



# Improving mental health and wellbeing in multicultural communities

## Ana's story

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact upon the mental health and wellbeing of many people in South Eastern NSW, and especially older people from multicultural and diverse backgrounds. Ana's story highlights the importance of bilingual and culturally inclusive supports to help reduce people's anxiety, social isolation, and fear during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In early 2021, anxiety and fear about COVID-19, extended lockdowns, and rapidly changing restrictions were taking its toll on many people, including Ana\*, an Illawarra resident aged over 65 with English as her second language. During the onset of the pandemic, Ana was finding it difficult to process important health updates, and often relied on family members or friends to translate information.

While listening to a local radio segment in her first language of Macedonian, Ana heard about the mental health and wellbeing services offered by the Multicultural Communities Council of the Illawarra (MCCI) to assist people impacted by the pandemic who may be isolated or lonely.

Ana decided to reach out to MCCI and was encouraged by a volunteer to attend the next monthly focus group, which took place via Zoom. There, she joined a cohort of seniors from diverse backgrounds. MCCI supported the seniors in the access and use of video conferencing technology. Many were feeling the same range of emotions as Ana.

138



community members attended MCCI's mental health and wellbeing focus groups between November 2020 and October 2021

40



bilingual MCCI volunteers facilitated the sessions, both online and in person

"I talked about my difficulty with managing my daily worries and lack of social connection in lockdown. I felt supported by the volunteers running the session and decided to continue attending the focus groups," said Ana.

Ana was one of 138 community members who attended MCCI's mental health and wellbeing focus groups funded by COORDINARE – South Eastern NSW PHN (Primary Health Network) between November 2020 and October 2021. A total of 40 bilingual MCCI volunteers facilitated the sessions, both online and in person.

In this supportive environment, Ana felt comfortable expressing her concerns.

"I felt worried about being ill with COVID-19 and my family catching it, and with the information and advice about how to stay safe changing all the time, and I didn't always understand what I was being asked to do."

Together, the MCCI team and focus group participants helped Ana identify ways to cope with her stress. They identified activities that bring Ana joy, such as knitting, arts, and crafts: beneficial activities for coping with adversity and building resilience. The focus groups also discussed the potential mental health benefits of these activities, including reduced risk of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress, as the Mental Health Foundation – UK has examined in recent [research](#).

Ana was grateful for the conversations she had throughout the monthly focus groups. When she first joined the initiative, she reported that her worries "made her depressed" and that she "wanted to stay in bed all day." By the end of 2021, Ana had made new friends and connections in the focus groups. She was encouraged to continue these connections via phone and given a MCCI contact to call whenever she felt overwhelmed.

"I felt less overwhelmed  
after speaking openly and  
honestly about some of my  
concerns." - Ana

"It was great to make new  
friends and feel heard."  
- Ana

Ana continues to call the MCCI team to seek out bilingual and culturally inclusive information about COVID-19, as well as other opportunities for support and social connection.

**MCCI provides a range of online and in-person health and wellbeing activities for seniors from a wide variety of backgrounds. You can find out more about MCCI's work with multicultural communities in the Illawarra here: [www.mcci.org.au](http://www.mcci.org.au)**

\*Not her real name.