



Media Release – Embargoed Until Thursday October 7th, 2021

STORY AT A GLANCE: As concerning figures show 800,000 Australians live with a serious mental health condition (including 300,000 with a severe mental illness) a new network is being launched to help support people in the XXX area with a mental health condition.

The ‘Finding North’ project is free to join and has been created by the not-for-profit Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia (MIFA). The initiative will link people with a mental health condition to others ... to share stories and inspire others with their experiences. It has been set up as a very safe and secure platform.

STORY IN FULL: A huge 3.8 million Australians now live with a mental illness – including 800,000 people who live with a serious mental health condition. The Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia (MIFA) highlights 300,000 people now experience severe mental illness with additional complexities that severely affect the quality of their lives. Latest data shows 62% of all GP presentations are now for mental health issues.

The not-for-profit Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia is highlighting nearly half of all Australians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime.

The Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia has announced today (Thursday October 7th, 2021) it is establishing a vital new much needed network which will directly support people in the XXX area who have mental health issues. It is a safe and secure platform. An APP will be released soon. It enables people with mental health issues to connect no matter where they are. The Network is free to join.

The unique new network – put simply – is aimed squarely at people who have lived with a mental health condition. One of its aims is to help them share their important stories with others facing similar issues.

MIFA CEO, Tony Stevenson, says it will all be done in a highly confidential and private manner.

MIFA says there are numerous reasons why people with a mental health issue should join the new network which is called "Finding North".

MIFA highlights the network will connect people on a local and a national level; help them work their way through issues around stigma and the network is, of course, a place where people can be themselves and help others.

MIFA CEO Tony Stevenson said, "This project will break down barriers, like distance, by allowing people to connect whenever they wish. What I love about the initiative is it promotes social connectedness, which for people with a mental health issue, is just critical."

Tony points out the Finding North project will show people how to use their influence to create positive change.

Tony Stevenson added, "This is very much about bringing many voices together to support each other. It is about actually strengthening those voices."

Through the project people can:

- Connect with others around Australia.
- Post information in the live chat section.
- Join numerous group discussions on different mental health topics.
- Take part in special events held on the Network ... such as guest speakers or training.

Joining up could not be easier. Simply go to www.findingnorthnetwork.com.au. Then simply click on 'Join Finding North' and fill in some basic detail and submit. Once your application is approved, you immediately get an email inviting you to join the Network. It really is that simple.

Tony Stevenson said, "Many people with mental health conditions have periods where they feel very isolated and very alone. This Network provides a safe space for people to read and hear inspiring stories of recovery. It is about strong connection and belonging. There is very real power in every individual's experience."

"Obviously, there are opportunities for people to help others by sharing experience or giving feedback. This may involve talking to a friend who is going

through something or providing formal feedback to a mental health service about how things could be improved.”

“Clearly learning to share your story is far from easy. It can be a very scary thing. The reality is it is a very powerful thing to do. It helps others share their stories too. It can change people’s perspective on what it actually means to live with a mental health condition. It breaks down the many myths and stereotypes.”

The Finding North Network is not public. It can only be viewed by anyone who is a member of the actual Network. It has been specifically designed to allow for very limited personal details for those wanting to maintain anonymity. If people want to maintain full privacy, you can select ‘Hide Your Profile’ from the main directory ... which, simply puts, only the Admins of the initiative can see your profile.

Members can maintain their anonymity as much as they like. Other Network members can only see the first name and the initial of the last name of the other person ... plus their town or city (for time zone purposes).

Tony Stevenson added, “We have specifically developed this important project to connect passionate people and ideas together. It is about learning from each other.”

“What this is all about is influencing other people and it is spearheaded by people who have lived experience of a mental health condition. We have a very long history of providing free services to the community.”

“This important project has been designed very much in partnership with people who have experience of mental health issues. They told us they wanted something that was hopeful, uplifting and progressive. They highlighted that everybody’s experience is unique. So many people have been on very big journeys.”

MIFA plans to hold free e-symposiums in the next 18 months. It will provide an opportunity for members to showcase their remarkable work to others. MIFA wants members of the public, mental health service providers, professionals and government to be part of this process so they can hear directly from people what their aspirations are for the future of Australia’s mental health system.

The APP is under development and will be launched in the not-too-distant future.

Tony Stevenson added, "We want to highlight, in the first instance, always talk to your GP. They will help you get connected to clinical support if you need it."

"We are simply not doing enough to tackle the issue of mental health. The system is clearly fragmented and dysfunctional. There are significant gaps in the system. It is very difficult for people to know exactly where to go to get the right help for their mental health needs."

**Media enquiries to Media Key on 03 9769 6488 or 0409 420 112
Tony Stevenson is available for interviews**

State/Territory Data:

New South Wales:

- 250,000 people in NSW are estimated to have a serious mental illness.
- 100,000 people in NSW are estimated to have a severe mental illness.

Victoria:

- 200,000 people in Victoria are estimated to have a serious mental illness.
- 75,000 people in Victoria are estimated to have a severe mental illness.

Queensland:

- 160,000 people in Queensland are estimated to have a serious mental illness.
- 60,000 people in Queensland are estimated to have a severe mental illness.

South Australia:

- 50,000 people in South Australia are estimated to have a serious mental illness.
- 20,000 people in South Australia are estimated to have a severe mental illness.

Western Australia:

- 80,000 people in Western Australia are estimated to have a serious mental illness.
- 30,000 people in WA are estimated to have a severe mental illness.

Tasmania:

- 15,000 people in Tasmania are estimated to have a serious mental illness.
- 6,000 people in Tasmania are estimated to have a severe mental illness.

The Northern Territory:

- 10,000 people in the Northern Territory are estimated to have a serious mental illness.
- 3,000 people in the NT are estimated to have a severe mental illness.

The ACT:

- 15,000 people in the ACT are estimated to have a serious mental illness.
- 5,000 people in the ACT are estimated to have a severe mental illness.

A question and answers extra information from the Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia About 'Finding North'

1. Explain what the Finding North network is.

Finding North Network is a safe and secure website and APP that enables people to connect wherever they are. Like other online community platforms, it promotes social connectedness, networking and exchanging of information. It also breaks down barriers such as distance by allowing people to connect online at whatever time they choose.

2. Who is it aimed at?

People who have personally lived with a mental health condition that may:

- want to connect with others who “have been there too”
- want to join the movement of speaking openly about what it is like to live with a mental health condition without fear or judgement
- want to explore how they might tell their own story in a safe environment amongst their peers
- want to support others to tell their story and use their influence to create change
- want a better future for others who have yet to live with a mental health condition

We wanted to create an online national network that brings many voices together to strengthen and support each other, and to ultimately increase the amount of people who can use their experience to influence community awareness and advise on how to build a better mental health system into the future.

3. How does it work?

You join up and participate as much or as little as you are comfortable with. Finding North Network enables network members to:

- Connect with others all around Australia.
- Post information, thoughts or questions in the live chat section.
- Join group discussions that align with their interest e.g., leadership and peer work.
- Collect and share resources through their own personal portfolio.
- Participate in Finding North Network events such as guest speakers, training and learning circles for personal and/or professional development.
- Gain access to information about organisations and projects relevant to people using their expertise of living with a mental health condition in a leadership/influencing capacity.

4. How easy is it for people to join?

Visit findingnorthnetwork.com.au/ and simply click on **Join Finding North** and complete your name, email address, whether you have firsthand experience of living with a mental health condition and submit. The finding North Network Team will then approve your request and you will receive an email inviting you to join the network. There are a few more personal questions to answer should you wish to (if you don't, you can choose "prefer not to say"). Once finished you will gain access to the network and be able to start participating.

5. Why would people with a mental health condition want to join this network?

Often people with mental health conditions have periods where they feel isolated and alone. Finding North Network provides a safe space for people to read and hear stories of recovery. Those simple but powerful words, "I've been there too" can provide a sense of connection and belonging. We know that there is power in every individual's lived experience and for those wanting to contribute or help others, that is a sense of hope in itself.

As people recover from periods of being unwell there are opportunities to help others through sharing your experience or give feedback. This could be talking to a friend who may be going through something or providing more formal feedback to a mental health service about how things could be improved. It could mean talking to your employer so they know how to best support you. It could also mean becoming an advocate or influential speaker on the topic of mental health and wellbeing.

Learning how to share your story is not easy. It can be scary and sometimes not go well. It can be met with fear or judgement but most of the time it is an extremely powerful thing to do. It can give other people permission to share their story too. It can show people what support is helpful and what isn't. It can change people's perspective on what it means to live with a mental health condition. It can break down myths and stereotypes. It can reduce stigma. It can change people and systems.

Established lived experience leaders may want to join as a way of helping and supporting others and to showcase the wonderful work that is happening across Australia.

6. How private is it?

The exclusive network has specific guidelines on how to participate. The network is not public and can only be viewed by anyone who is a member of the network. The network has been designed to allow for very limited personal details for those wanting to maintain their anonymity. For those who want to maintain full privacy you can select to hide your profile from the main directory, which means only Finding North Network Admins can see your profile.

One of the aims is to create a space where people can connect and network, so we wanted people to be able to share at least some personal details to be able to do this. There are other forums that may be a better alternative for people who are looking for support and want to maintain full anonymity. If you want to connect and network and learn from each other than Finding North Network if for you.

7. How safe are people with confidential information – obviously people have lots of confidential information?

We ask for personal/demographic information for reporting purposes, however the members are able to maintain their anonymity as much as they like. Their personal details are not shown in their profile and only available to Admin. Other Network members will only be able to see their first name and the initial of their last name. They will also see the town or city you are from, for time zone purposes. Other personal details are not compulsory. For further privacy, members also have the option to hide their profile completely where only Admins can view their profile or they can hide their profile in various parts of the network such as the main directory or various groups should they which to maintain a level of anonymity.

8. Why did you set this network up?

We know that there are examples of mental health lived experience leadership happening everywhere around Australia, whether it is on a personal, local, state or national level. There is currently no one single place that someone can go to learn about it or to get involved. We developed this platform hoping to connect passionate people and ideas together to learn from each other and amplify their impact.

In essence, an act of Lived Experience Leadership is an act of sharing. To be a Lived Experience Leader is to let your story out into the world, to offer your experience of mental illness as a source of comfort, or guidance, or just to say, 'I've been there too.' It can be hard to look back on dark times in your life, but for others who may have a similar story, there is no better guide than those who have been down the same path.

Right now, there is a movement empowering those with Lived Experience to have greater influence over policy and service outcomes in the mental health sector. The way people with Lived Experience utilise their insight can range from speaking to friends and family about mental health, to working as an advocate for mental health organisations. These are all acts of Lived Experience Leadership, and combined, their voices can reach beyond the immediate audience and change the understanding of mental health conditions at a greater societal level.

Finding North Network is a gathering place, a point of connection where people can see an overview of what is happening and can take off in the direction of their choosing.

9. What is your motivation behind it?

We know and have seen the power of the Lived Experience Movement and Mental Illness fellowship of Australia (MIFA) hopes to play a part in that movement by setting the vision of Finding North Network to amplify the voice and influence of people with lived experience of mental health conditions across their own lives, across their community, and in the governance, design and delivery of policies, programs and services.

MIFA also has a history of providing free services to the community to help people seek help and support. Finding North Network is another way to do this.

10. What do you visualise is the road ahead – how big can this network grow to?

Finding North is a completely new concept and brand. We designed it in partnership with people with a lived experience who said they wanted something that was hopeful, uplifting and progressive. They wanted to make sure we captured a sense of discovery and uniqueness because everyone's experience is unique and that there can be beauty in the journey of finding your way. Hence Finding North. We all have our own 'North'. Our own reason or purpose.... Only each person can say what *their* unique north is and how they navigate *their* way.

Given how new Finding North Network is, it will take some time for people to find out about it and to sign up as a member. We are effectively bringing together a community and we expect it will take at least 12 months to build the numbers up within the network. We hope to achieve 100 active members quickly; we have capacity for 500 now; and we will ramp it up from there once the interest increases.

The sky is the limit, and it is hard to determine what the future holds. We hope the network will help us improve as we grow through feedback and suggestions. Content will be driven by the network and what they feel they need and/or are willing to share. We have started a guest speaking series called *Finding My North* where people will share their journey of recovery and how they now use this experience in their day to day life. We aim to have some guest speakers coming from within the network itself.

We will also hold 3 e-symposiums over the next year and a half that will be open to anyone to attend. We hope the e-symposium will be a platform for Finding North Network Members to showcase their great work and to speak about the issues that matter most to them. MIFA would be encouraging the general public, mental health service providers, professionals and government to attend to hear directly from people what their hopes and dreams are for the future of the mental health system. MIFA is excited about the insight we will gain and how we can change to ensure people's voices are heard and are leading innovation into the future.

11. Is the network easy to join?

As long as you have internet and a decent internet browser such as google chrome or safari, you can join in with just a few clicks.

Soon there will be a finding north network APP that can be downloaded via google play or the apple store which will make it even easier to join and stay connected through most smart phones.

12. What can people actually do on the network?

- Browse on live feed to catch up on the latest post by members.
- Join groups of interest and chat with people with the same interest and discuss relevant topics.
- Post information, thoughts or questions in the live feed, groups or private chats with other members.
- Collect and share resources through their own personal portfolio.
- Participate in free events such as guest speakers, training and open discussions (we call them learning circles)

13. How big an issue is mental health in Australia?

One in 5 of us will experience a mental health condition in our lives. 800,000 people live with an on-going serious mental health condition that affects their day to day lives, requiring clinical support and community support.

300,000 people experience severe mental illness with additional complexities and considerable disadvantage including risk of homelessness, social isolation, extreme poverty due to lack of employment, long and frequent stays in mental health hospital wards, and risk of police or corrective interventions. 150,000 of those do not get any support to live well in their community.

14. Are we doing anywhere near enough to tackle the issue?

The Productivity Commission released a landmark report on Mental Health last year. They found that the system is fragmented and dysfunctional. There is a lack of clarity about which level of Government has responsibility for aspects of the mental health system, leading to significant gaps. It is difficult for people to know where to go to get the right help with their mental health needs.

15. How much meaningful support is there out there for people with mental health issues?

There is some support through a mental health plan that provides access to a psychologist. Hospital based emergency and acute mental health support is available where people can get to a hospital with mental health beds, but this only responds to crises, rather than help people to avoid a crisis when they feel they are getting unwell. Many people are discharged from hospital without having a home or the family or community supports they need.

16. Are there any key messages for people in regional areas – where arguably mental health can be more isolating?

In regional areas, specialised mental health support is often not readily available. Talk to your GP if you can or use a telehealth or on-line support option.

17. How isolated (at the current time) do you believe people with mental health issues are?

Restrictions on cross-border movement are isolating families from each other which is creating distress and isolation. Many people don't have access to family supports and may not have close relationships with people who can support them in their immediate community. Working from home has also exacerbated a feeling of isolation and disconnection with work colleagues and the feeling of being part of a community. Local sporting clubs and other community connections are also breaking down as people don't have the confidence to pay their fees or plan their memberships due to the fear of further lockdowns.

Because of the stigma surrounding severe mental health, people can take years to find the right support. This leads to alienation and social isolation. Family relationships can be strained due to the challenges of severe mental illness. People with severe mental illness report that they don't have friends, rarely get employed, and

18. If people want to know more at this stage, what do you want them to do?

Visit findingnorthnetwork.com.au or contact The Finding North Network team at info@findingnorthnetwork.com.au