



Finding your way back

A resource for people who have attempted suicide



This resource was developed with major input from many people who have attempted suicide and their family and friends; people just like you. It has been developed for ordinary, everyday people encountering the very difficult and intensely emotional time that occurs after a suicide attempt. The resource does not propose any one solution or path but provides information and thoughts based on shared experience and knowledge in the hope that your journey will be gentler and more informed.

The quotes used throughout this resource come from the people with lived experience of a suicide attempt who we spoke to in the development of the resource.



Finding your way back and other resources in *The way back* series have been proudly funded with donations from The Movember Foundation.

Consider the information contained in this resource in the context of contact with other professionals, don't rely on this resource in isolation.

About this resource

How this information might assist you

Getting your life back on track after attempting suicide is not easy. It takes time to recover, physically and emotionally. It is natural to have many feelings, thoughts and concerns. You might not know what to do or what to say.

This resource is a starting point for working through some of the questions that can come up after a suicide attempt. And it offers ideas about what may assist you in regaining a sense of control and to get back on track.

People who have attempted suicide, and their family members and friends, played an important role in the development of this resource. They spoke of the intense and difficult times associated with suicide however they also spoke of how a suicide attempt can be a turning point; a significant point from which change is possible. Their words and stories have been used throughout this resource.

This is what they wanted you to know first and foremost:

“ You are not alone and you can get through this. ”

Life after a suicide attempt may at first feel chaotic and without direction but with time and the right support you can find your way back to a life filled with hope, connection and a new sense of purpose and meaning.

Using this resource

The information in this resource should not be taken as medical advice and would be best used alongside the support of a trained health professional and your own support networks. It is a starting point and will not answer every question, but hopefully it will provide some perspective and suggestions.

Another resource was developed at the same time as this one; it's called *Guiding their way back* and is for people supporting someone after a suicide attempt. You can find it at **www.beyondblue.org.au/thewayback**

You may find it useful to access other sources of information and support; see section 'Resources and other information' on page 18.

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1. Getting immediate support

If you have just attempted suicide, it is important to see a doctor or mental health worker at either a hospital or clinic to make sure your physical and mental health are both okay.

It is likely a health provider has given you this resource, but if you have come across it in another way, it is important that you see a medical professional as soon as possible, even if the attempt does not appear life threatening.

At the hospital

If you have gone to hospital, it can be a daunting experience. The waiting, the busy environment and the lack of control over the situation can be unsettling.

At hospital, medical staff will look at physical injuries first. After these have been treated, they will then arrange for a mental health worker to come and talk about what was happening before the attempt.

This assessment will look at:

- how your mood has been
- how you've been managing your day-to-day activities (e.g. work, family responsibilities)
- how your relationships have been going
- if you have been experiencing any major stresses.



'Assessment' sounds quite formal but really it is a conversation to look at what has happened, why and if any current risks remain. Using the information from this discussion the health professional will assist you to make plans for the next few days and talk about what might be helpful in the coming weeks. They might also make appointments or recommend you make contact with an appropriate health service.

Note: If English is not your first language, you may request the support of an interpreting service.

At the local medical clinic – seeing a General Practitioner

If you go to the local medical clinic a General Practitioner (GP) will discuss your situation and determine if further medical tests are needed. Once the doctor or health worker is satisfied there are no physical problems, they will talk more about what has been happening, what supports are available at home, and if there are any risks of further harm. They might also suggest that going to see a local counsellor or health service would be helpful.

The GP's goal will be to put plans in place to ensure you have support over the following days and weeks. They will probably suggest you return for follow-up appointments to monitor how you are going and whether you have enough support.

The GP will probably encourage you to return for follow up appointments over the coming weeks. The GP will use these appointments to monitor how you are coping and whether you have enough support.

Consider involving others

Immediately after a suicide attempt you might find it hard to think clearly or remember details of conversations. You may also find it is hard to talk about what has happened or to describe to others how you are feeling.

Consider involving someone you trust in conversations with the health professional. They can be a second pair of ears and provide extra information in discussions.

“ When you are in the middle of it, you don't necessarily want someone to have all the answers... you just want someone to sit by you, who will keep you safe, not make any judgments, acknowledge what is happening for you and help you develop your own understanding. ”

– Heather, 55

About confidentiality

You have the right to tell health professionals when you don't want them to discuss your situation with others in your support network.

All health professionals are legally required to maintain their patient's confidentiality but there are some exceptions. These include if:

- you have given permission to share your personal information
- they believe you may hurt yourself or somebody else
- they need to talk with another health professional about you and your treatment
- they are legally required to share your confidential information.

If you do not give permission for information to be shared, people supporting you can still give information to the health professionals, as well as ask for advice and information about their role and what to expect, etc.

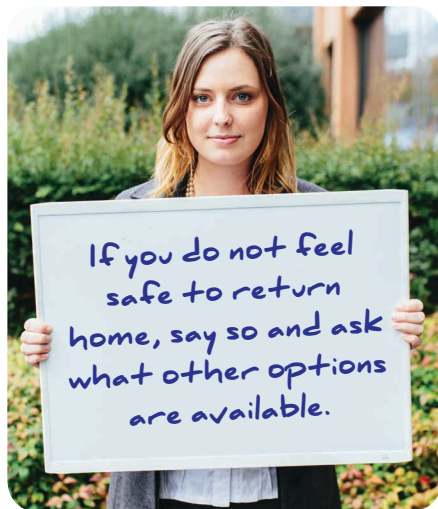
If you are 16 years or under it is important for a family member or carer to know what has happened so that they can support you. This does not mean that they will hear every detail of your conversations, but the health professional can provide them with information that helps them to support you and keep you safe.

If you are unsure how confidentiality works simply ask the health services staff to explain it to you and your support person(s) so that everyone understands what information will and won't be shared.

Before going home

With the right support in place you should be able to go home. If you do not feel safe to return home, say so and ask what other options are available.

It can be helpful to write this information down so that you can refer to it again later. Often it can be hard to remember things when you are tired or stressed.



Before you head home make sure you have an understanding of:

- What you can do that will make it easier to get through the next few days.
- What supports are available and useful to you when you return home.
- What you should do if you feel suicidal again.
- Names and contact details for counselling or other support services.
- Names and contact details for emergency services.

Experiences with health professionals

People who have attempted suicide, and their support people, have reported a range of experiences in the level of care and concern they have received from health professionals. Some have found staff to be supportive and available while others felt that staff were distracted, unhelpful, and had little or no time to talk.

How a health professional responds to you will depend on their personal attitude towards suicide and their level of skill, confidence and comfort in responding to suicide attempts. Time pressures within the clinic or hospital may also affect the amount of time that they can spend with you.



Consider the advice that the health professionals offer you, talk openly about any worries that you have, and ask questions so you fully understand your options for moving forward.

All health services have systems in place for people to provide feedback about their experience, whether this is positive or negative feedback. Written information about this process is usually available from the staff or administration team. Alternatively, consider talking to the staff member involved or their manager.

“ One thing that helped me when I wasn’t well and with the pressure and guilt I put on myself for not being able to function was what a nurse said to me, ‘If you had a broken leg and you were in hospital, would you feel that guilt about it?’ I said ‘No.’ She said ‘If it stops you beating up on yourself, I can bandage your head because you have a broken head.’ ”

– Belinda, 35

2. In the short-term

The first few days

The first few days after your suicide attempt are critical and will often raise a range of big issues and questions such as:

- What now?
- How can I be sure I will get back on track?
- How can I stay safe?



There are no clear cut answers but there are several things you can do to make it easier.

- Let other people assist you when it is possible.
- If you live alone, consider asking someone you trust to stay with you until things settle down. Alternatively, you might prefer to stay at their home for a period of time.
- Follow the advice of doctors and take any medication they have prescribed.
- Try to establish a routine with sleeping, meals and exercise.
- Keep appointments with counsellors and doctors.
- Remove things in and around the house that you could harm yourself with.
- Keep the use of alcohol and drugs to a minimum and preferably avoid them altogether. They can impair your judgment and make you feel worse.
- If people are trying to be helpful, acknowledge and respond to them. Although you may still not be in a space to talk in any detail, let them know you will talk more when you feel ready.
- If people from your support network are not available and you feel worried, unsure or suicidal again, consider calling a telephone counselling or support service such as Lifeline (available 24 hours a day). For a list of support services see section 'Resources and other information' on page 18.

Using your support network

Surround yourself with people that you trust, who will listen to you without judgment and that you enjoy being with.

“ Before my suicide attempt, I didn’t know about the importance of having a support network. Now I have a small group of people that I know and trust and if I start to get depressed again, I ring them. ”

– Andy, 18

Different people may have different roles. For example:

- A parent or family member may help you feel loved and cared for.
- A friend may be great if you are feeling down and want to have a laugh or do something socially.
- A neighbour or work colleague might be a good person to talk about things other than your personal life (such as sport, current affairs etc.).
- A religious or community leader may help you to connect or reconnect with spiritual beliefs or community activities.
- A counsellor might be the best person to assist with strategies to deal with stress and coping.
- A 24 hour phone service may provide non-judgmental crisis support.

There is room for a whole range of people in your support network but make sure you identify at least one person you feel that you can talk with about how you are feeling.

Getting support from a health professional

A health professional can help to address the feelings or situations that led up to your suicide attempt. You can talk openly about what has happened and find new ways to cope with difficult decisions, experiences or emotions.

“ If I’ve got something wrong with my car, I’ll take it to a specialist mechanic to get help with diagnosing and fixing it... suicide is very personal and you don’t want to talk about it with anyone... you want to know that you can say whatever you want and that you’ll be safe and protected. ”

– Carlo, 39

You might find sessions with a health professional useful to:

- sort through how you are feeling and why
- provide a different perspective
- link you in with other doctors or experts when necessary
- help develop new coping strategies.

Even if you don’t think it will be helpful to link in with a health professional consider having a couple of sessions to try it out.

– Heather, 55

3. Common reactions

What you might be thinking or feeling

There is no right or wrong way to feel following a suicide attempt. You can experience a range of feelings, and you might find that these feelings can change quickly and unexpectedly.

You might feel exhausted, numb, remorseful or embarrassed. Or you might feel shame or guilt, worried about how your attempt has affected those around you.

You might also feel angry about what has happened and find it hard to see any hope for the future. Alternatively you might be relieved and glad that you have survived but unsure about what happens now.

“ When I was suicidal, I didn’t want to talk about it because then it’s a sign of weakness... it’s actually a pretty difficult decision to make... you can’t be that weak... ”

– Anna, 33

Understanding your own actions

You might not know why, or even if, you wanted to end your life. You might feel confused by what has happened. The reason for your attempt will perhaps become clearer as you work through your thoughts and feelings in the next few days and weeks.

Understanding why you attempted suicide and how this now affects you can take time, but it is an important step in finding your way back.

Some of the reasons others have given for attempting suicide have included:

- The situation was so unbearable, I couldn’t think of an alternative.
- I felt trapped. There was no other way I could get away.
- I was just so agitated and completely on the edge all the time, I needed to do something.
- I felt overwhelmed and out of control.
- I needed to get help and let others know how desperate I felt.
- I felt like a failure and a burden. I just wanted to make it easier for those around me.
- I don’t know why I did it.

A suicide attempt is often associated with intense psychological pain along with negative feelings that seem endless and impossible to escape from.

Stressful life events may be the trigger for these feelings and can include:

- feeling alone, isolated and without any friends or family
- going through a difficult relationship breakup
- losing a job
- experiencing a financial crisis
- being bullied at work or school
- experiencing discrimination and isolation due to sexuality, culture or disability
- going to court for legal matters
- experiencing drug and alcohol problems.

“ I was just so hurt after my relationship ended that I couldn’t trust anyone... I also couldn’t risk the possibility of embarrassment or ridicule if I said anything... it’s a taboo subject. ”

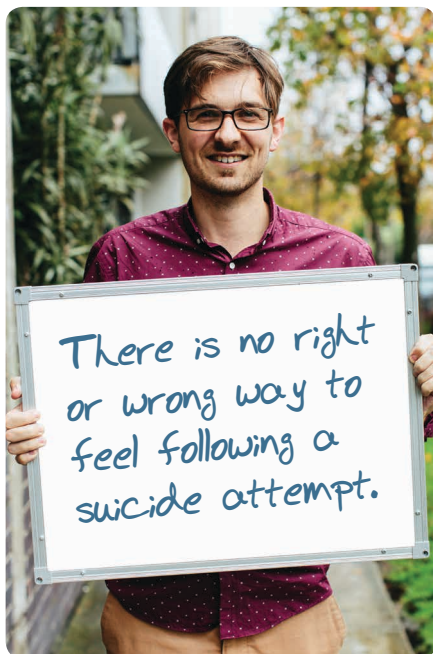
– Andy, 18

And sometimes there appears to be no obvious life events or experiences that have led to a suicide attempt.

“ I’ve followed teachings and advice from everyone in my life – parents, family and friends, church, schools, university, professional organisations, employers, media and government. If I’ve done all of the things they’ve taught me, how did I end up wanting to take my life? ”

– Carlo, 39

Some mental health conditions and medications will also increase the likelihood of someone experiencing intense out of control thoughts and feelings, but attempting suicide does not always mean a person was experiencing a mental health problem.



4. The people supporting you

What they may be thinking or feeling

People can react in a range of ways when they hear that someone they know and care about has attempted suicide. Initially they might feel panicked or shocked by the news.

Feelings of anger, betrayal, guilt and self-blame are also common reactions as they try to understand what has happened.

Their response will depend on how they feel, their past experiences and whether they are comfortable talking about difficult times. Their beliefs around life and death and their cultural or religious beliefs may also play a part in how they respond to you.

“ At the time, I was bewildered... I felt enormously incompetent... Was it my parenting skills? Did I miss the signs? I felt somehow responsible and guilty. ”

– Jen, 53

It is possible that people may be fearful of saying the wrong thing. You might want to consider some of the following suggestions.

- Acknowledge and thank those who make contact.
- If you are unsure about what to say, thank them for their concern and let them know you are handling things as best as you can.
- If you find it comforting to have people with you let them know that you appreciate their support.
- Consider sharing how you feel and seeking support from those you trust and who care about you.
- If someone wants to talk about your suicide attempt and nothing else, let them know that it helps to talk about other things too.

If it's not working for you, let them know what you need from them. For example:

- “What I need at this point is someone who can listen to me without telling me what I need to do.”
- “I’d really appreciate it if we could talk about other things at the moment. I just want to get my mind off it.”

5. Talking about what has happened

Talking to others

You may or may not want to talk about what has happened or what led up to your suicide attempt. It is common to feel unsure, worried and even distressed about what to say to others.

When you are ready, it is important to talk about what has happened with people you trust. This allows others to be there for you and provides a chance to work out where to go from here.

It is important to start thinking about what you (and those close to you) will say to others. It can be useful to have a clear agreement about what should be shared and with whom. By sharing some information about what has happened you might also find that this helps to reduce gossip and speculation.

Often a short message about what has happened and how you are now coping is enough for most people.

It could be something like, "Things have been really tough for me lately and I attempted suicide. I just wanted to let you know what I have been dealing with and that I am trying to get back on track."

Although it is rarely talked about, many people have been affected by suicide and being honest creates a range of opportunities for others to be more open and supportive.

“ I felt very responsible and I didn't want to trouble other people with what is incredibly distressing news. ”

– Candice, 31

“ I think there is a sort of guilt factor that tends to make people not want to talk about it ... they worry about what other people think – like what's been going on in that family that's led to this happening... ”

– Jen, 53

Considerations for social media

If you are a regular user of social media sites like Facebook or Twitter think carefully about whether it is the right time and place to talk about what has happened.

While it is good to talk to others and get support, everyone is different and you might want to think about the following things first:

- It is hard to know how other people reading the messages might react – they could become upset and worried about what has happened to you or it might bring up feelings for them that you may not know about.

- It might start with other people talking about what has happened to you before you are ready to tell them.
- It can be harder to get private support that you may need on a public forum.

Returning to work and study

Returning to your previous work or study is an important sign that you are getting back on track but it can be difficult to explain why you have been away.

It may be useful to discuss the possibility of:

- Flexible days or times in the initial return to work or study.
- The potential need to have time off to attend appointments.
- Initial reduced work or study load while you transition back.
- Flexible deadlines for work or study tasks.
- Identifying who else can support you in the work or study setting.

If you don't have close relationships with the people you work or study with you may not want to talk about what has happened; you might want to keep your personal and work/study life separate. However, by letting someone know (such as managers, supervisors, study coordinators), you create opportunities to receive additional support.

Under equal opportunity laws, workplaces and teaching institutions (such as universities and TAFE) are required to make adjustments to support people who have been or are physically or mentally unwell. Before returning to either work or study, you may wish to get advice, or find out about your rights and/or what supports are available from services such as:

- your workplace's Human Resources department
- the Employee Assistance Program provider or Student Counselling Service
- the Australian Human Rights Commission
- the Fair Work Ombudsman.



6. If thoughts about suicide return

It is common for suicidal thoughts to return after your suicide attempt. It is not a sign you have failed or that you are not recovering. Recovery from a suicide attempt is about building strategies and confidence in managing thoughts about death and suicide if or when they return.

Some people find that their suicidal thoughts can return in response to significant stress or tension. Often the hardest time to manage thoughts about suicide or death is in the period immediately after an attempt or after discharge from hospital. It is important to make sure you have thought about how you will respond if you become suicidal again.

Many people find that it is useful to prepare a safety plan. A safety plan is a series of steps that you follow if you start to feel suicidal again.

Often a health professional will work with you to develop a safety plan, but you can also do one yourself.

Safety plans usually include a list of:

- signs or triggers that tell you that you are becoming overwhelmed or suicidal.
- strategies that you can use to help get through those times when the urge to end your life is greatest. This can be a combination of distractions and things that make you feel a bit better, such as talking to a good friend, going for a walk, watching a movie, having dinner with family, prayer, etc.
- people you can talk to when you are struggling. This might include family members, friends, as well as doctors, counsellors, community or religious leaders.
- professional services to contact, including services that are available 24 hours a day, such as crisis telephone support services, hospitals and Emergency Services. See section 'Resources and other information' on page 18 for a list of available services.

Find out more at **www.suicideline.org.au/at-risk/how-to-make-a-suicide-safety-plan**

7. Looking after yourself

Having connections to other people and things you find important can protect you against suicidal thoughts or make it easier to manage if such thoughts return.

It is not uncommon for people to feel disconnected from life and those around them leading up to a suicide attempt. This can be a good time to reconnect with the things that are important to you.

Work with people that you trust to help identify ways to reconnect with things you find meaningful. It can also be a time to discover new things that are important to you.

In the short-term, this could mean:

- catching up regularly with friends, neighbours and family members
- spending time doing things you enjoy
- joining a group for something you have always been interested in.

In the longer-term, this could mean:

- thinking about work and whether it is fulfilling for you, or considering voluntary work
- thinking about study, such as courses at TAFE or university
- taking a holiday to places that you have always wanted to see.



Other things to consider are:

- Lifestyle improvements – choosing to live a physically healthier life. Eating a balanced diet, reducing alcohol consumption to a more moderate level, exercising a little each day and establishing a good sleep pattern can all be helpful.
- Meditation and relaxation – making sure relaxation is built into your routine; breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, yoga and Tai Chi can be good ways to do this.
- Interests and contributing – giving back to the community often helps our sense of purpose and connection with others. Think about what you used to find interesting or have been passionate about (such as animal welfare, environmental issues, swimming, astronomy, reading, playing music) and join an organisation that is involved in this.

8. The future

“ After my suicide attempt six years ago, I kept remembering a quote from Winston Churchill: ‘When you are going through hell... just keep going.’ This gave me great faith that somehow I would find a way out. Which I did and I’m really enjoying life now. ”

– Max, 54

After a suicide attempt it can be hard to see what the future holds.

It might help to see this time as a turning point; an opportunity for you to find your way back.

You will still have ups and downs. However, by focusing on the potential for change following your darkest times, and accepting the assistance of others, you can create opportunities that offer hope and direction for your future.

This resource was developed by bringing together the wisdom and experiences of people affected by suicide and combining it with what we know to be helpful.

Hopefully the information and guidance in this resource will assist you to understand and get through the challenges and opportunities associated with a suicide attempt.



The people involved in this project talked about suicide being a part of their past but that it was not going to define their future. They wished the same for you, that you can look to the future with a sense of hope and take a step towards the life you want to live.

Resources and other information

GENERAL

Lifeline

www.lifeline.org.au
13 11 14

Free, confidential, 24 hour telephone and online crisis support service. The website also provides a range of information.

Suicide Call Back Service

www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au
1300 659 467

Free, confidential, 24 hour telephone and online counselling service for people who are suicidal and anyone wanting to talk through concerns. The website also provides a range of information and resources.

beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au
1300 22 4636

Free, 24 hour telephone information and online chat from a trained health professional. Website provides a range of information to reduce the impact of depression and anxiety in the community by raising awareness and understanding, empowering people to seek support and supporting recovery, management and resilience.

Black Dog Institute

www.blackdoginstitute.org.au

Online information and resources (including self-tests) on the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mood disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder.

Living is for Everyone (LIFE) Resources

www.livingisforeveryone.com.au

The Federal Government's suicide prevention framework and supporting resources for people across the community wanting information on suicide and suicide prevention. Includes a range of fact sheets about rates of suicide in Australia, suicide warning signs and how to respond to suicidal thoughts.

Suicide Prevention Australia

www.suicidepreventionaust.org
02 9223 3333

National peak body for the suicide prevention sector in Australia. Supports communities and organisations throughout Australia, and promotes collaboration and partnerships in suicide and self-harm prevention, intervention and postvention.

FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 25 YEARS AND UNDER

Kids Helpline

www.kidshelp.com.au
1800 551 800

Free confidential 24 hour telephone, email and web counselling. The website also provides a range of information and resources.

ReachOut

reachout.com.au

Online forums and chat, fact sheets and videos about youth mental health issues.

headspace

www.headspace.org.au
1800 650 890

Online chat, counselling, forums and information about youth mental health issues. Face-to-face support services for young people and anyone supporting them are available at headspace centres throughout the country – check the website to find the closest one to you.

FOR CARERS AND OTHERS PROVIDING SUPPORT TO A PERSON WHO HAS ATTEMPTED SUICIDE

Carers Australia

www.carersaustralia.com.au
1800 242 636

Manages the delivery of national programs, support and services for carers across the country. This includes the Carer Advisory Service and Carer Counselling Program. It also advocates and lobbies on a wide range of issues that affect carers.

Family Drug Support – Support Line

1300 368 186

Free confidential 24 hour telephone assistance for families affected by alcohol and other drugs.

Mental Health Carers ARAFMI

www.arafmiaustralia.asn.au
1800 811 747

Provides services for people with a mental illness and their carers. It offers telephone and online information and support services for carers, as well as carer support groups in some areas. The carer support line listed above is staffed 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday.

Commonwealth Respite and Carelink Centres

1800 052 222

Facilitates access to information, respite care and other support appropriate to carers' needs and circumstances, and the needs of the people they care for.

Acknowledgments

This resource was developed in partnership by *beyondblue* and the Hunter Institute of Mental Health. Community experts with personal experience of the impact of suicide also played a key role as part of the Project Working Group.

We would like to acknowledge and thank all stakeholders and people with personal experience, including family members and friends, who took part in the consultation process.

A special thanks to the blueVoices members who appear in many of the photos throughout.

Finding your way back and other resources in *The way back* series have been proudly funded with donations from The Movember Foundation.

PROVIDING FEEDBACK

This is a new resource... we welcome all feedback, comments and suggestions.

Please email suicideprevention@beyondblue.org.au



Hunter
PRIMARY
CARE



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This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

MY CONTACTS

General Practitioner

Phone _____

Other

Phone _____

Mental Health Service

Phone _____

Other

Phone _____

Counsellor

Phone _____

Other

Phone _____

EMERGENCY CONTACTS

Lifeline

13 11 14

www.lifeline.org.au

Suicide Call Back Service

1300 659 467

www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

Poison Information Service

13 11 26

Ambulance and Police

000

beyondblue

1300 22 4636

www.beyondblue.org.au

Other

Phone _____

Phone _____

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Where to find more information

beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au

Learn more about anxiety, depression and suicide prevention, or talk through your concerns with our Support Service. Our trained mental health professionals will listen, provide information, advice and brief counselling, and point you in the right direction so you can seek further support.

 1300 22 4636

 Email or  chat to us online at www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

Head to Health

www.headtohealth.gov.au

Head to Health can help you find free and low-cost, trusted online and phone mental health resources.



Finding your way back and other resources in *The way back* series have been proudly funded with donations from The Movember Foundation.



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