



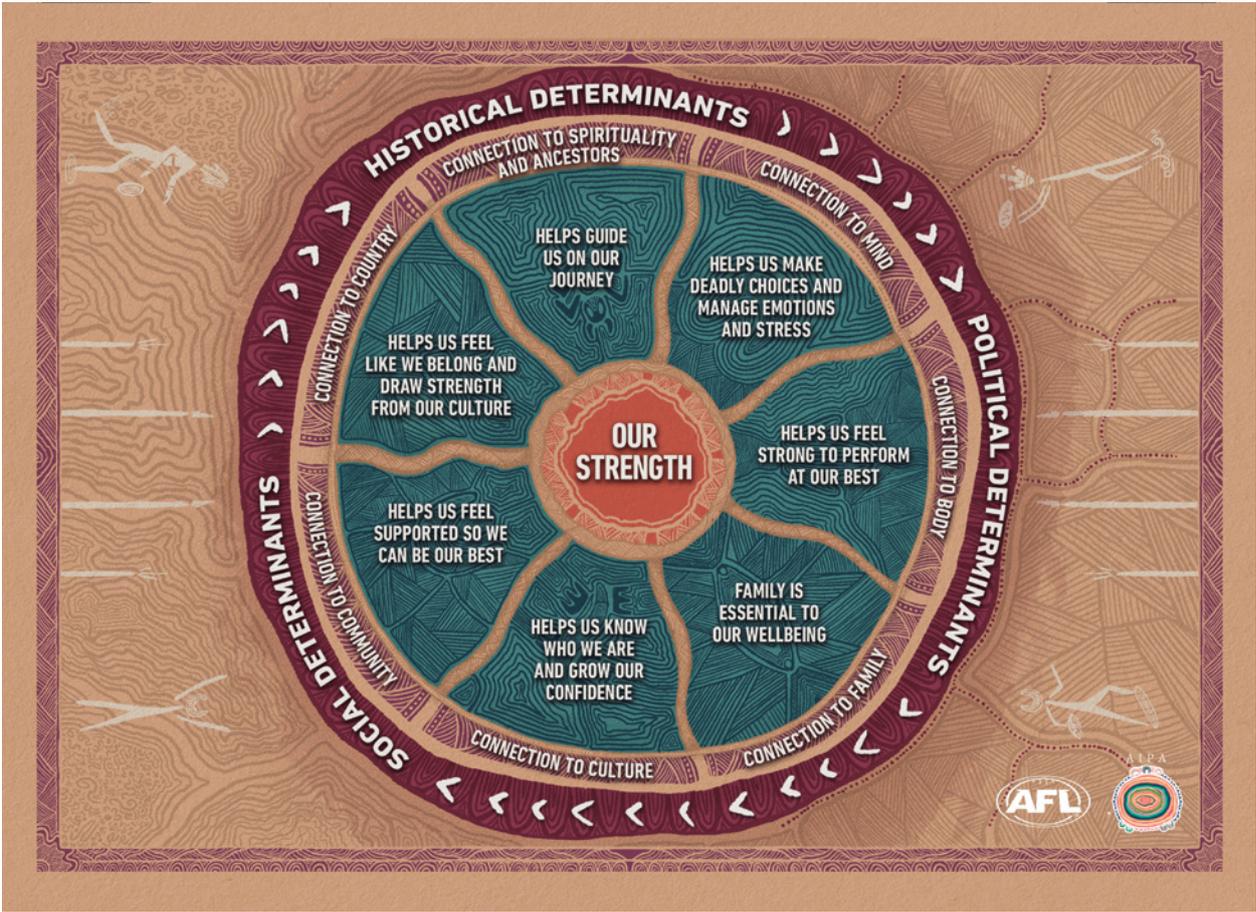
AFL and AFLW Player

MENTAL HEALTHCARE ROADMAP 2025



Acknowledgement of Country

The AFL acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and play our game. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge we play our great game on this land and respect the cultures of all First Peoples, their contribution to our nation and contribution to the game of Australian Rules Football. The AFL's Social Emotional Cultural Wellbeing Framework acknowledges the impacts of colonisation on the social and emotional wellbeing of First Nations Peoples and is committed to addressing racism and providing culturally responsive wellbeing services that support the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander players and staff.



Bawurra Yanay by Ngarbal/ Gomerioi Artist Jeremy Worrell (Wright)

In this Roadmap we acknowledge and pay respect to the knowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are unique, all with their own languages, knowledge systems, beliefs, and histories. We recognise the collective terms they prefer also vary. With respectful consideration to these preferences, typically we will specify Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples when referring to First Nations Peoples in this Roadmap. From time to time, we use the term Indigenous. However, we note that for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, this is not preferred. As such, we have only used this where we are referencing its use from another source, or it is the established use of the term, such as its use in "Indigenous Player Development Managers (IPDMs)". Where referring to individual Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, we have endeavoured to incorporate their preferences, including for example, reference to the Country they are connected to.

Message from AFL Head of Mental Health and Wellbeing

Having timely access to safe and trusted mental healthcare is essential for AFL and AFLW Players to thrive in football. A strong foundation of mental wellbeing is essential to sustain high performance. Despite the many opportunities for mental healthcare available to AFL and AFLW Players, mental healthcare services can be challenging to navigate. Over the past season the AFL Mental Health and Wellbeing Team has been working with Clubs and the AFLPA to strengthen the Industry wide supports that protect and support the mental health of current AFL and AFLW Players. The ***AFL and AFLW Player Mental Healthcare Roadmap*** is one initiative that aims to address the third pillar of the Industry mental health strategy: *Respond - provide accessible, safe and coordinated mental healthcare*. The Roadmap also acknowledges the AFL's commitment to the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Players and the provision of culturally responsive mental healthcare that aligns with Indigenous Health Principles.

There are several mental healthcare services available to current AFL and AFLW Players provided by Clubs, the AFL, and the AFLPA. Because these services have different service models and access points, it can be challenging to know where to find the right help when it is needed. This Roadmap was developed to outline who provides what services and where to find the right support so that Players are equipped to make choices about their mental healthcare needs. The Roadmap also sets standards of safety and quality assurance and communicates shared principles that underpin these mental healthcare services to build trust in mental healthcare provided in the Industry.

Everyone in the Industry has a role in protecting and promoting the mental health and wellbeing of Players. The Mental Healthcare Roadmap continues to uphold our Industry's commitment to provide the highest quality of support to Players.

– **Dr Kate Hall,**

AFL Head of Mental Health and Wellbeing



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Background

Almost half of all Australians will experience mental ill-health in their lifetime, and the negative impacts on all domains of life can be profound. For professional athletes, mental ill-health may also have impacts on athletic performance. **Wellbeing is a cornerstone of sustaining high performance and supporting Player mental health is therefore an essential component of success.** Research shows athletes experience mental ill-health at rates that are similar to the general population.¹⁻³ Mental health exists on a continuum across many domains and so while AFL and AFLW Players have higher rates of wellbeing than the general Australian population,⁴ mental health conditions are also common.

Mental health changes in response to a wide range of risk and protective factors, many of which exist in people's environments. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, mental health and wellbeing is understood holistically and considers cultural strengths, such as kinship and connection to Country, as well as disruptions, such as grief, loss, racism, or cultural disconnection, that can undermine wellbeing. While athletes experience the same risks to mental health and wellbeing as everyone else, there are also risks that are unique to their sport environment.

In high performance sport, mental health is best promoted at all levels of the sport system.⁵ Initiatives should be provided across the spectrum of mental health – ranging from promoting optimal mental health and preventing mental ill-health, through to responding to mental health challenges and crises.^{6,7} As part of the third pillar of the AFL Industry Mental Health and Wellbeing strategy – Respond - and the AFL Social Emotional and Cultural Wellbeing Framework, this Roadmap outlines the service access points, roles of healthcare professionals and the guiding principles for the effective coordination of safe and culturally responsive mental healthcare for the Industry so that all current AFL and AFLW Players have access to best practice mental healthcare for their specific needs and circumstances.

Why do AFL and AFLW Players need a Mental Healthcare Roadmap?

Mental healthcare is complex, usually requiring collaboration between interdisciplinary professionals, which can make it challenging to navigate. For athletes, mental healthcare also needs to consider the high-performance sport context. In the AFL and AFLW, this requires careful consideration of how interdisciplinary professionals and external services work with each other and Club healthcare teams. Poor coordination leads to gaps in care, missed risks and frustration for Players and families.

There are several mental healthcare services commissioned by the Industry for Players. Some of these services are provided by Clubs, the AFL, and the AFLPA. They all have different service models, access points and relationships to Clubs. Describing all the service options in the one place will help everyone in the Industry navigate and coordinate these professional services. Providing this Roadmap equips Players and their support personnel to know where to seek help and empowers Players to make informed choices in navigating their own mental healthcare. The Roadmap also ensures that mental healthcare services are underpinned by the same foundational principles, setting the direction for safe, culturally responsive, effective, and accessible delivery of mental healthcare services.



Aims of the Mental Healthcare Roadmap

The Roadmap aims to communicate:

1. Where to get the right help at the right time
2. Who delivers what services and supports
3. What principles guide these services



How was the Roadmap developed?

The Roadmap is an initiative developed by the AFL Mental Health and Wellbeing Team in consultation with Industry stakeholders through the 2025 seasons (see Figure 1).

The Roadmap was developed through:

1. **Review of scientific literature and models of healthcare.**
2. **Benchmarking of current practice across the national and international sport Industry.**
3. **Industry wide consultation through a series of externally facilitated consultation sessions with psychologists, doctors, health professionals, Social Emotional Wellbeing practitioners, Player Development Managers (PDMs) and Indigenous Player Development Managers (IPDMs) from the AFL, Clubs, AFLPA, AFL Referral Network and other sporting organisations.**
4. **Consultation with current and past Players.**





Figure 1: Roadmap Development

What does the research tell us about best practice for mental healthcare in elite sport?

Best practice recommendations from the expert literature in mental healthcare in elite sport and the fields of sports psychology and psychiatry highlight the need for sport organisations to approach athlete mental health from the following perspectives:

Holistic. Mental health is viewed as involving many related domains of functioning, such as emotional, social, cognitive, neurobiological and interpersonal.^{5,6} Mental healthcare service planning should address each of these related domains.⁵

Integrated and Interdisciplinary. Recovery from mental ill-health is best achieved through an integrated approach involving both informal psychosocial supports and interdisciplinary service providers (e.g., psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, dietitians, physiotherapists).

Evidence-informed. Treatments should be guided by the latest scientific evidence. First line treatments include psychological skills training, behaviour change, stress management, and promoting social networks. Psychological interventions such as cognitive and behavioural therapies may be delivered alone or in conjunction with pharmacological intervention.^{5,7}

Contextual. Treating practitioners must understand the high-performance sport environment and sport system.⁷ When the severity of the mental health condition impacts the athletes' ability to safely train or play, interventions including modifications for training practices may also be an important part of treatment and recovery.⁸

Embedded and External. Service options should be accessible and embedded in the sport, as well as provision of pathways to external supports.⁹

Proactive. The best outcomes for treatment come from early intervention at the first sign of psychological distress or emerging symptoms.⁵ Early intervention is best placed to reduce symptoms and support athlete performance.

Trauma-informed. Trauma-informed approaches reduce the risk of re-traumatisation and promote recovery. Crisis support after exposure to traumatic experiences are essential. Trauma-related interventions may also be needed.⁹

Crisis Responses. Crisis support should be embedded, accessible, proactive and timely.⁷ Expert suicide prevention at times of acute psychological distress is a necessity.

Individualised. Treatment should be individualised, and consider the athlete's unique individual, cultural, psychosocial and contextual factors.⁵ Individualised treatment should be informed by cultural praxis.¹⁰



The Destination: The Roadmap



The Roadmap describes four components:

- I. Principles that underpin safe and culturally responsive mental healthcare services for Players,**
- II. Levels of mental healthcare available to Players,**
- III. Mental health services available to Players and their access points,**
- IV. Roles and responsibilities of people and organisations providing mental healthcare to Players.**

I. Principles of Mental Healthcare

The following cross-cutting principles ensure the mental healthcare services available to Players are underpinned by a shared set of values that continue to build trust in mental healthcare for the Industry.

Culturally Responsive

All Players have access to services that are responsive to their cultural needs. Cultural responsiveness requires cultural humility and knowledge, the recognition of power imbalances and sensitivity and respect for individual diversity.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Players, culturally responsive care means that wellbeing is understood holistically, where the self is inseparable from family, community, and Culture, and the interconnection between social, emotional, spiritual and physical health is recognised. Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) services may include Cultural healing and/or mentorship.

Player-Centric

The preferences, needs and values of the Player are respected, not just the condition to be treated, and the holistic health of the Player is prioritised over performance. Players are involved in decisions related to their mental healthcare and their voice is respected.

Affirming and Inclusive

Players have the right to dignity, respect, and non-discrimination. Services are contextualised for each unique individual and are responsive to culture, gender, sexuality and neurodivergent needs.

Trusted and Safe

Service providers uphold their ethical and legal obligations and provide evidence-based treatments. The choice of independent and external services is provided and appropriate complaint processes for breaches in ethical standards are made available.

Private and sensitive information is strictly protected, and legal and ethical obligations of healthcare practitioners is respected. Confidential information is only shared under circumstances where practitioners are legally allowed to disclose, such as when informed consent is sought, granted and documented. Professional boundaries are maintained and dual relationships avoided.

Accessible and Timely

Players can easily and efficiently access mental healthcare professionals and services at any level of care. Services are implemented in a timely manner without extensive waiting lists so that Players can access the right care at the right time. If waiting lists do apply, communication about expected waitlist times is proactive. There is responsive critical incident and crisis care available to Players 24/7.

Equitable

All Players from both AFL and AFLW programs have equity in access to mental healthcare. This includes access to appropriate services that meet the Player's treatment needs.

Interdisciplinary

A range of mental healthcare professionals from different disciplines and specialities are accessible to Players and care is coordinated as needed.

Provided by Credentialed Mental Healthcare Practitioners

Mental healthcare treatments are delivered by credentialed mental health professionals who have specialist training and are bound by ethical and professional standards of practice that ensures Player safety. The Industry only engages or endorses providers who meet the highest ethical and professional standards.

Developmentally Appropriate

Service provision considers the developmental age and career stage of the Player and is tailored to be developmentally appropriate. Post career transition planning considers mental healthcare needs.

Empowering

Player capacity in health literacy is developed so they are empowered to navigate their own mental healthcare both during and beyond their playing careers.

II. Levels of Mental Healthcare

Stepped care is a best practice model of mental healthcare¹¹ where different 'levels' of care are provided in different settings for different needs. The service level is matched to an individual based on their specific needs such as the severity of their mental health condition. A fundamental component of stepped care models is that the right level of mental healthcare is provided at the right time. Moving seamlessly between the various levels by stepping up or down as required is incredibly important in recovery. Care may be provided by different professionals across the levels, and a care coordinator is commonly adopted to coordinate these services. Figure 2 shows the four levels of care and the services that are available at each level.

When best practice of stepped care is achieved, each of the levels of mental healthcare are identified and resourced with credentialled, competent and safe providers. Players can confidently and easily connect to the right level of care and support in a timely way, with coordinated transition between levels. Players will be empowered and self-determined in their mental healthcare journey and practitioners will coordinate care within and between the levels.





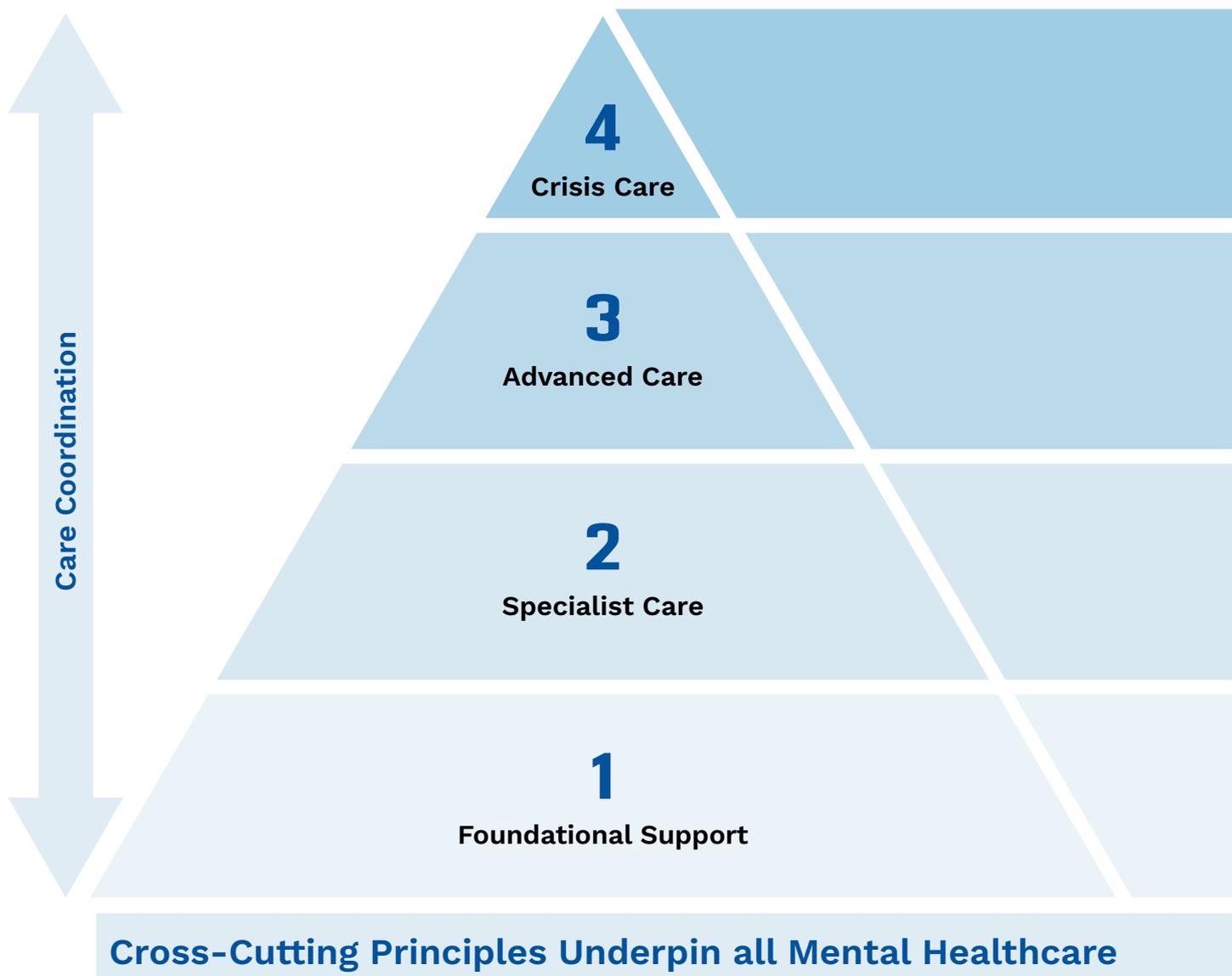


Figure 2: The Levels of Mental Healthcare

The Four Levels of mental healthcare start with the base of the pyramid, representing broadly accessible, lower-intensity interventions that are readily accessible to all Players in their Clubs. The levels escalate as condition severity increases, to more specialised care. The apex of the pyramid acknowledges advanced or crisis resources are preserved for complex or acute responses. Care coordination between the levels is important.

Severity

Services

Interventions that reduce suicide and self-harm risk

- 24/7 Helpline
- Individualised safety planning
- Public or private hospitals
- Emergency services

Treatment for severe conditions in inpatient or residential facilities

- Private or public hospitals or institutions

Targeted support for moderate conditions

- AFL Mental Health Referral Network
- AFLPA Navigation Service

Psychosocial and holistic wellbeing support
Frontline care for mild to moderate conditions
Sustained care for chronic conditions that have relapse episodes

- Foundational support – PDM, IPDM
- Frontline and Sustained Care – Club Psychologist, Club Doctor

Step Up and Down Levels as Required

III. Services and Access Points for Mental Healthcare

The services available to AFL and AFLW Players at each level are outlined below. Further service and referral information for healthcare providers is available in Appendix 1.

1. Foundational Support

Foundational Support promotes Player mental health in their sporting and personal environments, and helps Players cope with the psychological and social challenges related to mental health conditions, through:



Psychosocial and holistic wellbeing support. Psychosocial support focuses on social, emotional, and relational wellbeing, and may include environmental, lived experience or informal supports. Holistic wellbeing support also considers the interconnection of cultural, physical and spiritual dimensions of health (see Figure 3 for life domains that form holistic Player wellbeing).

Frontline care. Frontline care provides identification of and early support for mild to moderate conditions and may include basic medication. If needed, referrals are made to other levels of care.

Sustained care. Players with chronic mental health conditions may have episodic need to move up and down the levels throughout their playing lives in response to relapse or recovery patterns. In sustained care, Players are supported to navigate the level of care that they need at any given time.

Psychosocial and Holistic Wellbeing Support

Club-based Wellbeing Team and Support Networks

Support may be provided by individuals in a Player's personal and sporting environment — such as teammates, coaching and high-performance staff, PDMs, IPDMs, family members, or friends. Cultural or spiritual advisors and Elders may also be engaged.

Access to these services. All Players have access to the Club-based Player Development and Wellbeing Team.

Frontline and Sustained Care Services

Club-based Healthcare team

The Club-based healthcare team provide mental health monitoring and screening, enabling early identification of mental health challenges. They have a direct role in mental healthcare for Players through assessment, treatment planning, external referrals, medication management and care coordination.

Access to these services. All Players have access to the Club-based healthcare team.



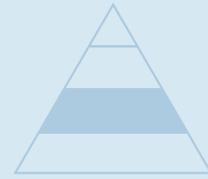


Figure 3: Holistic Approach to Foundational Support for Player Wellbeing.
Adapted from Schinke et al. (2024)⁵

Holistic player wellbeing is a dynamic interplay of many different life domains. These aspects form the foundation of Player mental health and are supported by Club-based wellbeing, player development and healthcare staff, as well as informal and formal support networks.

2. Specialist Care

Specialist care is where Players receive more targeted support from mental health professionals for moderate to severe conditions. These are usually low intensity mental healthcare services (e.g. one appointment a week).



Specialist Care Services

AFL Centralised Mental Health Referral Network

Funded directly by the AFL, the centralised network of mental health practitioners provides assessment and treatment for mental health conditions. The network includes First Nations psychologists who have expertise in social, emotional and cultural wellbeing. These services use a shared care model where multiple healthcare providers work together to coordinate and manage treatment, prioritising care coordination between Club healthcare staff and the provider in the network.

Access to these services. Referrals to the provider are made by the Club Doctor or Psychologist. Referrals for AIPA psychologists can also be made by Indigenous Player Development Managers.

AFLPA Mental Health Navigation Service

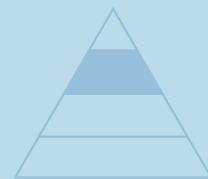
The AFLPA Mental Health Navigation Service provides assistance to help Players navigate the mental health system and the services available in the Industry. Services are independent, though, where appropriate, players are encouraged to discuss their care with their Club Doctor or Club Psychologist to optimise their wellbeing and care.

Access to these services. These services are available to all AFLPA members, by contacting wellbeing@aflplayers.com.au or 1800 448 903.

Club staff and other stakeholders can also access the Navigation service on behalf of an AFLPA member.

3. Advanced Care

These mental healthcare services are for severe or complex conditions that require greater or more intensive support than specialist care. Advanced care can only be delivered by private hospitals or institutions, such as voluntary inpatient or residential treatment programs. The Player must be open and willing to enter these treatment programs.



Advanced Care Services

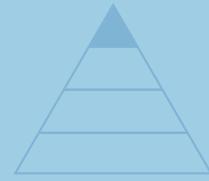
Residential Facilities

Residential facilities have daily programs focused on stabilisation and recovery provided in a safe and structured environment. Care is delivered by an interdisciplinary team to address the personalised goals and complex care needs for individuals experiencing severe mental health conditions or addiction. Every residential service has its own delivery model, but usually involves intensive treatment provided in both group and individual formats as well as education and aftercare planning.

Access to these services. Referrals are made through the Club healthcare team.

4. Crisis Care

Crisis care refers to risk assessment, management and safety planning in instances where a Player may be at risk of harm to themselves. Private practitioners, Club Psychologists and Club Doctors are not always available for crisis care (e.g. after hours or out of competition).



Crisis Care Services

24/7 Helpline

This service provides on demand support at any time of the day or night. Services provided include counselling, suicide prevention interventions, and crisis response.

Access to these services. All Players have access to the crisis helpline at any time.

Risk Mitigation and Safety Planning

A crisis intervention to secure a Player's safety may involve attending a psychiatric triage service at a hospital or calling 000 or making a referral for an admission to a residential facility for stabilisation. Most commonly, intervention involves a brief suicide prevention intervention involving the development of a short term, individualised safety plan. A safety plan mobilises professional and non-professional supports in a Player's life to provide immediate crisis support.

Access to these services: Club Doctors and Psychologists will lead the risk assessment, management and safety planning.

Risk of suicide

In the event that a Player is identified as being at mild risk of harm to themselves, a safety plan may be developed where a Player remains in a safe environment. A safety plan is individualised but may involve daily support from family and peers, professionals and ongoing access to 24/7 helplines. Where risk to the Player is assessed as moderate to severe, an admission to a residential facility may be required (within 24-48 hours). Where risk to a Player is assessed as severe and imminent, emergency services and psychiatric triage at a hospital may be required.

Acute inpatient admissions can be voluntary or involuntary and are accessed through the private and public mental healthcare systems. Due to the risk of suicide, enhanced expertise and governance in acute settings is required. These services are reserved only for occasions where a Player may need to be stabilised for their own safety and are accessed through an admitting psychiatrist or psychiatric triage at a hospital.

State and territory-specific legislation governs the assessment, treatment, and rights of people with mental illness. Each Australian state and territory has its own version of the Mental Health Act, but they share common principles grounded in patient rights, least restrictive care, and informed consent.

IV. Roles and Responsibilities in Mental Healthcare

The AFL, AFLPA, Players and all Club staff have a role in creating and maintaining healthy environments that support the psychosocial health and wellbeing of Players. At each level of the system, there are essential roles and responsibilities that are held by key people in order to adequately ensure safe and effective mental healthcare is available to all Club Players. Club leaders have governance responsibilities for mental healthcare providers engaged by the Club. Healthcare practitioners also have specific roles in the assessment and treatment of mental health conditions. The table below shows the common roles and responsibilities of different people in the Industry with regards to mental health.

Roles and Responsibilities in Mental Health	Industry Leaders*	All Club staff^	Players	Club Doctor	Club Psychologist
Prioritising Mental Health	●	●	●	●	●
Meeting workplace psychosocial health and safety obligations	●	●	●	●	●
Identifying and mitigating risks to mental health in the sporting environment and schedule	●	●	●	●	●
Identifying and mitigating risks to mental health from media and social media	●	●	●	●	●
Contributing to a psychologically safe team environment**	●	●	●	●	●
Prevention and providing education on protecting and promoting good mental health	●	●		●	●
Ensuring only credentialed providers are engaged or endorsed	●	●			
Ensuring adequate resourcing for Mental Healthcare	●				
Providing and promoting accessible pathways for Mental Healthcare	●	●		●	●
Monitoring and screening for Mental Health symptoms				●	●
Supporting safe return to play	●	●	●	●	●
Encouraging help seeking and help giving	●	●	●	●	●
Mental Health assessment				●	●
Mental Health treatment				●	●
Mental Health specialist referral				●	●

* Leaders includes AFL commission, Club executives and boards, Club General Managers, AFL Executive, AFLPA Executive.

^ Includes PDMs, IPDMs, healthcare staff, coaches

** For a comprehensive list of risk and protective factors for Player mental health refer to the AFL Industry Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2027

Table 1: Roles and Responsibilities Across the Industry in Mental Healthcare

Mental Healthcare Practitioners

Mental healthcare practitioners have specific skills and defined roles and responsibilities in providing mental healthcare. Practitioners hold national registration with AHPRA or AASW and complete ongoing continuing professional development every year. All registered mental health practitioners have a defined duty of care and professional obligation to ensure the safety, wellbeing, and rights of their clients and/or patients. These responsibilities are grounded in ethical guidelines, legal requirements, and professional standards specific to their role. For further information about the roles and expertise of different mental health professionals refer to Appendix 2.

Club Psychologist. Club Psychologists are highly trained in the assessment, treatment and management of mental health conditions. They provide screening and monitoring of mental health and frontline and sustained mental healthcare for Players. Refer to Appendix 3 for guidance on scope of practice for Club Psychologists.

External Psychologist. Psychologists external to the club hold endorsed competencies in the treatment of mental health conditions. They may enter into a shared care arrangement with the Club Doctor and Club Psychologist to treat moderate to severe mental health conditions.

Club Doctor. The Club Doctor is often the primary point of contact for mental healthcare for Players. Their role includes screening and monitoring of mental health, coordination of specialist care, referral to other mental health specialists and medication management in step with sport integrity requirements.

Psychiatrist. The role of the Psychiatrist is primarily in assessment and diagnosis, medication management, and intervention for severe or complex mental health conditions. Like external Psychologists, they enter a shared care arrangement with the Club Doctor and/or Psychologist.

Club Wellbeing Staff

Player Development Managers. PDMs play a key role in Foundational Support for Players. The PDM may connect Players to the professional support services available through Club-based mental healthcare staff and/or the AFLPA Navigation Service. They may contribute to psychosocial care, which complements and supports the professional services provided by mental healthcare practitioners (see Appendix 4 for an overview of the PDM role). If a PDM is a registered health practitioner, they may contribute to the care coordination of the Player.

Indigenous Player Development Managers. IPDMs support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Players' holistic social, emotional, and cultural wellbeing. They offer expert cultural guidance, psychosocial support and identify social and emotional wellbeing needs in step with Indigenous Ways. IPDMs also guide Clubs in developing culturally responsive environments that strengthen identity, resilience, and overall wellbeing. They may also assist in connecting Players with culturally responsive care, including through the AIPA network.

Care Coordination

In stepped care and interdisciplinary mental healthcare, support to the Player in coordinating different practitioners and levels of care is provided by a dedicated role who acts as a care coordinator. Care coordination is the structured process of identifying, organising, and managing a Player's comprehensive mental health needs, ensuring all aspects—social, emotional, psychological, cultural, and practical—are addressed collaboratively. Effective coordination ensures that every professional involved knows their role and gaps are minimised.¹²

Care Coordinator. The Care Coordinator is a designated individual responsible for ensuring coordinated care through navigating the complex network of Club-based supports, sporting bodies, and external services. This role may be fulfilled by a range of individuals, depending on the Player's needs and circumstances.



Making it Work



Clinical Governance

The AFL Industry sits within the broader healthcare ecosystem, including the range of primary, tertiary and private healthcare settings who may be involved in delivering mental healthcare. **Clinical governance sets clear standards for healthcare and ensures systems are in place so that Players in the AFL and AFLW receive safe, ethical, high quality and culturally responsive care and sporting organisations are protected from unethical practice that results in legal and reputational harm.** It is important for the AFL Industry to only engage or endorse registered health practitioners in the treatment of mental health conditions. Organisations that provide or commission healthcare services in sport must comply with national legal healthcare governance standards. These obligations are outlined in the [AFL Industry Mental Healthcare Clinical Governance Framework](#).

Duty of Care

The AFL and Clubs have a responsibility to provide Players with a safe and respectful environment that protects their health and wellbeing and minimises the risks of harm and mental ill-health. Healthcare practitioners within the Industry are bound by the [Health Practitioner Regulation National Law](#). In line with this legislation, healthcare practitioners have ethical and professional duty of care obligations to protect Players from harm while supporting their mental health and wellbeing. One of these obligations includes confidentiality, meaning that information shared with a healthcare practitioner cannot be shared with others without the Player's consent. These obligations set out by professional regulatory bodies extend beyond workplace health and safety requirements.

Practitioner Complaints Process

There are two main ways an individual can make a complaint about an AHPRA registered practitioner (e.g., Psychologist, Psychiatrist, Doctor). To make a complaint, individuals can:

1. raise a concern directly with the clinician
2. raise a complaint with the practitioner's regulatory body (AHPRA)

Complaints can be made anonymously, and AHPRA will never take action against anyone for making a complaint. Complaints can also be made by calling 1300 419 495, completing the [online complaint form](#) or completing the printable [complaint form](#) and mailing it to:

Administrative Complaints
G.P.O. Box 9958
In your capital city

Workforce Development

Continuing to enhance mental health awareness and literacy in the Industry best promotes Player wellbeing. Building capacity in the mental healthcare workforce for high performance environments is a key enabler for meeting the aims of the Roadmap. A workforce capability framework for the Industry including training pathways for early career practitioners would ensure a highly credentialed and competent workforce is mobilised to future proof the mental healthcare of Players.

Summary Statement

This Roadmap outlines the mental healthcare services available for AFL and AFLW Players and their access points. Providing this clarity helps everyone in the Industry to coordinate services and empowers Players to confidently navigate their mental healthcare journey, accessing the right level of support to meet their needs. This Roadmap also sets out the guiding principles for services, and the roles and responsibilities within the Industry to ensure that Players have timely access to ethical, culturally responsive and effective mental healthcare.



Abbreviations/Glossary of Terms

AFL – Australian Football League

AFLW – Australian Football League Women's

AFLPA – Australian Football League Players Association

AIPA – Australian Indigenous Psychology Association

AHPRA – Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency

AASW – Australian Association of Social Workers

Care coordination – A collaborative process between healthcare professionals and the patient, and their families to create a detailed and personalised plan to support someone's physical health and mental wellbeing.

Confidentiality – Refers to the legal and ethical requirements around personal or sensitive information. Practitioners cannot share private or personal information with anyone unless they have documented permission from the client/patient or there is a risk of harm.

Cultural praxis – The practice of working with athletes in ways that consider culture as central to their lived experiences, identities, and performance. Interventions and supports provided are shaped by the athlete's cultural identities and contexts, ensuring support is relevant, respectful, and effective.

Duty of care – The legal and ethical obligation of practitioners to take all reasonable steps to protect patients from harm.

Interdisciplinary care – A collaborative approach in healthcare where professionals from various disciplines work together to provide comprehensive care for patients.

IPDM – Indigenous Player Development Manager

PDM – Player Development Manager

Player – A Player of Australian Football who is contracted or listed with an AFL/W Club.

Psychological safety – Refers to the ability for individuals to feel and show their authentic selves without fear of adverse consequences which may be perceived or real. Psychological safety in sport ensures athletes are safe to disclose mental health concerns and access help for their mental health.

Roadmap – A guiding document that details the roles of the various healthcare professionals that contribute into mental healthcare planning and includes guiding principles for the effective coordination of those professionals so that the Player has access to best practice in mental healthcare.

Shared care – A collaborative and well-monitored care plan designed to promote coordinated care for individuals by facilitating communication between healthcare teams and consumers, as well as across different healthcare providers.

SEWB – Social and Emotional Wellbeing is the foundation for mental health and physical health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. SEWB underpins the self's connection to seven domains - community, body, mind, spirituality, Country, culture, and family. Social and Emotional Wellbeing recognises the self as inseparable from family and community. Connection and balance across domains strengthens wellbeing and cultivates a strong and positive cultural identity. Achieving balance between the interrelated domains is a source of wellbeing.

Stepped care – A model of mental healthcare delivery where the service intensity is matched to an individual Player's need and the severity of their mental health condition.



Other Relevant Strategies and Policies

- [AFL Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2027](#)
- [AFL Administration, Interpretation and Storage of Psychological Tests Policy](#)
- [AFL Industry Mental Healthcare Clinical Governance Framework](#)
- [AFL Medical Manual](#)
- [AFL Social Emotional and Cultural Wellbeing Framework 2024](#)

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Appendix 1: Referral and Service Information for Healthcare Providers

Role of the AFL Mental Health and Wellbeing Team

The AFL Mental Health Team does not deliver mental healthcare services directly. The Team comprises senior mental health practitioners who provide confidential and deidentified secondary consultation to Club healthcare staff and, if required, may assist in care coordination of interdisciplinary providers working with Players with complex needs. The team are bound by the same professional and ethical standards as all health practitioners.

The team approve any inactive Player or list management requests on mental health grounds and advise the softcap team on exemption requests for extraordinary mental healthcare expenditure in Clubs, as well as monitor and govern the providers in the AFL Mental Health Referral Network.

Crisis Care - Crisis Response to an Acute Risk Episode

A 24/7 helpline is provided by Converge International, for crisis care and after-hours support. If emergency psychiatric services are assessed as required, the Converge clinician will advise referral in step with their national emergency protocols. All Converge clinicians responding to crisis calls are credentialed emergency mental health practitioners who triage and navigate the Player to appropriate support, and if required provide psychological first aid and suicide prevention and put in place a safety plan.

Club Doctors and Psychologists who are working with Players who require a risk management or crisis plan are encouraged to include Converge in the safety plan as well as generalised crisis numbers such as Lifeline or 13YARN.

Eligibility and Referrals

This service is available for all current AFL and AFLW Players and is primarily intended for acute mental health presentations, such as risk of harm.

Players are encouraged to share the outcomes of any engagement with this service with their Club Doctor and/or Psychologist, to ensure continuity of care and optimise their overall wellbeing and health management.



How to refer

**The service does not require a referral.
It can be accessed by all Players**

Advanced Care - Residential Treatment Options

Advanced care is provided for severe or complex mental health conditions that require intensive care. Advanced care is provided through residential mental health facilities that offer structured daily programs, usually consisting of individual and group therapy, to support stabilisation and long-term recovery. The AFL has preferred providers of residential programs.

Eligibility and Referrals

Players with severe mental health conditions such as Addiction and substance use disorders, Trauma, Depression, Bipolar Disorder, Personality Disorders, Eating Disorders and high suicide risk. These services are reserved for Players with severe or complex mental health conditions, where functioning is substantially impacted and greater support than can be offered through specialist care is needed. Players must be open and willing to enter these programs.



How to refer

Referrals for Players can be made directly from the Club Doctor in consultation with a treating Psychiatrist or directly from a treating Psychiatrist with admission rights at the facility.



Specialist Care - AFL Mental Health Referral Network

The AFL contracts and funds mental healthcare professionals to provide centralised specialist mental healthcare for AFL and AFLW Players who require assessment and treatment for a mental health condition.

Funded by the AFL directly, the centralised network provides treatment of mental health conditions through a shared care model, which prioritises care coordination between Club medical or psychological staff and the provider in the network.

Who is in the Referral Network?

The network is national and made up of a small number of specialist mental health providers, including psychologists, psychiatrists, mental health social workers, and occupational therapists. Dietitians are also included in the network as part of the care team treating Eating Disorders. The network also has First Nations psychologists who are members of the Australian Indigenous Psychology Association (AIPA). All providers are registered with AHPRA and/or AASW. The practitioners in this network are highly experienced in working with elite athletes and are clinically experienced in their own specialist areas of practice.

Eligibility and Referrals

The network is in place for the treatment of mental health conditions and is only available for current AFL and AFLW players. Referrals come through the Club Doctor or Club Psychologist. The Club Doctor/Psychologist enters into a shared care arrangement with the centralised mental healthcare provider.

Referrals are typically received for moderate to severe mental health conditions including: Anxiety disorders such as Social Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Mood disorders such as Depression and Bipolar Disorder, Trauma, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and postvention after a critical incident, Addiction and substance use disorders, Neurodiversity assessment and management, such as ADHD and Autism Spectrum Disorder, Eating Disorders such as Anorexia and Bulimia Nervosa, Personality Disorders and Risk episode including risk of suicide or deliberate self-harm.

The length of the episode of care for the Player is determined by the mental healthcare provider and is informed by the treatment plan, in collaboration with the Club Psychologist and/or Doctor.



How to refer

Referrals for Players can be made directly from the Club Psychologist or Club Doctor to the Mental Health Providers; however, it is requested that the referral is confidentially noted with the AFL MHW Team. For AIPA referrals, the AFL Social Emotional Wellbeing team members facilitate.

Specialist Care - AFLPA Mental Health Navigation Service

The AFLPA Mental Health Navigation Service is an independent pathway for members to access free and confidential assistance from the AFLPA's in-house psychologists to navigate the mental health system and the services available to them. The process usually results in a connection to one of the AFLPA's external practitioners through the AFLPA Mental Health Practitioner Network. The Practitioner Network includes over 600 psychologists and psychiatrists from around the country. The Service is underpinned by 2 guiding principles:

1. the member has the right to seek independent mental health and wellbeing support; and
2. the member exercises their choice in determining which practitioner to engage for support.

The AFLPA funds the costs of services accessed through the Mental Health Practitioner Network.

Eligibility and Referrals

All AFLPA members (former and current AFL and AFLW Players) and their significant others are eligible for the service. For the purposes of accessing this service, 'significant others' refers to first degree relatives and defacto/ married partners.

Any member can engage with the Service for themselves or a significant other. Other stakeholders, including club staff (e.g., Club Psychologists, Club Doctors, PDMs, IPDMs), AFLPA staff (e.g., Regional Managers, Legal, Executives), family members, and Player agents can also facilitate a member's engagement with the Service. When engagement with the service is facilitated by a club staff member, and where appropriate, players are encouraged to discuss the outcome of consultations with the Club Doctor and/or Psychologist to optimise Player wellbeing and healthcare.

The most prevalent issues for current players accessing the AFLPA Mental Health Navigation Service include relationship concerns, Anxiety, performance-related issues, Trauma, and stress. Members also seek support for more complex issues, including Addiction, Personality Disorders, and assessment/management of Neurodiversity.



How to refer

These services are available to all AFLPA members, by contacting wellbeing@aflplayers.com.au or 1800 448 903.

Appendix 2: Roles and Expertise of Mental Healthcare Professionals

There are a range of professionals that provide mental healthcare. These professions have shared as well as distinct roles and areas of competence and specialisation.



Psychologists

Assess and treat mental health conditions



Doctors

Diagnose and manage all health conditions
Prescribe and manage medication



Sport and Exercise Psychologist

Specialise in performance and wellbeing in high performance environments



Psychiatrists

Medical doctors who specialise in diagnosing and treating severe mental health conditions
Prescribe and manage medication



Clinical Psychologists

Specialise in diagnosing and treating complex mental health conditions



Mental Health Social Workers

Specialise in management of mental health conditions and care coordination



Neuropsychologists

Specialise in brain functioning, and assessment and management of brain health (e.g., concussion)



Occupational Therapists

Assist individuals to improve their everyday functioning
Management of mental health conditions

All psychologists undertake a minimum of 6 years of nationally governed and accredited training in the discipline of psychology. This ensures that psychological services are provided by health professionals with competencies in psychological assessment and treatment, professional and ethical conduct and health equity and human rights practices. Psychologists have an extensive grounding in the scientific evidence of human cognition, emotion, development, neurobiology, motivation, learning and social behaviour. This deep evidence base underpins all evidence-based psychological approaches to mental healthcare, wellbeing and performance.

All sub-fields in the discipline of psychology, including clinical, sport and exercise, health and clinical neuropsychologists have competence in the identification and management of mental health conditions. Psychologists with an endorsed area of practice also have additional competencies in their recognised area of practice.



Appendix 3: Guidance on Scope of Practice for Club Psychologists

Role Function	Duties
<p>Individual Player Psychological health</p>	<p>Monitor and manage player mental health and wellbeing needs, addressing any related issues, and employing best practice intervention protocols</p> <p>Co-manage with Club Doctor any Players unable to play/train due to mental ill-health, concussion and/or long-term injuries through return to play planning and coordinate interdisciplinary care planning in partnership with Club Doctors and external specialist providers</p> <p>Develop a high functioning, player-centric approach to effective psychological services for performance, mental health and wellbeing for players, in collaboration with Medical, Sport Science and Player Development Staff</p> <p>Lead and support a shared care approach to psychological case management to external referrals through the AFL PA Wellbeing Services and AFL Mental Health Referral Network</p>
<p>Team Psychological health</p>	<p>Support any mental health and performance related education</p> <p>Contribute and collaborate with the Football Departments/HP Program to ensure robust performance and wellbeing strategy is delivered with psychological oversight</p> <p>Provide input and approval of any camp activities involving external consultants, or any club-based activities involving mental skills, psychological processes, mental toughness or any activities with the potential to impact player psychological health</p> <p>Lead the psychological response for critical incident responses to ensure trauma informed and psychologically safe practice</p>

Role Function	Duties
Recruitment and psychometrics	<p>Act in accordance with the AFL Administration, Interpretation and Storage of Psychological Tests Policy at the AFL</p> <p>Access and apply psychological interpretation and summary of psychometrics provided by the AFL throughout the AFL and AFLW National Draft.</p> <p>Have appropriate post graduate training and/or accreditation in the use of the psychological test or screening tool</p> <p>Understand and apply cultural considerations that may influence psychological assessments</p> <p>Consult and coordinate the interpretation of results with AFL external psychometric provider</p> <p>Consult on draft recruitment practices such as interviewing and profiling to provide psychological insight.</p>
Governance	<p>Registered Psychologist with the Psychology Board of Australia (PsyBA) and listed with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA).</p> <p>Always adhere to the requirements for the ethical and professional standards of psychological practice</p> <p>Min. 3 years demonstrated experience and success working in sport with elite athletes and coaches.</p> <p>Eligibility for full membership with the Australian Psychological Society.</p> <p>Demonstrated experience in psychological assessment, diagnosis and treatment.</p> <p>Desirable but not essential to have a relevant Area of Practice Endorsement (for example, Sport & Exercise Psychology, Clinical Psychology, Health Psychology, Organisational Psychology, or Counselling Psychology).</p> <p>Adherence to all practice standards and policies set by the AFL.</p> <p>Maintain all personal case notes in accordance with the guidelines stipulated in the APS Code of Ethics.</p>

Appendix 4: Roles and Expertise of Player Development Managers and Indigenous Player Development Managers

The Player Development Manager and Indigenous Player Development Manager roles can be fulfilled by a range of interdisciplinary professionals as well as those with lived experience. PDMs and IPDMs play a key role in facilitating and coordinating Players' off field and non-playing endeavours. The role includes provision of educational, vocational, financial and professional development, life skills in managing the demands of professional sport, engaging with support networks such as connecting with family and peers, providing critical holistic wellbeing and psychosocial support to Players. IPDMs also guide Clubs in developing culturally responsive systems and environments that strengthen identity, resilience, and overall wellbeing for both Players and the organisation.





