

The mental health of the unemployed [deteriorates the longer they are out of work](#) and this is a [barrier to securing future employment](#), research has found. While different ways to reach this group are being trialled, no solution is firmly in sight.

The connection between unemployment and mental illness was most visible during the global financial crisis when Australia's economic growth slowed and [unemployment and underemployment increased](#).
Suicide rates among the [unemployed rose 22% during the crisis](#) compared to their rates prior to the crisis.

There is still an estimated [727,500 Australians out of work](#) and a [notable lack of interventions](#) addressing the mental health needs of the unemployed.

There are likely several explanations for why the unemployed miss out on programs that could improve their mental health. The first reason is that some of the [main adopters of workplace mental health activities](#) have been employers with no long-term obligation to provide help to the people they have let go.

If employers aren't responsible for the mental health of the unemployed as they search for work, it would seem to fall into the remit of government employment services. However, while governmental services have regular contact with job seekers and require them participate in a [Job Plan](#) in order to receive benefits, there appears to be a lack of attention to the mental health impacts of unemployment itself.

[Some people who have a mental illness](#) end up in a catch 22 scenario where difficulties in job seeking exacerbate mental health issues and this in turn might make it difficult to apply for jobs. These difficulties include accessing transport to and from work, negative attitudes of employers and co-workers and concern about how to balance employment with treatment for ongoing health problems.

There is also a changing landscape of government requirements regarding access to financial support. For example, people with a disability may be asked to undertake an [Job Capacity Assessment](#), which has flow-on implications for a person's ability to access the Disability Support Pension.

A second reason for the lack of attention to the mental health of the unemployed is that they are harder to engage than those who are employed (who can be identified and contacted in a work setting). This poses a challenge to face-to-face and group-based interventions addressing mental health.

Online interventions have [been shown to be beneficial](#) for those people suffering from mental health problems. Recognising this, the government launched [an e-Mental Health Strategy in 2014](#). The importance of electronic interventions has also recently been emphasised [in the Australian government's 2015 response to a review of mental health services](#).

Online interventions may be the most feasible option for the unemployed population, who otherwise may be difficult to reach or to engage face-to-face. There are some current trials that aim to boost the mental health of job seekers using online approaches.

For example, a program [from Incolink and Deakin University](#) called "Contact & Connect" is providing online mental health support for the unemployed via a series of text messages sent from a website. The program is designed to give unemployed people tools to look after their mental wellbeing.

The long-term goal of the trial is to break down stigma against help-seeking and encourage social interaction with friends and family. While this approach shows promise because it can be delivered remotely and conveniently, it does not yet have results. It's also important to remember that online programs such as "Contact & Connect" are not meant to be undertaken at the exclusion of other treatments. Ideally, online intervention would operate hand-in-hand with face-to-face treatment.

At the end of the day, there maybe no one-size fits all approach to helping those who are

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Written by The Conversation

unemployed back on the road to recovery. Tackling this problem will be complex, and likely necessitate involvement from multiple stakeholders including affected individuals, families, employers, support services, government, and others.

Despite this, greater attention to the topic is needed given the large impact of job loss on an individual's life, and the subsequent flow-on effects to mental health and wellbeing.

This story is part of a [series on mental illness and the workplace](#) .

If you are distressed by this story or want to seek help for someone you know, please contact Lifeline 13 11 14 lifeline.org.au or SANE Australia 1800 187 263 sane.org/get-help

Allison Milner receives funding from beyondblue for work related to unemployment and mental health

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