Online Forums 2017

A Research Report for beyondblue
July 2017

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This third wave of research among 1597 forum participants again demonstrated that beyondblue’s online forums are playing an important role in the lives of a number of people with depression, anxiety and other mental health conditions.

While the forums have continued to grow in terms of members, posts, and activities, clear signs are emerging of a maturation process that is, in the main, having beneficial effects. In particular, this third wave of research has shown a number of trends developing:

- More participants have been using the forums for over a year than was the case in earlier years.
- Despite this, the reasons for joining forums, and the profile of newer members are remaining relatively constant, i.e. the forums are continuing to appeal to “like people”, and are not alienating them by appearing “clubby”.
- Members are increasingly likely to hear about the forums through external voices, and not beyondblue – Facebook, digital search, health professionals.
- Members are accessing forums less frequently, and are displaying less interest in emotional support, and more in practical guidance.
- Encouragingly, the gap between what they are seeking through the forums and what is being delivered is narrowing over time, particularly in relation to providing emotional support. Most users feel they have gained at least what they expected to from the forums, if not more.
- There is less of a focus on passive participation (reading other people’s posts) and more on active participation (responding to posts, or even starting your own thread). Again, this indicates a maturing community.

Generating outcomes

Where the 2016 findings contained numerous strong shifts towards more positive engagement with the forums that were leading to increasingly positive outcomes, this year we have seen a more stable picture, with the positive impacts largely maintained, and being seen to work together. To illustrate this, we have seen a clear correlation between participants making lifestyle changes as a direct result of their forum participation, and becoming less depressed or anxious after taking part in the forums.

While a small minority have had negative experiences in the forums, these have tended to be due to individual actions and reactions (such as reading posts that distressed them) rather than to anything directly attributable to forum structure or approach. Given the overall trend away from a need for emotional support, these appear to be exceptions to the rule of positive forum experiences.
A sense of community is present in the forums, but it appears to be relatively modest – the forums are in no way central to the lives of most participants, but they clearly provide a positive, caring, respectful environment in most cases.

Introducing changes

In terms of introducing changes, the new forums added in 2017 have, so far, attracted modest usage except amongst the most active forum users – those making frequent posts (including those with a risk flag). The range of new ideas put to participants was positively, if not enthusiastically received, and especially email notification of post replies, and access to a forum app. Amongst 18-24 year olds a far more positive response was apparent; they welcomed all technology or engagement-based suggestions with some energy. However, there was no strong sense that change needs to be radical; rather it is about bringing the forum offer into line with what participants experience in other online environments.
BACKGROUND

beyondblue’s online forums, hosted on the beyondblue website, have grown over recent years into a significant platform for discussion of depression, anxiety and other related life issues.

In 2016-17 around 81,000 people a month visited the forums, more than double the level two years previously. Forum visitors made an average of 6,500 posts per month (up from 2,500 in two years), with around 9 posts per day touching on themes of self-harm or suicide.

A team of people manage the forums, including a community manager, clinically-trained moderators for content where the user is assessed to be at risk, and 18 volunteer “community champions”, who work closely with the community manager to provide peer support online and ensure that members of the forums receive replies to their posts.

While some contact information is held by beyondblue, the forums themselves are an anonymous space, and users post using pseudonyms. Personal contact is not allowed, nor is sharing of details around specific medications, and details of suicide and self-harming methods.

Discussions take place in a range of categories. Besides general posting categories for depression and anxiety, there are also categories for supporting friends and family, staying well, treatments, and relationship issues.

Requirement for research

The need for a dedicated program of research amongst forum users was identified through a 2014 literature review that revealed dearth of information or research on the mental health benefits of online depression and anxiety forums. Where information was available it was not of sufficient depth or breadth to guide practice or policy decisions.

In particular, beyondblue lacked any formal concrete information about:

- What users hope to obtain from the forums.
- Whether the forums are achieving the stated aim of creating a place where members can find encouragement, hope and a sense of belonging.
- Whether the forums are helping people to move forward in their recovery journey.

To address this information shortfall, beyondblue commissioned Hall & Partners | Open Mind, an independent social and market research agency, to conduct specific research into the forums as a recovery tool. An initial (Benchmark) wave of research was carried out in March 2015, followed by a second wave in April 2016; this report presents findings from the third wave, which took place between 15th and 29th May 2017.
Research objectives

The research program was primarily designed to gather detailed user feedback to help beyondblue optimise the content, structure and functionality of the forums.

Among the specific questions the research sought to address were:

- Who uses the forums: basic demographic information such as gender, age, location
- Reasons people start (and continue) to use the forums
- What they are hoping to achieve from using the forums
- What role the forums play in their lives (e.g. ongoing or at specific points)
- How much support they obtain from the forums and how this works in conjunction with other support mechanisms e.g. psychologist, medication, face-to-face peer support, other websites.
- Overall advantages and disadvantages of using the beyondblue forums
- Suggestions for improvement and enhancement of forum experiences

In addition, the Sense of Community Index developed by Macmillan and Chavis (1986), which is the most frequently used quantitative measure of sense of community in the social sciences, was adapted into a specific index for the beyondblue online forums.¹

This third wave of quantitative tracking allows us to monitor further differences arising from changes to the way that the forums operate, and understand trends in the evolution of the forums.

Research methodology

To collect survey data, an invitation was sent out to people who had registered to join the beyondblue forums; in total n=1597 participants completed the 20 minute online survey between 15th and 29th May 2017. All participants had to be over 18, resident in Australia, and had used at least one of the forums to read or post.

Participation in the survey was completely voluntary. The survey was carried out in compliance with the Australian Privacy Principles, and participants were assured that their individual responses were treated in the strictest confidence.

No changes were made to the scope of the survey this year other than the addition of two new questions in relation to whether participants gained what they expected from the forums (A10b), and their preferences for a range of possible changes to the forums (A18).

¹ www.communityscience.com
Strengths and limitations of the methodology

Strengths of the methodology

An online methodology was chosen for several reasons:

- It was seen to be a methodology that a large majority of participants would feel comfortable with, given that the beyondblue forums themselves are online.

- It was intended to maximise participation and participant comfort levels by allowing people to complete the survey in their own time, in their own home or at any other location of their choosing. Allowing the survey to run for two weeks increases the chances of representative participation, and is especially important when surveying those who may have depression or anxiety conditions, who may not feel up to completing a survey at one point in time.

- Online methodologies also allow for participant anonymity.

By limiting the survey to forum members who have opted in for marketing contact, the risk of disturbing people who did not wish to hear from beyondblue was reduced.

Limitations of the methodology

The design of the survey has resulted in some limitations:

- Participation in the survey is self-selecting, although this is not specific to online methodologies.

- While it was considered advisable from an ethical perspective to survey only those who were over 18, this meant that the views of younger participants were unable to be included.

- Our contact database for the research only included those who have actually signed up to the forums. Since it is not necessary for someone to sign up in order to use the forums (e.g. to read posts without posting or commenting), it is not possible to draw conclusions about how the forums are used as a whole.

Changes on the forums since 2016

Some changes were made to the forums during 2016 in terms of new forum categories:

- Long term support over the journey
- BB Social Zone
- Ask Dr Kim.

It is important to note these changes upfront, as they may account for different user experiences in 2017, and therefore shifts in survey response.
FINDINGS

1. Forum participation

1.1 Demographics of the survey respondents

In order that beyondblue can draw meaningful comparisons between this and other data at its disposal, the demographic questions used in our survey are taken directly from the Depression and Anxiety Monitor.

Since demographic information such as gender and location is not collected through forum registration, we are unable to be certain that the demographics of our survey respondents are perfectly reflective of the wider forum population. However, we have drawn some broad conclusions based on comparison with other research (where available) and ABS data.

There have been only limited changes in survey respondent demographics since 2016:

- **There continues to be a skew to female participants (71%)...** This is in line with overseas experience with online depression communities.

- **Almost half of survey respondents (47%) are 35-54 year olds...** while this is higher than the Australian population, forums continue to encompass participation across all age categories, including almost one in four who are aged over 55.
• The survey population is roughly in line with population by state. While there is slight over-representation of Victorians (24% of overall population vs 26% of survey participants) and South Australians (7% overall vs 9% survey), and slight under-representation of NSW (32% overall vs 29% survey), these skews have narrowed since last year.

• The metro vs. regional/rural split is 54%/46%... This represents a substantial skew to regional areas (65% metro/35% regional, according to the 2011 Census); this skew has increased each wave of research.

![Country of Birth](image1)

**Country of Birth**

- 20% Overseas
- 80% Australia

![Speak English](image2)

**Speak English**

- Yes 85%
- No 15%

![Work Status](image3)

**Work Status**

- Prefer not to say 3%
- Volunteer work 3%
- Have a job, but away due to illness or vacation 2%
- Retired 7%
- Home duties 8%
- Not working and currently receiving allowance/pension 8%
- Unemployed or looking for work 17%
- Working part-time 17%
- Working full-time 36%

![Sexual Orientation](image4)

**Sexual Orientation**

- LGBTI 13%
- Heterosexual 83%
- Not sure/undecided 2%
- Prefer not to say 3%

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2 ABS: 3101.0 Australian Demographic Statistics (Sep Qr 2016)
3 We note that there is regional residents tend to complete online surveys more frequently than their metro counterparts, although it still appears that forum usage skews towards regional users.
However, the proportion of LGBTI respondents has again risen... from 7% in 2015, 11% in 2016, to 13% in 2017. Across the sample, 1% identified themselves as neither male nor female.

MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION

- Both depression and anxiety conditions: 55%
- Depression: 76%
- Other mental health conditions: 63%
- Anxiety condition: 21%
- Prefer not to say: 20%
- None of these: 8%

LENGTH OF TIME SINCE DIAGNOSIS

- 3%: Past 12 months
- 23%: 1-5 years ago
- 18%: 6-10 years ago
- 56%: Over 10 years ago
- 1%: Prefer not to say

**Figure 3: Conditions experienced**

Most (88%) say they have been diagnosed with depression, anxiety or another mental condition... This has increased slightly since last year; over half (56%) of those who have been diagnosed have been living with their condition for more than 10 years.

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5 We note that the questions in the Depression and Anxiety monitor differentiate between a formal diagnosis and when the user first started experiencing the condition, which means potentially that some of the users who have been living with their condition for 10+ years were undiagnosed for some or all of that time.
1.2 How users find out about the forums

How people hear about beyondblue forums

In combination, beyondblue channels (website, TV or billboard advertising, newsletters and the support service) continue to be a key source of awareness of forums; 64% of respondents mentioned them (down from 68% last year). More generally, online sources (website, Google, Facebook) are prominent amongst the key awareness sources, corresponding with lower contribution from traditional print sources. Facebook mentions have increased significantly, with females mentioning this source more than males (15% vs 8% respectively).

While a substantial 42% of respondents came into contact with the forums via the beyondblue website, this has fallen significantly in both 2016 and 2017.

Similarly, beyondblue advertising (e.g. TV or billboard), the second most common channel, was mentioned significantly less. This substantial source is believed to reflect broader beyondblue campaigns that have drawn people to the website where they found the forums.

In-person referral through health professionals, family or a friend, and an employer, manager or co-worker represent the next major source of awareness.

Other organisations continue to provide a minor, stable source of awareness of the forums.
1.3 Accessing the forums for the first time

When the online forums were first accessed

Figure 5: First access of forums

We have seen a continuing maturation process with the forums, with a significant increase in those who had first accessed the forums more than a year ago (58%, up from 53% in 2016, and only 32% in 2015).

However, while respondents’ experience with the forums has matured, the profile of participants has changed little; there were no significant differences in gender, age, location, birthplace, or sexual orientation between those with different forum experience. This indicates that the appeal of the forums across demographics has remained stable over time.
Reasons for accessing the online forums

The primary motivations for first accessing the forums are personal: to seek help, support or information on their own behalf. This has remained highly stable since 2015.

Leading the reasons for initial access was because they felt depressed or anxious and wanted support (54%), while a substantial 25% specifically stated that they felt suicidal and wanted support. The latter was mentioned more by 18-24 year olds (34%), LGBTI (40%), and those who were unemployed (36%).

Two groups of participants sought anonymity; 32% wanted to connect in an anonymous way, while 19% did not want friends and family to know. This latter group was skewed towards 18-24 year olds (28%) and those from regional areas (22% vs 16% metro). The former group appear to need anonymity in order to “download”; they represent around half of respondents posting more than 10 times, and 43% of those with a serious/critical flag.

Since 2016 there has been a significant fall in respondents saying they wanted to complement support they were getting through a health professional (down from 18% to 15%); this decline has occurred evenly across those with depression, anxiety, and other conditions.

There has also been a significant decrease in those who first joined because they wanted to provide help or support to other people (14%, down from 18%).
1.4 How the forums are used

Time of day forums are accessed

The pattern of forum usage across the day has remained mostly stable, but with a significant increase in the early evening (5-8pm), which is used by all demographics equally.
Since 2016 there has been a shift to less frequent forum access; weekly access fell significantly, while fortnightly, monthly or less frequent access increased slightly. Despite this trend, almost a third (31%) access the forums at least monthly, and this has remained stable.

Figure 8: Frequency of forum access

Since 2016 there has been a shift to less frequent forum access; weekly access fell significantly, while fortnightly, monthly or less frequent access increased slightly. Despite this trend, almost a third (31%) access the forums at least monthly, and this has remained stable.
Recent access of online forums

As seen in 2016, only 22% had actually accessed the forums in the last month. Very recent visitors (i.e. within the last week) were more likely to be very active posters (41% of those posting 20+ times), or to have a serious/critical flag (19%).
What people like to do on forums

Figure 10: What people like to do on the forums

Continuing the trend observed last year, respondents have moved towards more active participation, as demonstrated by:

- Less primary focus on reading other people’s posts (down from 80% in 2015, to 68% this year)
- More primary focus on responding to or participating in threads (up from 12% to 21%) and starting threads (up from 8% to 12%).

Although both of these increasing activities are carried out disproportionately by frequent posters and those with serious/critical flags, the trend to greater participation has been happening amongst other respondents; for example, those with flags represented lower proportions of those responding to or starting threads than in 2016 (both down by 3% to 30% and 24% respectively).
1.5 The role of forums versus other avenues of support

Other avenues of support accessed by users

In almost all cases respondents are using some other avenues of support, with health professionals (77%), family/friends (53%), and the website (45%) being particularly prominent; only 4% claimed to be relying solely on the forums.

While the overall story is highly stable, since 2016 there has been a significant fall in mentions of the website (down 5%), and other depression/anxiety forums (down from 20% to just 6%); the latter shift may have been due to younger forum participants and those with chronic mental health conditions switching permanently to specialised forums such as Reach Out and SANE.

Figure 11: Other avenues of support accessed by users
Type of health professional consulted

Amongst those who also access health professionals, GPs and psychologists continue to be the main source of support across all demographics; psychiatrists are more likely to have been consulted by those identified as suicide risks (48%, against 40% of all respondents).
2. Forum achievements and impacts

2.1 What are the forums achieving?

What users hope to gain

![Bar chart showing what users hope to gain from the forums]

All: What are the main things you hope to gain from using the beyondblue forums? Please select up to FIVE reasons from the list below...
Base: All respondents Wave 3 n=1597, Wave 2 n= 1138

Over the last year there have been significant reductions in a number of these drivers, including:

- Tips/advice about how others cope
- Ability to communicate with others who know what I’m going through
- Just someone to talk to
- 24 hour availability

The unifying theme with these appears to be that they are less likely to be mentioned by those who visit the forums less often and/or have been accessing them for longer; it suggests that as the forums mature there may be less need for emotional support, and more need for practical guidance.
What users have gained

Respondents generally feel they have gained most from their forum participation in those areas that they prioritised going in, i.e. the order of both priorities and gains matches very closely. Overall, there has been relative stability in areas of perceived gain, with three areas of significant deterioration and one significant improvement:

- Two areas of lower gain also moved significantly down in terms of being priorities: tips/advice about how others have coped, and ability to communicate with others who know what I’m going through.

- However, there was little change in respondents hoping for factual information, but a significant fall in perceived delivery of this aspect.

- One clear area of improvement has been “just someone to talk to about how I am feeling”, which became a lower priority while concurrently being perceived to be delivered more fully.
The impact of these movements is that the average gap between what respondents hoped for and what they actually gained has been reducing slightly over time, from 11% in 2015 to 9% this year. Particularly marked has been the reduced gap for “just someone to talk to about how I am feeling”, which has almost halved in the last year. Smaller reductions occurred with providing an anonymous/confidential way to communicate, and the ability to vent frustrations.

The only area to see a worsening delivery gap has been in providing factual information about depression and anxiety, where perceived gains fell significantly.
Most useful aspects of the forum

1st Ranked - most important aspects

In terms of what respondents have found most useful, factual information emerges again as an area where there appears to have been some weakening in delivery, although it remains in second position as a key forum outcome. Overall, however, there has been little change in what is perceived as being most useful.
The ranking of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd most useful aspects of the forums has again remained relatively consistent, with the forums seen as most useful for informing, followed by connecting. One area showing an increase in perceived value is “just someone to talk to about how I am feeling”, supporting the earlier finding that this has been an area where delivery has increasingly matched respondent expectations.

Figure 17: Most useful aspects of the forums – all ranks
How much gained from forums

Overall, most respondents feel that they have gained at least as much as they expected from participating in the forums, if not more; only 1 in 11 said they gained less than they had expected. This is a strong endorsement for the personal value derived from participation.

2.2 The impact of forum participation on mental health outcomes

A key proviso with assessing the impact of the forums on mental health outcomes is that, as with any support or recovery methods, the forums work better for some people than others.

Three key indicators have been identified within this research that the forums are having a beneficial effect on many users, enabling them to move forward or better manage their condition:

1. **General improvement in mood**… by comparing feelings before and after last use

2. **Accessing other avenues of help and support**… as a direct result of using the forums

3. **Making positive lifestyle changes**… again, as a direct result of using the forums

The gains made against each of these in 2016 have been maintained this year.
2.2.1 General improvement in mood

Comparing feelings before and after forum use

![Comparison of feelings before and after forum use](image)

When describing their state of depression and anxiety before accessing the forums on the last occasion that they used them, 33% of people ranked themselves as ‘very depressed’ (9 or 10 out of 10) and 31% of people as ‘very anxious’. After they had used the forums, this figure fell to 14% for depression and 11% for anxiety. This matches the findings from last year and indicates that the forums provide short-term relief of symptoms for a number of users.

Overall, about half (54%) of users said that they felt less depressed, and 56% said that they felt less anxious, while just 6% say the felt more depressed and 5% more anxious after interacting with the forums. While there has been some weakening in the impact on anxiety since last year, the broad picture of nett gains holds strongly.

Figure 20 and 21 below provide further detail on this issue.
Depression: Feelings before and after forums

Feeling of depression before accessing the forum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wave 2</th>
<th>Wave 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16%</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>28%</td>
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<tr>
<td>31%</td>
<td>33%</td>
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Feeling of depression after accessing the forum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wave 2</th>
<th>Wave 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34%</td>
<td>32%</td>
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<tr>
<td>22%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A6. And thinking about the last time you accessed the forums, how were you feeling before you accessed them?
A6a. And still thinking about the last time you accessed the forums, how did you feel after you had finished using them?
Base: All respondents: Wave 1 n=1597, Wave 2 n=1138

Figure 20: Depression: feelings before and after accessing the forums

Anxiety: Feelings before and after forums

Feeling of anxiety before accessing the forum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wave 2</th>
<th>Wave 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>19%</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td>19%</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<td>28%</td>
<td>26%</td>
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<tr>
<td>31%</td>
<td>31%</td>
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</table>

Feeling of anxiety after accessing the forum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wave 2</th>
<th>Wave 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>31%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33%</td>
<td>33%</td>
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<tr>
<td>21%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A6. And thinking about the last time you accessed the forums, how were you feeling before you accessed them?
A6a. And still thinking about the last time you accessed the forums, how did you feel after you had finished using them?
Base: All respondents: Wave 1 n=1597, Wave 2 n=1138

Figure 21: Anxiety: feelings before and after accessing the forums
2.2.2 Accessing other avenues of help and support

Support accessed as a direct result of using forums

![Graph showing support accessed](image)

Figure 22: Support accessed as a direct result of using forums

After a significant decrease in the proportion of people who said they had accessed no other avenue support as a direct result of using the forums in 2016, the pattern of around two-thirds of respondents (66%) accessing some form of support has been maintained this year.

Those who haven’t accessed other support were significantly more likely to:

- Have only accessed the forums once (42% didn’t access other support)
- Last accessed forums more than a year ago (43% none of these)
- Haven’t experienced any shift in their depression after participation (43% and 47% respectively none of these).
2.2.3 Making positive lifestyle changes

Changes made as a result of forum use

Around two-thirds (66%) of respondents claimed to have made changes to their lifestyle as a result of forum participation, which is slightly below last year. Increasing exercise and meditation/mindfulness techniques head the list of changes, followed by connecting more with friends or family.

Importantly, making changes was more common amongst those claiming to feel less depressed or anxious after participating in the forums; 78% of both groups had made some lifestyle changes, significantly above those experiencing no or negative impacts. This difference is seen across all activities, with none showing a particularly strong impact on depression or anxiety.
In addition to these findings on personal impact, accessing support, and making lifestyle changes, 42% of respondents considered the forums have had an extremely good or good impact on their life, a positive result that has held constant since last year. Around one in six, however, considered that impact to have been poor.

### 2.3 Disadvantages and negative experiences

Against the strongly positive overall results, 5-6% of users gave a lower score for how depressed or anxious they felt after interacting with the forums, and 15% say the forums have had a poor impact on their lives.

When asked directly about a range of potential negative experiences, in general between around 15% and 25% of respondents agree that they have had such experiences in the forums:

- 26% agreed that they had felt anxious about responding to posts
- 18% had been distressed by negative posts (about suicide, sexual abuse, domestic violence)
- 18% felt a fear of being judged
- 16% had felt more depressed/anxious after reading of others’ experiences.

For some the negative experiences were about format: 22% agreed that some posts were too long to bother reading, and 11% found the layout daunting/intimidating.

While there was lower disagreement with most of these statements than last year, there has not been a shift to greater agreement; rather respondents moved to more neutral responses.
Negative forum experiences

![Bar chart showing negative forum experiences](chart.png)

Figure 25: Negative forum experiences

3. Building a sense of community

Importance of sense of community

![Bar chart showing importance of sense of community](chart.png)

Figure 26: Importance of a sense of community
While 71% of respondents attached at least some importance to a sense of forum community, this was only held with any strength by 40% of those surveyed, a result that has changed little since 2016. Against this, only 8% overtly reject being part of such a community, a response that varied little across a wide range of demographic and other characteristics.

Included in the survey was a brief and edited form of the ‘Sense of Community Index’, described in the Background section above. The need to make minor changes to survey questions to fit the context of the beyondblue forums meant that we are unable to compare the scores with other studies.

The findings for these indicators have been positive and stable:

- The forums are considered to be welcoming (67% agree), and participants are felt to care about each other (57% agree) and can be trusted (43% agree)
- Participants feel that the forums create a sense of community (49% agree), and are successful in meeting member needs (53% agree)
- People feel supported (42% agree), share needs and priorities (48% agree), and value the same things as others in the forums (42% agree)

While the forums are not considered integral to the lives of the majority of forum users, there is a core of users (which includes more active contributors and “superusers”) for whom the forums are more self-defining:

- Overall, 22% of respondents consider it to be very important to be part of them, 11% put a lot of time into being a member, and 10% view participation as part of their identity
  - Amongst more regular contributors (those making more than 20 posts) these shares were far higher – 34%, 22% and 34% respectively.
  - They also place greater weight than others on emotional support as something they gain from the forums, suggesting why the forums are more central to their lives:
    - 58% - ability to communicate with others who know what I’m going through
    - 52% - just someone to talk to about how I am feeling
    - 51% - being able to share my experiences and offer support to others.
### Sense of Community Index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Wave 2</th>
<th>Wave 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The beyondblue forums have members that help others feel welcome</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants of the beyondblue forums care about each other</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The beyondblue forums create a sense of community</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can trust people in the beyondblue forums</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I expect to be part of the beyondblue forums for a long time</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I have a problem I can talk about it with members of the beyondblue forums</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The beyondblue forums are successful in meeting the needs of members</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I care about what the other beyondblue forum participants think of me</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People in the beyondblue forums have similar needs, priorities and goals to me</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel supported through being part of the beyondblue online forums</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a member of the beyondblue forums helps me to deal with my depression and/or anxiety</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beyondblue forum members value the same things as I do</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is very important to me to be part of the beyondblue forums</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have influence over what the beyondblue forum is like</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I put a lot of time and effort into being a member of the beyondblue forums</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in the beyondblue forum is part of my identity</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 27: Sense of community index**

A17. How well do each of the following statements represent how you feel about the beyondblue forums?

Notes: All respondents: Wave 3 = 1597, Wave 2 = 1138

Key:
- ▲ Indicates a significant difference at a 95% confidence level when compared to Wave 2
- ▼ Confidence level when compared to Wave 2
4. Forum user experience

Usage of specific beyondblue forums

While most forums have attracted stable usage (albeit amongst a growing population of users), there have been changes:

- Usage of the Depression forum fell from 82% to 78% of respondents
- PTSD and Trauma experienced a sharp increase (up 10 points to 21%)
- Relationship and Family Issues also showed a strong increase (up 6 points to 26%)
- Three new forum categories were introduced (Long term support over the journey, BB Social Zone, and Ask Dr Kim); all three forums attracted modest usage, but were significantly more likely to be accessed by:
  - Those who make more posts (32% used Long term support for the journey, 37% BB Social Zone, and 15% Ask Dr Kim)
  - Those with suicide risk (11% used Long term support for the journey)
  - Those with a serious/critical flag (19% used Long term support for the journey, 14% BB Social Zone, and 8% Ask Dr Kim)
We also asked about particular topic areas (not specifically related to the forum categories, but identified by beyondblue as being common areas of discussion) that people liked to read and/or contribute to.

**Topic areas most likely read**

![Bar chart showing topic areas most likely read](image)

Again we have seen a general decrease – and in some cases a significant one – in the topic areas people are likely to read (and contribute to). This trend is not as marked as in 2016, when the addition of a number of new topics – PTSD, workplace issues, bipolar and workplace support – was felt to have diluted the audience for the ‘old’ topics. The main reductions this year were for:

- Explaining depression/anxiety to family/friends (down 11%)
- Panic attacks (down 5%)
- Medication side effects (down 4%)
- General venting (down 4%)
- Gender identity and sexuality (down 2%).

Figure 20: Topic areas most likely read

AB. Below is a list of common topic areas that people have identified on the forums. Please select up to five that you are most likely to read, and up to five that you are most likely to contribute to (i.e. create/respond to a thread)...

Base: All respondents, Wave 3 n=1537, Wave 2 n=1388

*Revised Code*
Corresponding to a reduced interest in reading about explaining depression/anxiety to family/friends was a 5% fall in interest in contributing to this topic. Apart from a 2% fall in interest in responding on OCD posts, no other significant falls occurred this year.
In general, there is a relatively small and declining gap between likelihood of reading and contributing on each topic. Two key exceptions were in relation to:

- Suicide/self-harm – a wider gap than in 2016 (11%, up 5%) as a result of slightly greater interest in reading about the topic
- BPD – an increase in the gap from 3% to 5%.
Rating of forum aspects

There have been no significant shifts at all in respondent ratings of the forum in terms of ease of reading and navigation, quality of moderation, length of posts, and speed of response to posts. The gains made in 2016 have, however, been able to be maintained.

5. Suggested improvements

A number of potential changes were put to respondents; most attracted support from around 25%, but email notification of replies (44%) and access via app (39%) held the greatest appeal. Only three changes (sharing videos and images, tagging users) stood out as lacking appeal to more than a small minority of respondents.

There were differences in appeal between user groups:

- 18-24 year olds (and to a lesser degree 25-34 year olds) were more enthusiastic about most options, but stood out particularly in relation to:
  - Access via an app (56%)
  - Email notification of replies (54%)
- Contacting users privately (46%)
- Using emoticons (36%)
- Following posts by specific users (34%)
- Sharing videos (14%)

- Being able to follow posts by specific users was particularly favoured by:
  - Frequent (20+) posters (39%)
  - Those with serious/critical flags (35%)
  - Those at suicide risk (29%)

Changes like to see made to forums

- Email notification when I have a reply on the forum: 44%
- Access to the forums via an app: 39%
- Ability to block seeing posts by specific users: 27%
- Ability to contact users privately: 25%
- Ability to use emoticons: 25%
- Ability to follow posts by specific users: 25%
- Ability to share links: 24%
- Forum posts visible only to registered users: 23%
- A profile, viewable by other users, where I can introduce myself: 22%
- Ability to quickly access all posts by a particular user: 21%
- Ability to tag users in a conversation: 15%
- Ability to share images: 10%
- Ability to share videos: 6%
- None of these: 17%

All: Which of the following changes would you like to see made to the BeyondBlue forums?
Base: All respondents; Wave 3 n=1597

Figure 33: Reaction to suggested changes
DISCUSSION

While the forums have continued to grow in terms of members, posts, and activities, clear signs are emerging of a maturation process that is, in the main, having beneficial effects. In particular, this third wave of research has shown a number of trends developing:

- More participants have been using the forums for over a year than was the case in earlier years.
- Despite this, the reasons for joining forums, and the profile of newer members are remaining relatively constant, i.e. the forums are continuing to appeal to “like people”, and are not alienating them by appearing “clubby”.
- Members are increasingly likely to hear about the forums through external voices, and not beyondblue – Facebook, digital search, health professionals.
- Members are accessing forums less frequently, and are displaying less interest in emotional support, and more in practical guidance.
- Encouragingly, the gap between what they are seeking through the forums and what is being delivered is narrowing over time, particularly in relation to providing emotional support. Most users feel they have gained at least what they expected to from the forums, if not more.
- There is less of a focus on passive participation (reading other people’s posts) and more on active participation (responding to posts, or even starting your own thread). Again, this indicates a maturing community.

Generating outcomes

Where the 2016 findings contained numerous strong shifts towards more positive engagement with the forums that were leading to increasingly positive outcomes, this year we have seen a more stable picture, with the positive impacts largely maintained, and being seen to work together. To illustrate this, we have seen a clear correlation between participants making lifestyle changes as a direct result of their forum participation, and becoming less depressed or anxious after taking part in the forums.

While a small minority have had negative experiences in the forums, these have tended to be due to individual actions and reactions (such as reading posts that distressed them) rather than to anything directly attributable to forum structure or approach. Given the overall trend away from a need for emotional support, these appear to be exceptions to the rule of positive forum experiences.

A sense of community is present in the forums, but it appears to be relatively modest – the forums are in no way central to the lives of most participants, but they clearly provide a positive, caring, respectful environment in most cases.
Introducing changes

In terms of introducing changes, the new forums added in 2017 have, so far, attracted modest usage except amongst the most active forum users – those making frequent posts (including those with a risk flag). The range of new ideas put to participants was positively, if not enthusiastically received, and especially email notification of post replies, and access to a forum app.

Amongst 18-24 year olds a far more positive response was apparent; they welcomed all technology or engagement-based suggestions with some energy. However, there was no strong sense that change needs to be radical; rather it is about bringing the forum offer into line with what participants experience in other online environments.
ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS: SUICIDALITY

In order to obtain further insights into the experiences and responses of those with suicide risk, additional analysis has been carried out into the n=694 forum members responding to the survey who:

- Indicated that they accessed the forums because they were suicidal and wanted support (n=411), or
- Didn’t indicate this motivation but had accessed the Suicidal Thoughts and Self Harm forum category (n=283).

Demographic profile

Respondents in this group did not differ greatly on demographic characteristics from the overall sample of forum users:

- The gender balance was significantly less female-skewed
- Significantly more were aged under 25
- No significant differences in location (state/territory) or area type (metro/regional)
- Significantly more LGBTI (and particularly Bisexual – 10% v 6% in the total sample).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Suicide risk group (n=694)</th>
<th>Total sample (n=1597)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35-54</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>55+</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VIC</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Figure 34: Profile of suicide risk respondents v overall sample

#### Other key findings on suicide risk

A number of other differences between those at risk of suicide and the overall sample of forum users included the following:

- **Other avenues of support** (A11)
  - Significantly more likely to access support services/lines (47% v 38% total), particularly:
    - Called another support line e.g. Lifeline (34% v 24%)
    - Called the beyondblue Support Service 1300 22 4636 (17% v 13%)
    - Used the beyondblue Support Service online chat service (15% v 11%)
  - No other significant differences in avenues accessed.
• **Comparing feelings before and after forum use (A6/A6a)**
  
  o Those at suicide risk experienced very similar shifts in **depression** after forum participation: 55% felt better, and 5% worse (cf 54% and 6% of the overall sample).
  
  o However, they experienced greater shifts in **anxiety** after the forums: 61% of those accessing forums because they felt suicidal and wanted support felt better and 4% worse (cf 56% and 5% overall).
    
    ▪ Specifically, 47% of those at suicide risk felt very depressed and 37% very anxious **before** the forums, and this fell to 20% and 16% respectively **after** the forums.
    
    ▪ This compare with shifts from 33% to 14% for depression, and 31% to 11% for anxiety amongst the total sample.

• **Support accessed as a result of using the forums (A12)**
  
  o Those at suicide risk were significantly more likely than others to have **sought help from a health professional** (e.g. GP, psychologist, counsellor, practice nurse): 41% v 36% of the overall sample.
  
  o All other support was accessed at a very similar level.

• **Lifestyle changes made as a result of using the forums (A13)**
  
  o Those at suicide risk were significantly more likely than others to have **reduced alcohol / drug intake**: 18% v 15% of the overall sample.
  
  o All other changes were reported at a very similar levels, although the suicide risk group were slightly more likely to have made no changes at all (38% v 34% overall).