

# INTRODUCTION TO SUPPORTED DECISION-MAKING FOR PEOPLE EXPERIENCING MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AND THEIR FAMILIES AND OTHER SUPPORTERS



A guiding principle of Victoria's *Mental Health Act 2014* is that people experiencing mental health challenges have the right to decide about their treatment and care. Where this is not possible they have the right to be supported to make decisions relating to their treatment and care. Supported decision-making may be defined as the process whereby individuals are provided with assistance, tailored to their capacity and preferences at the time, to make decisions.

One of the key outcomes of an Australian Research Council project about supported decision-making is a website which shows people who have used mental health services talking about the supports they've experienced or would like. This website can be accessed via: <http://research.healthtalkaustralia.org/supported-decision-making/resources-and-information>

The research project gathered the views and preferences of people experiencing mental health challenges about what they wanted to assist them to make decisions. Their experiences indicate that people feel confident to participate in supported decision-making with service providers who develop a good relationship, listen carefully and help people to explore the options that are right for them at the time. [1] For example, on the website, Joseph has this to say about his General Practitioner:

*He's been a fantastic advocate ... He's been really with me every step of the way ... He's been a really, really empowering part of the process in what otherwise could have been totally disempowering.*

By contrast, people who encounter negative attitudes about their mental ill-health may find it difficult to talk through the pros and cons of various treatment options. This may make it difficult for people to clarify their thoughts and preferences and gather new information for decision-making. [1]

Formal supported decision-making mechanisms, such as advance statements and nominated persons can be helpful. The research project found that people experiencing mental health challenges value having their views and preferences followed where possible, or represented should they receive compulsory treatment. People particularly value being able to include aspects of their daily lives that are important to them, such as care for pets, in their advance statements.

The research project also gathered the views of families and other supporters. Some of their views can be found on this website: <http://research.healthtalkaustralia.org/carers/carers-and-supported-decision-making-mechanisms>

Their views indicate that involvement must be meaningful and go beyond an invitation to meetings – there is a need to be informed and acknowledged, including acknowledging the difficulties associated with providing care. For example, on the website, Alexia has this to say:

*if [mental health practitioners] ... involve the carer in the decision-making and they work with the carer closely and the family, the carer doesn't have to be a mother, or it can be a friend or a sibling. So they can have this prevention and we can have a better outcome but first we need a proper structured treatment plan.*

Many Australian states and territories are now formally recognising the role of families and other supporters in legislation. In Victoria, for example, mental health legislation includes recognition of the role of families and other supporters in supporting people experiencing mental health challenges to make decisions (see *Mental Health Act 2014*, section 10(h)).

Families and other supporters can support decision-making in a range of ways. They can assist with formal mechanisms, such as nominated persons and advance statements, or through liaising and advocating with health professionals and mental health support providers. Families and other supporters can help to ensure that preferences in advance statements are known and followed where possible by mental health practitioners.

Families and other supporters can access more information and help with supported decision-making from the contact information in the Resources Fact Sheet or via the online resources at: <http://research.healthtalkaustralia.org/carers/resources-and-information>

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## References

1. Kokanovic R, Brophy L, McSherry B, et al, (2017) *Options for Supported Decision-Making to Enhance the Recovery of People Experiencing Severe Mental Health Problems* Melbourne: Melbourne Social Equity Institute, University of Melbourne.

This Introduction is part of a series of resources designed to improve supported decision-making practices for people experiencing mental health challenges and to assist families and other supporters' participation in supported decision-making. These resources can be used individually, as an aid to policy development, and as a training tool.

See also:

- What Is Supported Decision-Making? Fact Sheet
- Supported Decision-Making Legal Mechanisms Fact Sheet
- Practices To Improve Supported Decision-Making In Mental Health Services Fact Sheet
- Resources To Assist With Supported Decision-Making Fact Sheet
- Guidelines For Supported Decision-Making For Mental Health Services
- Report – Options For Supported Decision-Making To Enhance The Recovery Of People Experiencing Severe Mental Health Problems
- Online Resources – <http://research.healthtalkaustralia.org/supported-decision-making/support-in-treatment-decisions>

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