



**BUILDING THRIVING COMMUNITIES  
THROUGH SOCIAL CONNECTION**



Australian Government  
National Mental Health Commission

**SANE AUSTRALIA**

# 690,000

Australians over 18 years of age are living with complex mental illness, including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, major depression, severe anxiety, eating disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder. (*Review of Mental Health Programs and Services, National Mental Health Commission, 2014*).

# 5+

Family members, friends or colleagues affected for every person living with complex mental illness.

# 4 million

Australians affected by complex mental illness in any year.

## WHY PEER SUPPORT?

**People with complex mental illness often experience increased stigma due to lack of understanding from the broader community.**

Social isolation is common for people affected by complex mental illness, especially those living in regional remote areas, and has a significant impact on wellbeing, recovery and community participation.

**Peer support is a largely untapped resource for those affected by complex mental illness. It is proving to be a cost effective way for individuals and carers to build connections and work through their shared experience of emotional and psychological pain.**

Online peer support can provide emotional support, companionship and opportunities for meaningful social engagement that can influence help-seeking, effective coping strategies and sense of wellbeing.

## ONLINE PEER SUPPORT FORUMS

SANE Australia's Lived Experience and Carers Forums are thriving online communities that are anonymous, professionally moderated 24/7, and supported by a comprehensive Duty of Care Framework.

The Forums work on a peer support model where people interact by posting supportive messages to each other about their mental health concerns to both help themselves and provide help for others.

The Forums also provide a platform for collaboration across the mental health sector. Using an innovative syndication model, the Forums are offered in partnership with 51 community mental health organisations covering every state and territory across Australia.



*“A lot of people think carers are saints, they don't think of us as human beings. But we are real people who suffer from isolation, stress and burnout. As a carer, it is very important to try to look after yourself and stay connected.”*

Jo, Carer Participant:  
Thriving Communities 2016

# THRIVING COMMUNITIES PROJECT

In 2016, the National Mental Health Commission provided funding for SANE Australia to pilot a fully integrated awareness campaign promoting the benefits of online peer support to enhance meaningful social connection for Australians affected by complex mental illness.

The 14-week television, radio and online campaign featured eight real-life stories of people affected by complex mental illness. The campaign was aimed at people between the ages of 25 and 45, particularly those living in rural and regional Australia. It reached 155 locations nationally, including three capital cities (Melbourne, Canberra and Brisbane).

The University of Sydney evaluated the effectiveness and impact of the campaign. This included assessing the suitability of the SANE Forums for people from both Culturally and Linguistically Diverse and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.



*“If you’re feeling alone or isolated, the SANE online forums are a great place to go. You’ll find someone there who has experienced what you’re experiencing, or felt what you’re feeling. It can really help you feel validated. And not so alone.”*

**Harrison**, Lived Experience Participant:  
Thriving Communities 2016

## SANE AUSTRALIA

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SANE Australia is a national mental health charity working to provide Australians affected by complex mental illness with better support, stronger connections, less discrimination and longer lives.

## OUR AIMS

- Increase opportunities for social connection via peer-to-peer contact.
- Provide greater access to support and information .
- Raise awareness of complex mental illness and the value of online peer support.
- Increase help-seeking behaviour.
- Reduce stigma about complex mental illness.
- Evaluate effectiveness of the campaign.

## OUR APPROACH

The project consisted of a targeted six-month endeavour from July to December 2016 with the following four key elements:

1. A national campaign about the SANE Forums using social media, radio, and TV, with a concerted promotion in rural and regional areas. Print media was also included.
2. Creation of a bank of comprehensive content (written, audio and video) drawing on the lived experience of people with complex mental illness.
3. Capacity-building of partner organisations to promote the peer support forums to their constituents.
4. An external evaluation.

## THE RESULTS

# 155

Communities reached (97% in regional and remote locations).

# 256%

Increase in new members to the SANE Forums (compared to previous three months).

# 103%

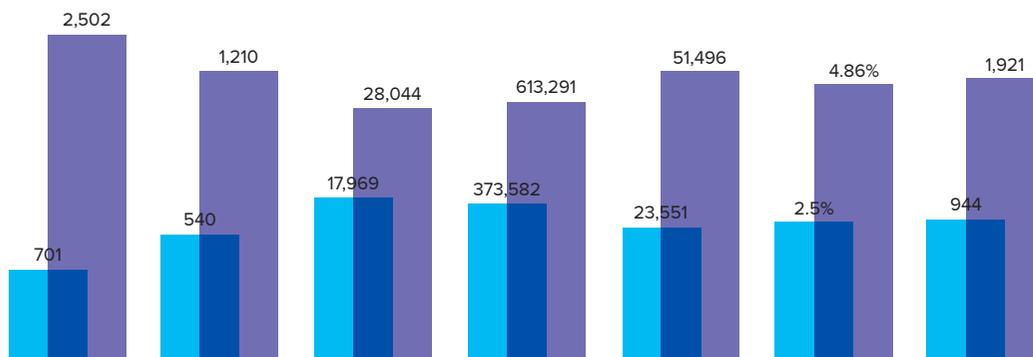
Increase in new forum members from regional and remote areas.

# 119%

Increase in unique visitors to the forums (compared to the previous three months).

# 9

New mental health partner organisations hosting the SANE Forums, representing strong uptake of the Forums by the mental health sector.



**256%**  
New members ↑

**124%**  
New discussions ↑

**56%**  
New posts ↑

**64%**  
Page views ↑

**119%**  
SANE Forums Unique Visitors ↑

**94%**  
Visitor to member conversion rate ↑

**103%**  
Regional and remote members ↑

■ Pre-campaign  
3 April–10 July  
■ Campaign period  
10 July–15 October

## USER HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 There was significant positive feedback about the effectiveness of the advertising and storytelling content indicating the content successfully resonated with the target audience.

*A family member of mine, who is usually very quiet and shy, saw my story on TV and all of a sudden disclosed his own battle with mental illness – to the shock of his children.*

*This then started a family ‘around the table discussion’, which was probably the proudest moment for me as I was part of starting that discussion!*

*I've also had so many Facebook messages from people, including a couple from indigenous women, thanking me for telling my story and for being a strong indigenous role model. – Denielle, Lived Experience Participant: Thriving Communities 2016*

- 2 Participants of the SANE Forums visited the service for an average of 1–2 hours at a time, accessing a significant number of pages and frequently started new discussions. This indicates that they are a particularly engaged community.

*I just want to thank you all so much for your words of support. I feel less alone which is something I haven't felt in so long. – Forum Member*

- 3 Participants sought out the SANE Forums as a way to find social connection that was lacking in their everyday lives. This regaining of social connection through the forums enabled participants to reframe the often-difficult experiences of mental illness. The SANE Forums provide a space to step out of the stigmatisation and loneliness experienced in everyday life.

*When you're feeling a bit down and out and you do have a read of 30–40 other people going through the same thing, you don't feel so, I guess, alone and cut-off from the rest of the world. – Forum Member*

- 4 Participants reported that using the SANE Forums enabled them to seek out additional help for their mental health, to speak more openly about it, gain a better understanding of where to get help, and activate strategies to better manage their mental health.

*Thank you so much for all your posts because I read through them before my appointment, and even though I couldn't respond then, they really did encourage and help me. – Forum Member*

- 5 This project strongly suggested that peer support can be a crucial element of recovery, and the particular model offered by the SANE Forums (with anonymity and professional moderation) underpins this.

*Being able to actually articulate those experiences within that [online] community makes me more able to go out and talk about it to the broader community. – Forum Member*

- 6 This project highlighted the need for more culturally-inclusive forums, particularly for older people who may be less likely to use mainstream forms of social media and online support. Any such future research must be fully collaborative with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island consumers, community, and relevant organisations.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Online peer support platforms are an effective form of support for people with complex mental illness and should be actively considered as a way to reach this population.
- 2 Promotion of online peer-support services is effective at increasing participation of people in regional and remote areas and is crucial to optimising awareness and use of online peer-support services.
- 3 Campaign promotion of online peer support services needs to use a combination of television, radio and online channels for best results in driving awareness and participation.
- 4 There is a need for continued investment and evaluation of the inclusion of people with lived experience in the development of promotional campaigns, projects and research.
- 5 Further research is needed to explore the impact of online peer support on users' mental health, how we can reduce stigma via public campaigns, the demographics of users, and the feasibility of online peer support Forums for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities, with significant input from those communities.