

## Additional Sessions Available During COVID-19

The Australian Government recognises the mental health impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having on individuals and communities across Australia. The Better Access to Mental Health Services Pandemic Support measure has been expanded to include an additional 10 Medicare subsidised psychological therapy sessions per calendar year. This applies to eligible people whose mental health has been adversely impacted by COVID-19.

The additional sessions extend existing support provided by Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners through the Medical Benefits Schedule (Better Access) initiative. It entitles eligible people nationally to access up to 20 Medicare subsidised individual support sessions each calendar year. These additional sessions are available from 9 October 2020 until 30 June 2022.

### Who is eligible to access the 10 additional sessions?

The additional sessions are available to people who have:

- a Mental Health Treatment Plan;
- used all 10 individual Better Access sessions in the calendar year that they seek a referral; and
- a GP, psychiatrist or paediatrician referral for additional sessions.

### How do I access these sessions?

The Australian Government has designed the process for accessing these sessions to be flexible and consistent with the existing referral process for Better Access.

You will need to see your GP, psychiatrist or paediatrician (reviewing practitioner). Your practitioner can review your Mental Health Treatment Plan or use another consultation item to refer you for the additional sessions.

Your practitioner will decide how many sessions you can receive in your referral. You are able to access up to 10 additional sessions each calendar year from 9 October 2020 until **30 June 2022**. This is a total of up to 20 individual sessions each calendar

year. The maximum number of sessions your reviewing practitioner can state on your referral is:

- 10 additional Better Access sessions or
- 6 initial Better Access sessions.

### What happens if I don't use all 10 additional sessions before the calendar year ends?

The quota for your number of Better Access sessions resets each calendar year. The maximum number of sessions you can receive in a calendar year is 20 sessions. To support access, you can continue to use your referral for the additional sessions to access unused services in the next calendar year.

For example, if your GP provides you with a referral for 10 additional sessions in 2020, and you only use 6 sessions before 31 December 2020, you can continue to use to access the remaining 4 sessions in 2021, before needing a new referral. Once you have used all of the additional sessions stated on your referral, you will need to visit your reviewing practitioner. They will decide whether to refer you for initial Better Access sessions in the new calendar year. You can access a maximum of 6 sessions in an initial Better Access sessions referral.

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### **What happens if I haven't used up all my additional 10 sessions before June 2022?**

The additional Better Access Pandemic Support sessions are temporary and cannot be accessed after 30 June 2022.

### **Can I access additional group sessions?**

No, this new measure is for individual psychological services only.

### **Can I receive sessions via telehealth?**

Yes, however, temporary COVID-19 MBS telehealth items are only available until 31 March 2021. More information on telehealth is available here. The appropriateness of telehealth services is a clinical judgement the health professional will make in consultation with the patient.

### **Do I need a new Mental Health Treatment Plan to access the additional sessions?**

No, you do not need a new Mental Health Treatment Plan to access the additional 10 sessions but you do need an existing Mental Health Treatment Plan. If you already have a Mental Health Treatment Plan, see the section above entitled 'How do I access these sessions?' for further information.

### **What if I don't have a Mental Health Treatment Plan?**

If you don't have an existing Mental Health Treatment Plan then you will be unable to access any sessions. You will need to discuss this with your medical practitioner (GP, psychiatrist or paediatrician). Your medical practitioner can determine if you need a Mental Health Treatment Plan.

### **What services are available without a Mental Health Treatment Plan?**

You can continue to attend for treatment sessions with your clinical psychologist without a Mental Health Treatment Plan by paying privately, or accessing private health care rebates. If you need support outside of business hours, Beyond Blue have established a 24/7 phone counselling service (**1800 512 348**). This service is staffed by trained counsellors to help people experiencing stress or anxiety associated with the impacts of the pandemic as well as many other issues. You can find further information about the Beyond Blue Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service by visiting [coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au](https://coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au) or calling the phone counselling service line.

You may also like to consider using digital services. You can use digital services to complement face-to-face therapies with your clinical psychologist. They allow you to seek support in times of need, when and where it's most convenient. The Government's digital mental health gateway, Head to Health, is a consumer-friendly website that aims to help people more easily access information. Head to Health is available at [headtohealth.gov.au](https://headtohealth.gov.au).

**If you're unsure whether the above information applies to you and whether you may be eligible to access additional sessions under your Mental Health Treatment Plan this calendar year, please be sure to check in with your clinician at your next appointment, or phone our service to discuss.**