



Media Release

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2024 Australian Mental Health Prize winners announced

UNSW Sydney proudly announces the winners of the 2024 Australian Mental Health Prize, celebrating individuals who have made significant impacts in mental health through cultural security, lived experience, professional innovation, and community support.

The winners were presented by the Hon. Emma McBride MP, Assistant Minister for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention and the Hon. Rose Jackson MLC Minister for Mental Health.

Category	2024 Winner
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	Professor Juli Coffin (Broome, WA): Professor Juli Coffin, a leading Aboriginal researcher deeply connected to Nyangumarta country in the Pilbara, is dedicated to improving the social and emotional well-being of Aboriginal youth. She created the Yawardani Jan-ga Equine Assisted Learning program, based in the Kimberley region, which harnesses the healing power of horses to offer a culturally grounded alternative to conventional therapies. The program fosters trust, connection, and empowerment among Aboriginal young people, providing a safe space for control and self-reflection. Yawardani Jan-ga - meaning "horses helping" in the Yawuru language - reflects Juli's mission to incorporate cultural security into health and education systems. As the Ellison Professor of Aboriginal Young Peoples' Social and Emotional Wellbeing at Murdoch University, Professor Coffin is committed to long-term, community-driven solutions that honour Aboriginal knowledge and support healing on Aboriginal terms.
Lived Experience	Dr. Louise Byrne (Barlows Hill, Queensland): Dr. Louise Byrne is a pioneering advocate in the Lived Experience movement. Drawing from her personal journey with mental health and adversity, Louise has become a leading figure in embedding Lived Experience roles within and beyond the mental health sector. Her groundbreaking 15-year research program has established a comprehensive evidence base that promotes the value of Lived Experience as a distinct discipline and outlines strategies to support this unique workforce. Louise's leadership in initiatives such as the National Lived Experience (Peer) Workforce Development Guidelines has provided practical steps to embed Lived Experience within mental health services across Australia. Her influence extends globally through her roles at RMIT University and Yale University, and through her strategic consulting and training.

Category	2024 Winner
Professional	<p>Professor Michael Berk (Geelong, Victoria): Professor Michael Berk is a distinguished mental health researcher whose work has significantly reshaped the treatment landscape of psychiatric disorders both in Australia and globally. As Director of the Institute for Mental and Physical Health and Clinical Translation (IMPACT) at Deakin University, his early research led to the first randomised controlled trials showing the effectiveness of medications for bipolar disorder, which are now standard treatments worldwide. One of his team’s most innovative contributions is using stem cell technology for drug discovery and repurposing. By developing a platform with patient-derived stem cells, Michael’s team can identify existing medications to treat psychiatric disorders, speeding up the development of new treatments. This approach is opening new avenues for conditions like bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and chronic fatigue syndrome.</p>
Community Hero	<p>Dr. Marilyn June Anderson (Cessnock, NSW): Dr Marilyn June Anderson, a lifelong advocate for mental health and crisis intervention, has dedicated over 25 years of service at Lifeline, leading initiatives that have trained over 40,000 individuals, including frontline workers, volunteers, and community members, in areas such as suicide prevention, mental health, domestic violence, grief, and loss. Starting her career in Far North Queensland, Marilyn’s leadership has transformed Lifeline into a major force for community-based mental health support, reaching communities from the NSW Hunter, Central Coast, and New England regions to remote areas in Victoria and Alice Springs. Driven by a belief in the power of community and the necessity for people to have the tools to support each other in times of crisis, she views her role as a calling, not just a career, aiming to make Lifeline a cornerstone of mental health support, especially in rural and regional areas where such services are often limited.</p>

More detailed information about each of the winners, including background, suggested discussion topics, quotes, and photographs, is available [here](#).

Professor Allan Fels, past winner and co-chair of the Australian Mental Health Prize Advisory Group said: “The dedication of this year’s winners highlights the power of personal experience, cultural security, and scientific innovation in mental health. Their work offers hope and tangible support to countless Australians. We are honoured to celebrate their achievements, inspiring us to prioritise mental wellbeing for everyone.”

UNSW Vice-Chancellor and President, Professor Attila Brungs, added: “These winners embody the spirit of innovation and commitment in mental health advocacy, research, and support. I congratulate them on driving meaningful change and inspiring a more inclusive and compassionate approach to mental wellbeing.”

For more details about the Australian Mental Health Prize, visit www.australianmentalhealthprize.org.au.

Issued by Lanham Media on behalf of the Australian Mental Health Prize – UNSW Sydney.

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Notes for Media:

Available for interview:

- Winners of the 2024 Australian Mental Health Prize:
 - Dr. Juli Coffin (Broome, WA) – Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander category.
 - Dr. Louise Byrne (Barlows Hill, Queensland) – Lived Experience category.
 - Professor Michael Berk (Geelong, Victoria) – Professional category.
 - Dr. Marilyn June Anderson (Cessnock, NSW) – Community Hero category.
- Lucy Brogden AM, Co-chair of the Australian Mental Health Prize Committee.
- Professor Allan Fels AO, Co-chair of the Australian Mental Health Prize Committee.
- Scientia Professor Henry Brodaty AO, Scientia Professor of Ageing and Mental Health, UNSW Medicine & Health Sydney.

Background:

The Australian Mental Health Prize was established in 2016 by UNSW Sydney to recognise Australians who have made outstanding contributions to promoting mental health or preventing and treating mental illness.

Mental illnesses are common and highly disabling. In any given year, one in five adult Australians and one in seven children aged 4 to 17 will experience some form of mental illness. One in three Australians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime. Mental illness significantly impacts a person's ability to work, earn a living and maintain close relationships.

Recent statistics highlight the scale and impact of mental health challenges in Australia:

- **Youth Mental Health:** A quarter of Australians aged 16-24 are experiencing a mental illness at any given time. Many people first experience symptoms during adolescence.
- **Suicide Rates:** More than 3,000 Australians die by suicide each year, with men being at greatest risk but least likely to seek help.
- **Prevalence of Depression and Anxiety:** Around one million Australian adults experience depression, and over two million suffer from anxiety each year. Depression ranks as the third highest burden of all diseases in Australia.
- **Impact on Vulnerable Communities:** Indigenous Australians experience significantly higher rates of psychological distress compared to the general population and have lower access to mental health services. LGBTIQ+ individuals also face very high rates of depression and psychological distress and are the most at-risk group in Australia for suicide.
- **Impact on Women:** Women are more likely to experience depression and anxiety during pregnancy and in the year following childbirth.
- **Chronic Mental Health Conditions:** According to the 2021 Australian Census, mental health issues have now surpassed all other chronic illnesses, with over 2.2 million Australians reporting a diagnosed mental illness.
- **Economic Impact:** The cost of mental illness and suicide to Australia is estimated to be around \$220 billion annually, as reported by the Productivity Commission.

Why establish the Australian Mental Health Prize?

Australia has led the way internationally in many aspects of mental health such as community awareness, public advocacy and innovative services. This includes innovative programs such as *beyondblue*, a mental health and wellbeing support organisation, and *headspace*, the national network of youth mental health services. Our open public discourse involving politicians and high-profile individuals occurs in few other countries.

The Australian Mental Health Prize:

- Acknowledges and recognises the important and ground-breaking work that many Australians are doing for mental health
- Raises public awareness on the importance of mental health and
- Provides an incentive to improve services and outcomes for people with mental illness.

What are the criteria for the Australian Mental Health Prize?

The Prize is awarded annually to Australians who have made *outstanding contributions to the promotion of mental health or the prevention or treatment of mental illness – in areas such as advocacy, research or service provision.*

Who is involved with the Prize?

The Prize has been established by a group of eminent Australians in partnership with UNSW. Co-chaired by Lucy Brogden AM and Professor Allan Fels AO, the Prize Advisory Group comprises: Sophie Scott, Melinda Upton, Jeremy Coggin, Associate Professor Mat Coleman, UNSW Scientia Professor Henry Brodaty AO, UNSW Professor Kimberlie Dean, UNSW Scientia Professor Philip Mitchell AM, UNSW Professor Valsamma Eapen and UNSW Professor Maree Toombs.

