



COMMUNITY FEEDBACK 2021



# Identifying the impact of COVID19 on Regional Victorian Women's Mental Health and Wellbeing

Utilising the framework of Five Ways to Wellbeing, project partners engaged women across the Loddon Mallee region to contribute their stories and experiences around their mental health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 lockdowns and ongoing restrictions through a series of focus groups.

# Introduction



## COLLABORATION

In early 2021 Women's Health Loddon Mallee (WHLM), Northern District Community Health (NDCH) and Bendigo Community Health Services (BCHS) partnered on a qualitative information gathering initiative, inquiring into the effects of COVID-19 on women's mental health in the Loddon Mallee region.

## THE FIVE WAYS TO WELLBEING

Utilising the framework of Five Ways to Wellbeing, each project partner engaged women within the Loddon Mallee region to contribute their stories and experiences around their mental health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 lockdowns and ongoing restrictions through a series of focus groups. The focus groups, with the questioning framed through the 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' looked into women's experiences around the following, in particular: physical activity, mindfulness, social connectedness, community participation, learning for life and support services.

## FOCUS GROUPS

The focus groups provided an opportunity for women to reflect on their experiences and connect through storytelling, while also examining any gendered drivers of mental unwellness throughout the pandemic.

Eight focus groups were held in total over May 2021. Participants were engaged through various means and included a broad range of women from diverse backgrounds and locations within the Loddon Mallee region.

## SAMPLE SIZE

It is noted that the sample size for this project was small and that the project partners have not been able to capture the experiences of ALL women across the region.

## PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

This summary of findings has been developed in order to share stories and experiences of the impact of the global pandemic on the mental health of women across Loddon Mallee. Our hope is that this work can contribute to the growing body of information and research gathered from across the region, working toward a gender responsive regional recovery.



Mildura

Swan Hill

**A Snapshot of  
our region**

Buloke

Gannawarra

Loddon

Campaspe

Greater  
Bendigo



# Key Themes

WHLM, NDCH and BHCS transcribed relevant discussions with each of the focus group conversations. They also noted the key themes within each of the discussions.

Half of the focus groups were held online, the other half were held in person, with COVID-safe precautions.



# General Mental Health and Wellbeing

The feelings women have expressed regarding the future are widely varied. For some, there were positive things gained during the pandemic that should be included moving forward. For others, there is anxiety around what the future holds, and a fear that the changes made during the pandemic will have lasting negative consequences.

Some of the key barriers and difficulties people faced generally were trying to sift through information to find accurate information was difficult, fear of catching the virus, difficulties of mask-wearing, fearing for people overseas at risk of contracting the virus and feelings of loss when someone died, being unable to visit loved ones in aged care, hospitals and funerals, overwhelm at listening to/watching the updates and news, and the struggles of being stuck at home for long periods of time.



MENTAL  
HEALTH



# General Mental Health & Wellbeing

- “The social isolation was and is still tough. There is still concern no matter what you plan it can still get shut down in a blink of an eye. So that kind of messes with your head a bit”
- One of our elders in the Sudanese community died of Corona virus and we prayed a lot. We cried a lot for him. After that people became scared to go out for fear of catching corona virus”.
- “Two of my family members in Iran died from Corona Virus”
- “I think at one point I stopped listening to the news and the radio, just for the factor that it was so overwhelming. The numbers were rising all the time. And it was like, okay, we're in lockdown again. And you know, like the saddest thing was probably everyone taking all the toilet paper in the supermarket that was ridiculous.”
- “Infection control is the biggest thing. If anything, it's taught us to be cleaner.”
- “My father fell ill during the pandemic and we were in Bendigo at the time and we weren't allowed in to the hospital to see him...they phoned and said, 'I'm sorry he's passed away'...we had to have a graveside funeral and we chose out of town at Lake Boga, because Mum and Dad originated there. And you're only allowed to have 10 people, including the funeral directors”
- “I can't wear a mask, I did try my best at the pizza shop because it's food. I did struggle to wear it because my anxiety. I've been locked in the cupboard as a kid and abused my teacher and stuff so it all stems from my childhood fears. And I hate being in confined spaces. Yeah so I can't wear it because I feel like I'm absolutely suffocated. And it's like, I just need claw at it and get it off. Like it a physical reflex. So I had an exemption and so many people were like “you need to wear your mask”. I said I have an exemption, the doctors told me I do not have to wear it.”



# General Mental Health & Wellbeing

- “One of the things that was really difficult was that my brother-in-law was battling cancer at the time and I couldn’t, we couldn’t, physically see him and also support him and my sister. So that was one of the things that was really difficult.”
- “We were literally the four of us stuck in a very small space with two young children who were constantly bored and weren’t engaged with remote learning. I was trying to study and my partner was trying to work and teach remotely as well.”
- “I was just trying to keep my head above water.”
- “There was a lot of having to care for others and so I think in the end I felt quite... overwhelmed”
- “There’s been lots of realisations in terms of how little we actually need and how busy we make our lives out to be when we don’t actually need a lot of these distractions, a lot of those sorts of things, that’s been a good realisation.”
- “Just really taking that time to sort of think about what’s important and what’s going on around you and what do you value, when you have all the stimulants taken away.”
- “The build up, the tension, what’s he going to say, you know, is this going to be, is he going to extend it, or – that was particularly a tense sort of moment I guess and it became, Sunday took on a different meaning for me. Oh god I don’t want to go there again.”
- “It just felt like groundhog day. It just felt like one day bled into the next, into the next, and you just felt this sense of hopelessness of not knowing when this is going to end, how this is going to be any different from yesterday as opposed to tomorrow.”
- “There was fear. Even going to Swan Hill I got frightened that I might catch covid at the supermarket and bring it back to the town I live in. I used to drive down to the supermarket and id sit in my car just to be able to see people.”





## Be Active

While barriers to establishing and maintaining physical activity have been recognised, many women commented on the positive impact that physical activity had on their mental health and wellbeing. Women also commented on how important it was to stay active with their families if they had small children in their homes to care for.

In particular a number of women discussed the positive impact of walking, not just for physical health. Walking became a time to be able to connect with others in person when they were in lockdown.

A major challenge for women in terms of caring for their physical health was also the barrier of having gyms and other services closed over this period, as well as being required to wear masks, which could hinder breathing.







## Be Active

**Did you find ways during the pandemic to be physically active? In what ways do you feel that this impacted on your health and wellbeing?**

- “I think I found far more local walking tracks than I ever knew existed and found that that had an excellent effect on my mental health.”
- “In the evening I would go for a run, this gave me energy.”
- “I kept active by doing house chores”
- “I make exercise, I walk around but wearing the mask was difficult”.
- “Being less active and being restricted in my activity impacted my mental health.”
- “I found getting up and going for a walk every morning was my release before starting the day...because I could start the day off right. I could clear the head and know what I had to do for my son.”
- “I wasn't very active at all. I used to sit and sit and sit and do my crosswords. Before this all started I used to go every second day over to my husband and take him out for a walk around the garden and then that was closed down.”



## Be Active

- “I walk everyday anyway, but I walked a lot more. The poor dogs, their legs were walked off them.”
- “I found walking helpful and I combined walking and reaching out because I was home on my own, but I could talk to them on the front lawn and you know, that was all right. And it combined the two, like the interaction and the physical exercise, which is always good at any time pandemic or not for stress.”
- “I found myself going for walks more, just to get out of the house with the kids. I've got two little kids, they were 5 and 7 at the time, so it was for all our mental health to get out of a very small space.”
- “I would walk as well, 3 or 4 times a week with a different person, so that was really good, just to sort of keep in touch with other people”







## Take Notice

One prominent theme has been that a number of women were able to spend more time in the garden as a means to take time out and connect in with themselves. Watching things that they had planted growing had a positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

Some women found that they had more opportunity to connect in with their own emotions and lives as they found they were freed up from the lack of social expectations.

It is noted that women from refugee backgrounds were predominantly unable to take time to reflect on themselves and their own experiences as they were so busy caring for others and worried about loved ones overseas that they knew were in danger. Their responses to questions regarding mindfulness and taking notice often centered on these concerns.

# Take Notice

**Were you able to take time out to reflect and tune into yourself through the pandemic? Tell us in what ways you did that.**

- “I think my mantra became be kind to yourself, when I felt pressured or anxious about demands from other things or people, I was very clear about drawing boundaries and saying no to something I wasn’t comfortable with for whatever reason.”
- “The garden became a bit of a focus. I took a great amount of joy in just planting things and seeing it grow.”
- “I had more time to garden and plant vegetables and herbs”
- “My gardening is my mental and physical health. If I’ve got anything on my mind, I’ll just go and disappear out in the garden”
- “I think the lockdown, especially the first one was a real chance for me to reflect on the state of my relationship because I could no longer escape it. I had a lot of time to reflect on why I was unhappy and why things weren’t working and ultimately ended up leaving that relationship.”
- “It was actually a really good time for reflecting on life and also for me personally I could be creative too, so I was doing much more painting than I normally would at home. Because I didn’t have to be anywhere”
- “I would drive up the mountain and just sit there and look at the landscape. I found that really powerful. And I know how lucky I was. I’d take photos and put them on FB and people would say, “god I wish I was there”. I had the opportunity to look at something outside of my four walls.
- “I think about my nephews in the camp who cannot be processed because of Covid and it makes me sad”.
- “I think about my daughter who is in the camp and it makes me weak”





## Keep Learning

It was a common for participants to have been able to focus on learning new skills over this time, including: cooking, arts, crafts, DIY, languages. Some major learnings for women over this time were around technology (computers and phones). Others cited that they learned more over this time about virus control and cleanliness.





## Keep Learning

**What impact, if any, has Covid-19 had on your ability to keep your brain active or learn new things?**

- “Yes, I learn something about how to connect with people on the phone”
- “We learned about words like mask, sanitiser, social distance, Corona Virus, lockdown”
- “We learned new ways to cook with vegetables. A lot of people stopped eating meat”.
- “Learning new computer skills.”
- We were still able to learn remotely through a digital platform our English school helped us with.
- “My children were encouraging me to learn more English”
- “I learnt more English, my English got better when I had more time to read”
- “I learned some new computer skills”
- “I got on Youtube and figured out how to build this and fix that, do this. So, things that I thought I was going to get someone else to do when I won tatts Lotto, I’ve done myself.”
- “If anything, like we’ve kept learning about how important infection control is and how quickly bacteria can spread”
- “It was interesting for me in that I started learning Spanish... wouldn’t have normally have done that. It’s a great little brain challenge for half an hour everyday.”



## Give

Women expressed that they found being able to contribute in some way to their community had a positive impact on their own mental health and wellbeing. Many also felt heartened to know that the community was there to support them if they needed it. However, due to various closures of services some women struggled to be able to contribute to their communities in the ways that they had been used to prior to the pandemic, and many women felt a loss from this.







## Give

**As a result of the pandemic has your ability to actively contribute to your community been impacted? In what ways?**

- “We started making ‘thinking of you cards’ for the residents [who] loved getting the cards. We haven’t met them, and they haven’t met us, but it felt good just being able to do something to brighten their day because they were in much stricter lockdown than the rest of us.”
- “I was actively involved in volunteering to help with Sunday school and wasn’t able to do that anymore”
- “I wasn’t able to attend women’s group like I did before”
- “I wasn’t able to volunteer at the temple”
- “We were part of a women’s group but that stopped during the pandemic.”
- “We used to attend Sisterworks, but that stopped during Corona Virus.”
- “I would make tuna moray or spaghetti or casserole, because there’s a few elderly neighbours around on their own. I would take them over a container, and I’d take meals to my mum in Swan Hill.”





## Give

“If you were going to the supermarket, you would check with a few family members or neighbours. I'm going to get bread and milk cause we're out. What would you like? And you would pick up those items for your friends or whatever, to save them getting exposed”

“At the pizza shop I gave my customers extra time too. If they wanted to have a little bit of a chat, it might have been the only other person during the day that they got to talk to.”

“The positive side is that you brought out the best in people in the sense of people were very community aware and looking out for one another.”

“We had a small band of volunteers that were able to collect people's excess produce from their gardens. We cooked it up, we delivered it to families that were in need. We supported some local families who had to self-quarantine because they contracted Covid so we delivered food parcels to them, cooked meals, we helped link them into other services for food and financial assistance, and mental health assistance. So it was actually, I think that really helped keep you sane. Because rather than sitting in the space of not being able to see past when this is going to change, when are we going to come out of lockdown, it put my focus onto doing something really positive and doing something for someone else.”

“I sort of became hyper local for a while during the pandemic and I just wanted to get to know more of my neighbours and what was sort of things were happening in this town... I just liked the idea of having more face-to-face interactions with people in the same vicinity who were going through similar challenges.”

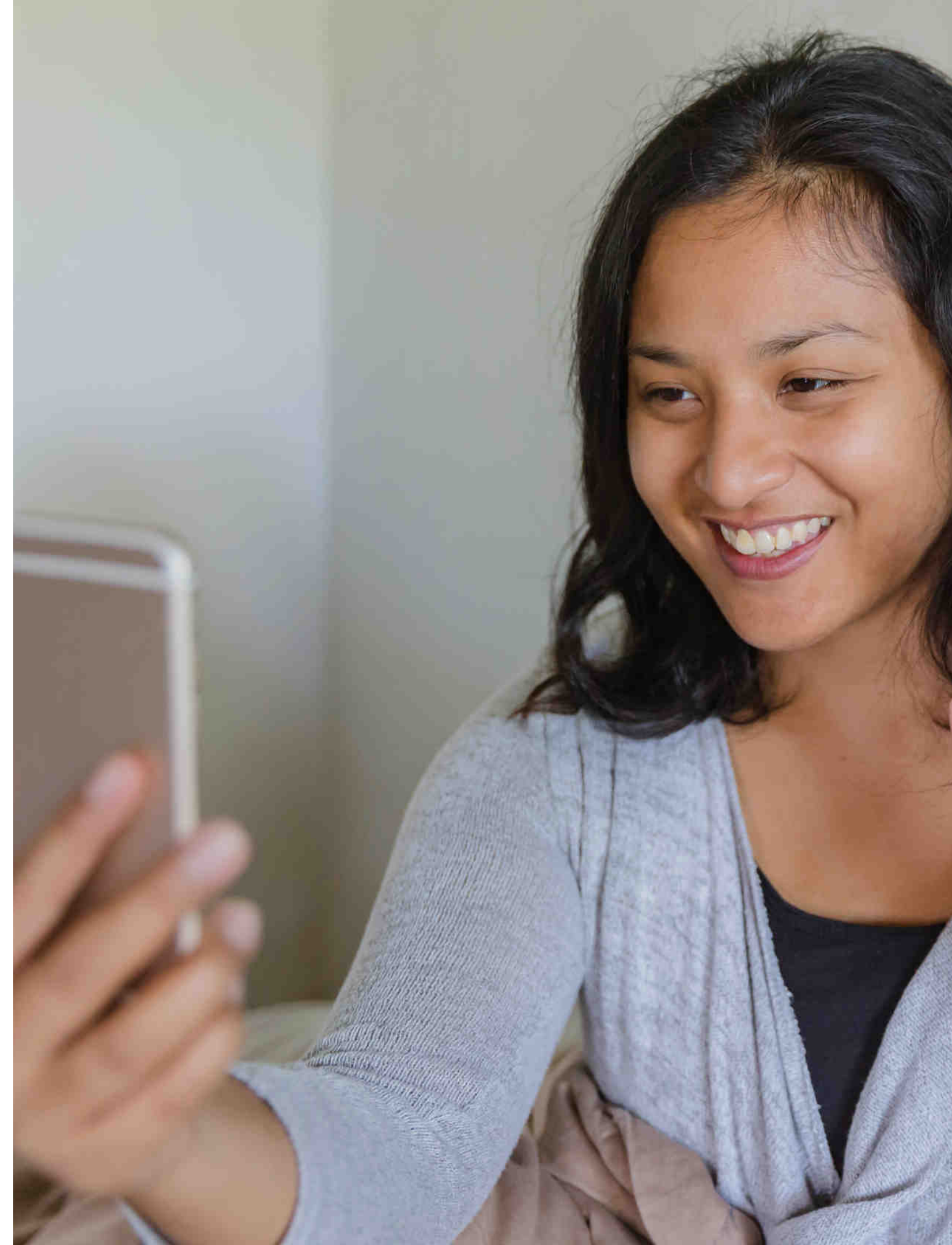
“So amazing that practical support when you do run out of toilet paper and all of a sudden you've got multiple women coming to your door and doing these kind of stealthy drop offs. So yeah just feeling that support I guess in a physically distanced way, it was really lovely. I was blown away by it.”

## Connect

The ways in which people have connected during this time were varied, with some women coming up with creative ways to connect with others as they felt such a sense of loss at the impacts of social isolation.

Many women found that being able to connect with people predominantly online only a barrier to meaningful connection. A number of women found that they got so tired of being on screens all the time – for work and education that they gave up on connecting online with friends and family online.

Many expressed their gratitude for being able to connect online and over the phone over this time with their loved ones, family, church and other groups, because without technology they would have been even more isolated from others. It is noted, however, that a number of women from refugee backgrounds were unable to connect with loved ones overseas because of lack of internet access. (Some were able to connect over the phone.)





## Connect

**Were you able to connect with friends and/or family during the pandemic? Please tell us about your experience and how it affected you.**

- “It was hard to not see anyone, I like to keep contact all the time...if I’m not around everyone, I feel really alone and think a lot of things.”
- “I have grandchildren that I was caring while their mum was working, so I could see them, that was legitimate reason, I was grateful for that.”
- “My neighbour, we had conversations over the fence during the pandemic time and we thought that was really great.”
- “We made contact with our community on the phone”.
- “We connected with our church a lot. They called me every day.”
- “I still think the importance of community can’t be underestimated because even when lockdown occurs if you’ve got a good community network that eventually looks out for one another then it shouldn’t have the same impact as if you are totally disconnected and totally isolated.”
- “We used zoom to keep in contact with our church. Our kids helped us with zoom. Without their help it would have been difficult to communicate.”
- “It would have been very hard without the connections of the church/monastery
- “Even though we couldn’t see our families physically we still connected with them on the phone”
- “Our mental health carers group we supported each other...we used to go once a month for our Chinese meal, get our Chinese meal take away and sit down the park. Once a month.”
- “I used to come in [to town] everyday, to get the paper just because I needed to have contact with people.”
- “Social media was excellent. I used to check on people and, people used to check on us. Using facetime, messaging, phone.”
- “Not seeing my sister was pretty devastating because she's like one of my best friends as well.”







## Connect

- “Not the same as having a cuddle with someone in person, that was the biggest loss, I think.”
- “I think we all felt really disconnected from our communities. As you say, couldn’t go to the funeral. If there was a birth, you couldn’t celebrate that either. Somebody was sick, you couldn’t go to hospital, and you couldn’t visit aged care.”
- “I did do the live-streaming but I just felt it wasn’t the same as being under the same roof. Bit disconnected.”
- “We were forced to let go of a lot of the stuff that normally happens and we had a lot more time to think about how important friendships and family are, especially the ones that are overseas. I found myself connecting a lot more with friends that I’d lost touch with, which was really nice.”
- “It doesn’t feel the same when you’re looking at somebody and you really don’t know what’s behind the mask.”
- “I just had such Zoom fatigue. Feeling like I was on Zoom all the time was not healthy, so I ended up opting out of that”
- “I think as a parent, one of the things I missed was just those connections that you have with other parents incidentally, you know when you’re down the street or at the playground, without that bumping into people. I think most of my efforts were spent catching up with friends and family, who are not necessarily local, but did really miss that sense of community locally.”
- “I definitely lost touch with a lot of people because I refused after a while to have anymore video calls.”
- “I think keeping in touch with local friends for walks and exercise and that kind of thing was really important”



# Accessing Support and Information



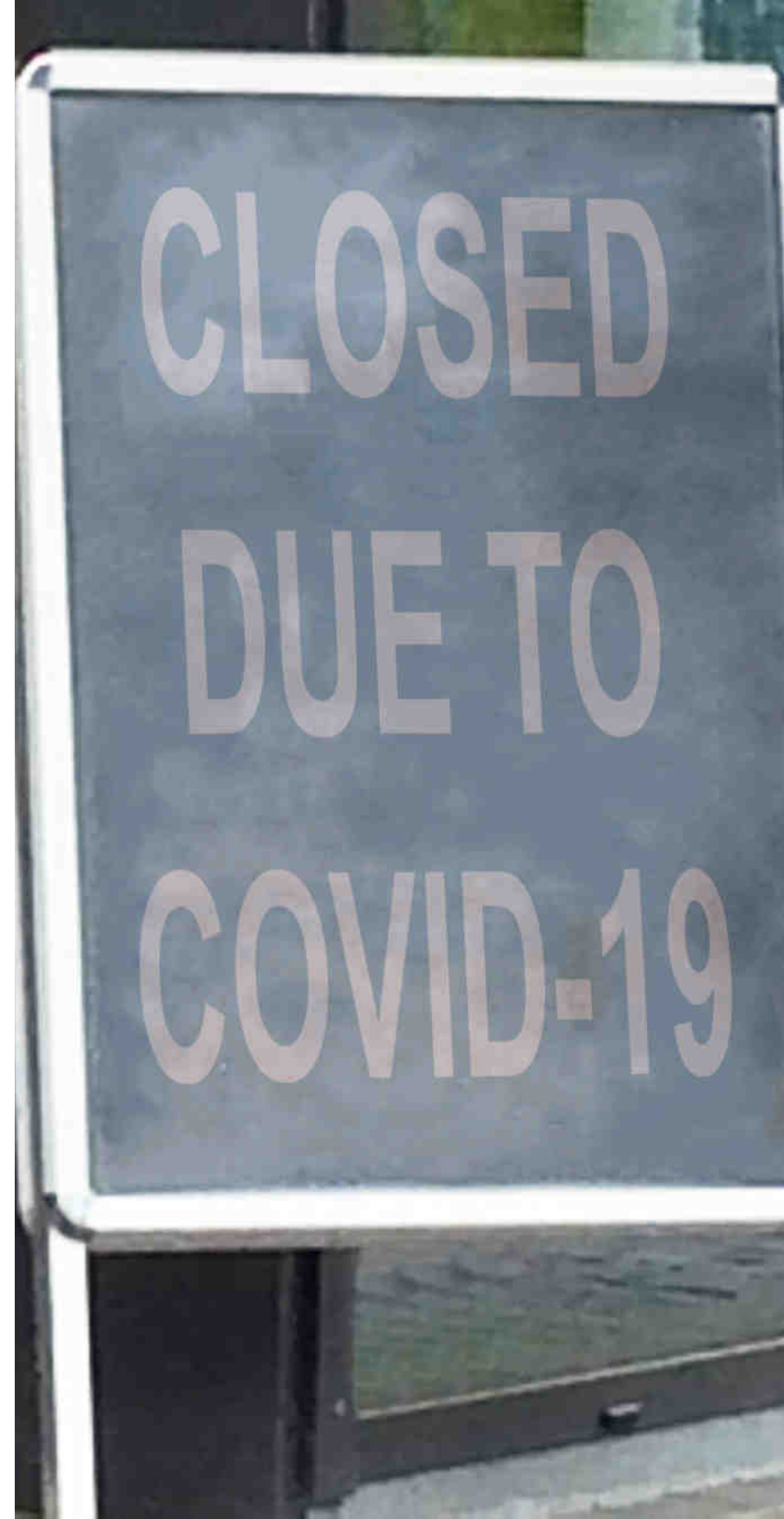
A common theme for women was around the fact that counselling and other supports were now only offered online or over the phone, which they felt was a barrier for themselves and others accessing mental health support if they needed it. For women from refugee backgrounds, this barrier was even greater due to lack of information in their native language(s) as well as cultural differences in the types of supports being offered.

Some women reported that they felt negatively impacted by the restrictions imposed on them for hospital visits and funerals of loved ones. Others remarked that the closure of a number of services and support groups negatively impacted them.

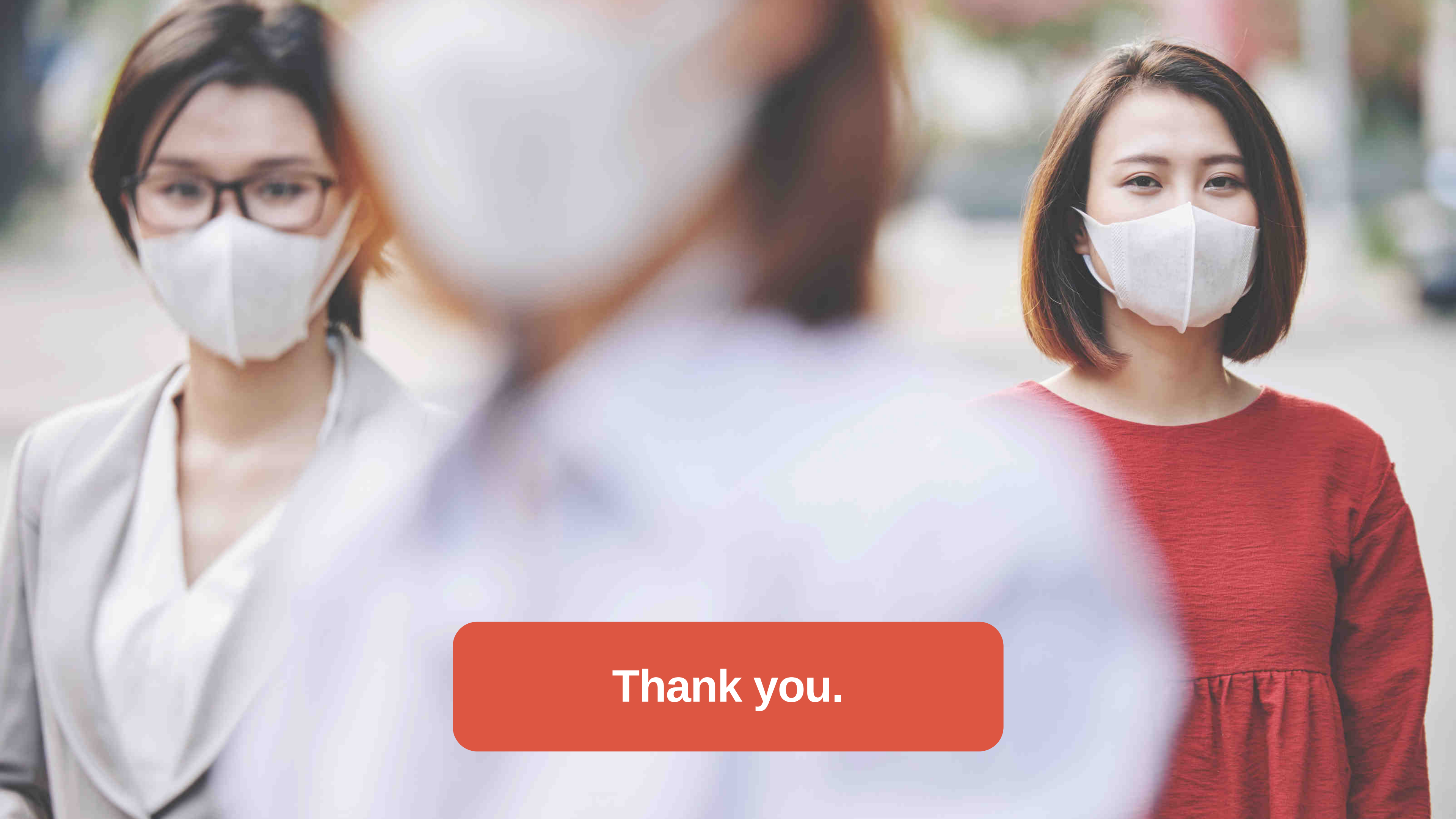
# Accessing Support and Information

**If you needed to, were you able to access adequate and appropriate services and information to support your mental health and wellbeing throughout the pandemic? What more was needed, if anything?**

- “My partner passed away and they only allowed 50 people at the funeral. They gave us contact numbers if we needed to talk to someone. Which I thought was a great idea for everybody... just in case we needed to speak to someone”
- “I don’t know if there is any continuity in care, of somebody seeing someone different every time and I think covid has made that even harder for people to deal with.”
- “I don’t personally think the services were available the way that they should be, and I think people have difficulty picking up the phone to call for help at times.”
- “The other carers meeting was stopped by the Shire, and all this time there has been no phone call to see how you’re going and how you’ve coped. And that’s what we really needed that communication, to see if we are okay, and how we were going...they could have done something to see if we are okay.”
- “I spoke to the counsellor here. They gave me the Lifeline number because they couldn’t speak to me. I don’t need the Lifeline or Beyond Blue number. I just needed someone to talk to. I thought that was the counsellor’s job not to tell you what to do but to listen what your problems are. I just needed someone to talk to.”
- “I just talked it out with friends as you do if things got a bit stressful and the sense of isolation was a bit much.”
- “Community access stopped because of COVID, everything was either telehealth or online. Not everyone's tech savvy either”
- “They should provide better support systems and care systems, especially for carers and anyone with disability, elderly mental health that needs to really improve”
- “When I started my nursing training years ago, we did a thing called person-centred care, and sorry, it’s just not there. Some of the organisations that are really good, but not all of them. Not one size fits all. Every, every single person is different.”
- “We’d be chatting about these really intense things then it was like, okay our time’s up now, and you literally like just shut the computer or you shut that window and was like oh shit, right okay, back to work or back to parenting or whatever.”
- “I think it’s better not to go and don’t use medication”
- “I’m trying to manage my mental health on my own”
- “We didn’t have anywhere to go or anyone to talk to”







**Thank you.**