

# Accessing expert mental health care with a psychologist

Consumer and carer experiences of psychologist services in Australia: A report by Lived Experience Australia

## Introduction

Psychologists are an integral part of Australia's mental health care landscape, with approximately 1.26 million consumers accessing the services of psychologists through Medicare each year (Productivity Commission, Oct 2019).

Throughout the pandemic, demand for psychologists' services has skyrocketed. The Australian Psychological Society reports that one in five psychologists have had to close their books to new patients, and others have wait times of up to three months as ongoing restrictions, uncertainty and health anxiety take a toll on the mental health of the population (APS, Sept 2021).

Mental health is top of the national agenda in Australia in 2021, with governments taking notice of the economic and human costs of this crisis and making unprecedented commitments to invest in mental health reform. Consumer voices are key to this period of reform if we are to genuinely highlight issues in the system and improve care.

Lived Experience Australia (LEA) conducted a nationwide survey to provide a national collective voice of consumers' experiences accessing a psychologist and the experiences of carers in supporting someone who has accessed a psychologist.

We wanted to hear about:

- consumers' and carers' satisfaction with care provided by psychologists
- changes in their health and wellbeing since accessing a psychologist, and
- potential barriers to access, including referral requirements and costs.

Almost three quarters of consumer respondents (74.70%, n=189) and over half of carer respondents (59.70%, n=40) reported that they, or the person they support had seen a psychologist in the past 5 years and were able to see the psychologist they wanted to see.

Many consumers and carers sought help from a psychologist when they recognised their own self-care needs following a decline in mental health, including those that had reached crisis point and needed further support. Prior to a referral to a psychologist, referring doctors most frequently suggested medication followed closely by exercise, online therapy, or not providing alternative suggestions at all. This document provides a summary of key findings, the full report can be accessed from [www.livedexperienceaustralia.com.au/research](http://www.livedexperienceaustralia.com.au/research)

## Overall, Australians are happy with the care psychologists are providing

Consumers and carers report largely positive experiences with psychologists and psychological services. Overall, they reported that the care received from a psychologist was helpful most of the time, and they are satisfied with, and benefiting from, the care they receive. The main reason why consumers said they discontinued support from a psychologist was due to the psychologist not being the right fit for them. Further, almost one third of consumer respondents (29.25%, n=74) and 10.45% (n=7) of carer respondents reported negative impacts on the consumer's wellbeing after psychological therapy.



Three-quarters of consumers and half of carers reported being satisfied with the care provided by the psychologist.



Over two-thirds of consumers respondents said that they considered the treatment from the psychologist to be helpful most or all of the time.



Would recommend seeing a psychologist to a family member or friend

Over 90% of both consumer and carer respondents said they would recommend seeing a psychologist to a family member or friend.

Consumers highlighted the interpersonal benefits of seeing a psychologist such as receiving strategies to support with coping and self-care; having their experiences validated; and the opportunity to build trust and hope with the psychologist.

“ [The psychologist] helped me work through a lot of my traumas and I have developed lots of skills to manage life in general. How to manage and work with emotions, triggers, self-love and everything pretty much. She taught me to be self-efficient. ”

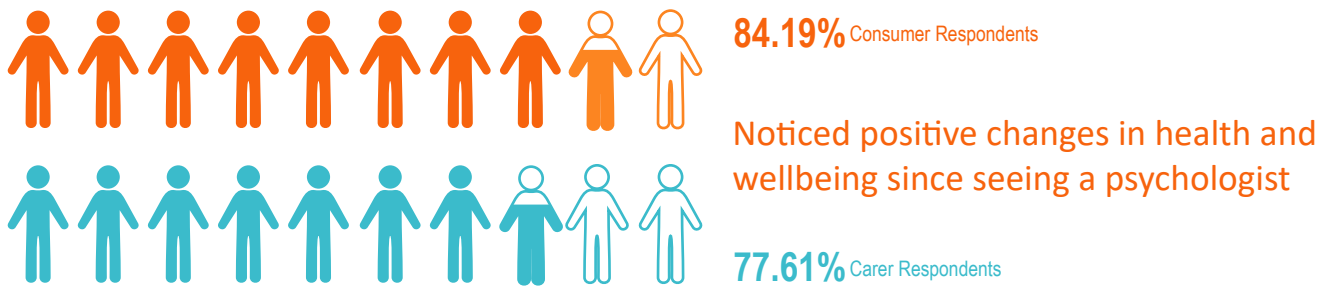
For detailed information about the survey design, respondents and logic, see the full report at [www.livedexperienceaustralia.com.au/research](http://www.livedexperienceaustralia.com.au/research)



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## The care received is making a difference

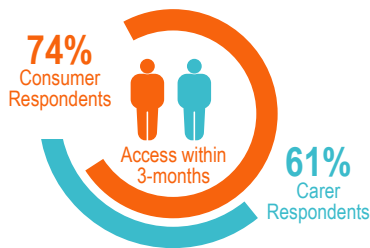
A vast majority of respondents said they had noticed positive changes in their health and wellbeing or of the person they support since seeing a psychologist. For consumers, 41.5% (n=105) reported that this was largely or entirely due to the psychologist, while 31.35% (n=21) of carers attributed the positive change to the psychologist.



“ [The psychologist] supported me in understanding my illness and how to best manage it day-to-day. I gained much insight, tools, strategies, gained the confidence to try new things and re-engage with the world in a meaningful way. ”

## There are some key barriers to care

However, there are some key barriers to accessing the services of a psychologist, including wait times, availability and cost.



Almost three-quarters of consumers reported being able to see a psychologist within 3 months of referral (74.31%, n=188) and over half of carers reported that the person they support was able to see a psychologist within 3 months (61.19%, n=41). The main pathway for accessing a psychologist as rated by both consumer and carer respondents was through a doctor's referral. The requirement to obtain a GP referral to access a psychologist was identified as a barrier to accessing and continuing treatment with a psychologist by over half of all consumer and carer respondents and over 60% of consumer and carer respondents disagreed with this requirement. Many carers commented that the requirement for GP review was an unnecessary bureaucratic layer that added burden, including barriers to access.

Cost was a concern for many, with over half of consumer and carer respondents reporting having to pay a gap fee for the psychologist. The amount of the fee varied greatly for both consumer and carer respondent groups, with gap fees ranging from \$5 to over \$300 per session. The largest proportion of consumers reporting paying between \$51-\$200 gap fee.



The mean average gap fee reported by carers was \$161 and the mean average gap fee reported by consumers was \$176. The mean average number of sessions accessed as reported by consumers was 18 with some accessing regular ongoing support.

Consumer and carer respondents emphasised that psychologists need skills with specific sub-groups, diversity and communications with other parts of the health system. Carers also raised concerns about psychologists' skills and experience, especially relating to trauma and the need to include family carers in healthcare communication to support follow-up.

## What do we need to explore further?

These findings present an opportunity to increase the focus on education and support for consumers and carers about psychological therapy, and further training opportunities for psychologists regarding trauma informed care, working with LGBTIQ+, autism, people who experience complex mental health issues, and engaging with carers and families.

Also indicated are reviewing the requirements around referrals and reviews under the Better Access Program, inclusion of additional subsidised sessions for setting expectations and developing relationships, and a review of subsidy levels and gap fees.

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