to-day lives. A number of measures were included in the survey to provide this information. These include days out of role, measures of the severity of mental disorders and a measure of psychological distress, the Kessler 10 scale (K10).

2.3.1   Days out of role

Days out of role is a count of the number of days in the 30 days prior to interview that a person was unable to fulfil their usual role due to problems with their health. This covers the range of activities that the person usually performs (see Glossary for further information). The average number of days out of role for people with mental disorders is shown in Figure 2-2.

On average, people with mental disorders experienced four out of the previous 30 days out of role. This means that for those four days they were unable to carry out their normal activities or had to cut down on what they did. People with anxiety disorders experienced an average of four days out of role. People with substance use disorders experienced an average of three days out of role and people with affective disorders experienced an average of about six days out of role.

Figure 2-2: Days out of role by 12-month mental disorder class

2.3.2 Severity of mental disorders

The severity of impairment associated with mental illness has important implications for the treatment of mental disorders, determining access to some services.

The measure of severity used in the survey summarises the impact of all the mental disorders experienced in a 12-month period on a person's daily life and categorises this impact as severe, moderate or mild. For additional information on severity refer to the Glossary.

In terms of the total population, 4.1% or over 650,000 people had severe mental disorders in the previous 12 months, 6.6% or over one million people had moderate mental disorders and 9.3% or almost one and a half million people had mild mental disorders.

Of the one in five (20.0%) Australians aged 16-85 years who experienced mental disorders in the previous 12 months, one-fifth (20.5%) were classified as severe, one third (33.2%) were classified as moderate and just under half (46.3%) were classified as mild.

People with affective disorders were more likely to be categorised as having severe mental disorders compared to people with anxiety or substance use disorders (Figure 2-3). Among people with affective disorders, half (51.1%) were classified as severe, compared to just over one-fifth (22.2%) with anxiety disorders and one-fifth (20.6%) with substance use disorders. One in ten (10.2%) people with affective disorders had mild mental disorders, compared to 43.8% of people with anxiety disorders and 54.6% of people with substance use disorders.

Figure 2-3: Proportion of people with 12-month mental disorders by mental disorder class and severity level
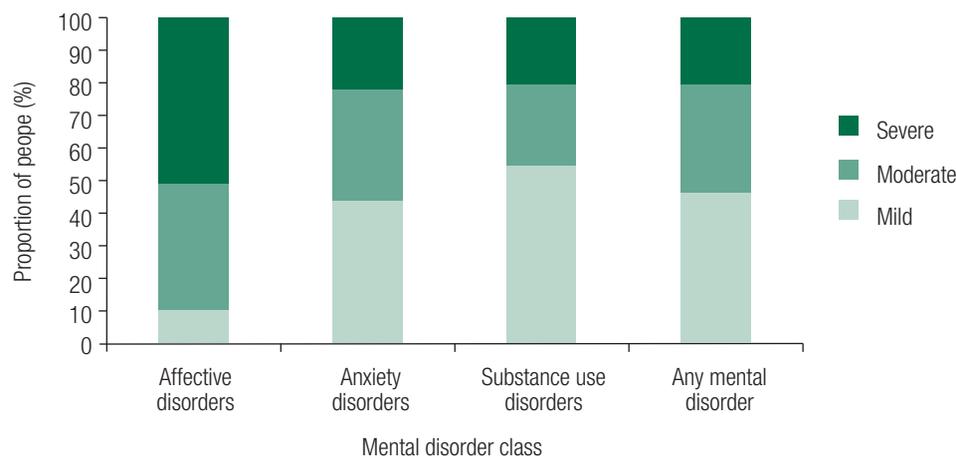
2.3.3 Psychological distress

Psychological distress was measured using the Kessler 10 scale (K10). K10 scores were divided into four categories representing low psychological distress (scores ranging from 10-15), moderate psychological distress (scores ranging from 16-21), high psychological distress (scores ranging from 22-29) and very high psychological distress (scores ranging from 30-50) (Figure 2-4).

The average K10 score for people with any 12-month mental disorder was 19.1, which is rated as moderate psychological distress, compared to a score of 13.3 or low psychological distress for people who did not have a mental disorder in the previous 12 months.

Almost one quarter (22.2%) of people with affective disorders reported very high psychological distress, compared to 11.9% of people with anxiety disorders and 7.3% of people with substance use disorders.

Figure 2-4: Proportion of people with 12-month mental disorders by mental disorder class and psychological distress (K10) level