



↳ Many workers in the transport industry face mental health issues. Credit: Shire of Esperance.

Tackling Mental Health Issues Head-On

While our town's isolation contributes to our resilience as a community, it also means we face greater challenges in terms of our health and wellbeing. Access to mental health services is, in particular, substantially more limited in country areas than in major cities. According to the National Rural Health Alliance, rates of self-harm and suicide increase with remoteness, a result of the difficulty regional and rural Australians experience in accessing the support needed for mental illness.

Here in Esperance, we are no stranger to the impact mental health issues have on a community. A report published by the WA Country Health Service in 2018 revealed that Esperance had the highest proportion of non-urgent emergency department presentations for psychosocial complications compared with the rest of regional WA, and nearly triple the hospital admission rate per 10,000 people due to depression compared with the rest of the nation.

With such statistics front of mind, the Shire of Esperance is working to promote and enhance the health, wellbeing, and quality of life for the local community. The Shire is committed to creating environments that support our community's health and wellbeing, and through the promotion of healthy lifestyle choices, the enhancement of built environments, social interaction, and community connectivity and wellness, they aim to create an active and healthy community. The Shire's *Public Health Plan 2021 – 2026* sets out how they intend to achieve this, focussing on promoting three key themes – healthy active lifestyle opportunities for all, a safe and protective community, and an inclusive, resilient, and connected community.

The Shire's Suicide Prevention Grants Program, funded by WA Primary Health Alliance under the Australian Government funded Local Suicide Prevention Activities, aligns with the latter theme of the plan – an inclusive, resilient, and connected community. Launched in March, the program provided funding for events and projects that would support mental health and reduce the risk of suicide at the local level. Applicants had to demonstrate how their projects aligned with one or more of the four pillars of the Alliance Against Depression Framework, an integrated community-based approach to tackling depression and suicide. Priority was given to applicants focussed on high-risk groups, including Aboriginal communities and men aged 25-54 working in farming, fishing, or FIFO.

Another component of the Suicide Prevention Program is working with the local transport and agricultural industries, recognising that both face unique challenges including tight deadlines, long hours, shift work, and isolation. Shire of Esperance Coordinator of Environmental Health Chantal Spittle says while we have all had our challenges over the last few years, for those working in the road transport, warehousing and logistics

industries, the challenges hit a little differently. "When flights were grounded across the country, our drivers, our posties, the folks driving the road trains became a lifeline for so many businesses and individuals across the country. Their resilience was tested every day," Chantal says. "So, we included an opportunity specific to them with a free online course - *Lifeline Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Road Transport, Warehousing and Logistics Sector*. It highlights the importance of managing stress and building resilience, and how to put that into practice, equipping participants with the tools to help manage their mental wellbeing."

The 110-minute industry-specific eLearning course focuses on managing close relationships for better mental health when away from home and developing small daily habits for a healthy lifestyle around the core principles of wellness. With the transport industry the third biggest employer in Esperance, the course is vital for many in our community. According to Healthy Heads, an organisation championing mental health and wellbeing for people working in trucks and sheds, the transport, postal, and warehousing industry is ranked 19 out of 19 in terms of workplace mental health and wellbeing. They report that 48 per cent of workers in the industry have had a mental health condition in the last 12 months, and 40 per cent of drivers experience loneliness on the road.

Other upcoming events funded by the Suicide Prevention Grants Program include a free two-day mental health first aid course, men's movement and breath sessions with sports physiotherapist Cam Watkins, a resilience youth camp with Armed for Life, yarning circles with Whadjak Noongar Elder Len Yarran, and a quiz night fundraiser for Life SPAN Esperance. All events are free, though registration is required. The Shire encourages people to register for and promote the free courses and events, so we continue to build a strong community. To keep up to date with what's on, subscribe to the Community eNewsletter at www.esperance.wa.gov.au/enewsletters or check out the Shire events page at www.esperance.wa.gov.au/events.

If you, or someone you know, are feeling overwhelmed, connect with Lifeline in the way you feel most comfortable. Phone Lifeline on 13 11 14 (24/7), text 0477 131 114 (24/7) or chat to Lifeline online at www.lifeline.org.au (24/7).



← Scan the QR code to head to the Suicide Prevention Training Page.