

Comment to Productivity Commission re Mental Health Enquiry

I am the mother of children with mental health issues. I make these comments based on my experiences of assisting my youngest daughter deal with Centrelink and disability employment services. I provide her with practical assistance and emotional assistance. Fortunately my oldest daughter, who lives interstate is a lawyer and is able to deal with the bureaucratic issues. She is registered with Centrelink as her sister's legal nominee.

My youngest daughter is a recipient of the disability support pension. She has agoraphobia, anxiety and panic attack disorder. She is not able to work. She has a dog who has recently qualified as a psychiatric assistance dog.

(See <https://www.minddog.org.au/>) Without him she often would not be able to go out, including to attend medical appointments with her treaters.

Prior to successfully applying for the DSP my daughter received Newstart benefits. She was given an exemption from seeking employment for an unspecified period. That period expired without warning from Centrelink. My youngest daughter was simply contacted directly (not through her nominee). She was told needed to attend a disability employment agency, Wise Employment. Wise Employment is engaged by Centrelink to assist people with disabilities including mental health. Their website specifically mentions anxiety and depression (See <https://wiseemployment.com.au/job-seekers/>). Despite this these they showed no real understanding of the nature of my daughter's illness.

All too frequently youngest daughter was contacted directly instead of her nominee. The whole reason for my oldest daughter being her legal nominee is so that she could navigate the system and prepare her sister any required contacts. My youngest daughter becomes overwhelmed and panicked when she is called unexpectedly. In addition part of her condition means that she cannot read official documents without becoming physically unwell and has great difficulty making telephone calls and receiving telephone calls from people she does not know. The timing was most unfortunate as she was contacted in mid-December and because of the time of year her psychiatrist was on leave and she was unable to access mental health supports. Fortunately, I was able to take her to the first appointment. She was able to leave her home and attend with great difficulty. She had a panic attack on the way home. Agoraphobia does not just mean she finds it hard to go places. Sometimes she simply cannot bring herself to open her door despite her best efforts.

My oldest daughter spoke to at least two people at Wise Employment who dealt with my youngest daughter's case. It was not the same person throughout. One of them asked my youngest daughter if she had a friend with a business who could employ her. This was the extent of the job assistance she received. On one occasion my oldest daughter had to call them to tell them that her sister was unable to make her appointment that day after receiving a call from her sister who was in the midst of a panic attack whilst she was trying to leave her home to attend her appointment. Her attack was so severe she could hardly speak. She could not ring Wise Employment herself.

This happened again when she tried to attend her appointment. Again my oldest daughter called Wise Employment. She was told that unless my youngest daughter attended their office that day she would have to tell Centrelink to stop her benefits. My oldest daughter was told to reassure her sister that that she as a nice person and could attend any time before the close of business. This showed an incredible lack of insight into my daughter's mental health. Yet this is supposed to be one of their areas of expertise. After this experience my oldest daughter and I decided it was best to cancel her Centrelink benefits ourselves and support her without assistance from the government as this process was worsening her mental health and causing distress to the whole family.

Dealings with Centrelink were at times arduous and distressing. I saw my daughter's mental health worsen during this process. As a family we are fortunate to be in the position of being able to provide my youngest daughter with emotional and additional financial assistance. Many people are not so fortunate.

It is clear that Centrelink, like many government agencies have no understanding of mental health issues. Physical disabilities are visible. Mental ones are not. The process of applying for the disability support pension was a lengthy one. The first time we applied we were unsuccessful. I saw we as my youngest daughter could not have applied on her own without our assistance. Even the process of filing out the form is a daunting and lengthy process. There were a couple of questions that were incomprehensible. If that is the case for a lawyer, what is it like for someone without those qualifications?

The actions were completely counterproductive to the aim of getting people with mental illness into the workforce. Wise Employment and Centrelink contributed to a significant deterioration to my daughter's mental health. Fortunately she is making progress again. The only support she receives from Centrelink is financial.