



Annual Report 2020

# Times have changed

Our services are needed  
more than ever

Our new headquarters



Chair Report

CEO Report

Board

Executive Team



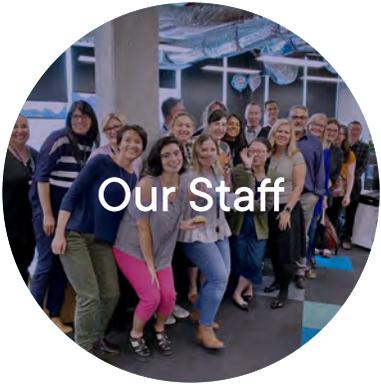
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# Message from the Chair

For over thirty- five years Better Place Australia has successfully adapted to a changing world, but the 2019/2020 year presented challenges never before seen in Australia's history. Unimaginable bushfire devastation swept through Victoria taking lives and causing grief and despair. This disaster was quickly followed by COVID-19, a global pandemic that has reshaped our world. The need for organisations like Better Place Australia has never been greater. As trauma, anxiety, and serious symptoms related to social isolation were experienced by many, Better Place rose to the challenge. The significant work of our dedicated practitioners has helped thousands to navigate these extraordinary events. Their dedication, expertise, and resilience as they worked amid strict lockdowns, has been exemplary. They can be proud of the fact that their efforts have helped our communities to endure.

Better Place is well recognised as a strong organisation, led by an empathetic and energetic CEO and his talented Executive, and supported by a committed and generous Board. Our reputation led to having the Commonwealth contract for the *Victorian National Debt Helpline* expanded to support communities affected by the Summer

bushfires and then for those financially stressed by COVID-19. This gave us the chance to play a direct role in supporting individuals as they began to rebuild their lives after the bushfire tragedy or those at risk of unmanageable debt due to the Pandemic. Confidence in Better Place was also demonstrated when we successfully won The Way Back Support Service contract for suicide prevention in the south east region, allowing us to expand our mental health services.

These were not the only newly funded programs that we were able to launch during the year. Financial counselling, elder abuse and residential aged care mental health programs have also been part of an extended suite of services we are now able to offer. This makes us well positioned to reach more people in need and respond to a broader range of issues. Our client's trust and appreciate our services, and this has been demonstrated by a 15% growth in client numbers.

Our commitment to continuous improvement meant that we were able to transition to remote services within one week after lockdown was announced, since we had just completed an upgrade of our technological

capability. We purchased a new head office, which provides more exposure on Nepean Highway for our surrounding community and we announced the *Centre for Better Relationships* which marks a new direction for Better Place Australia and will facilitate stronger social impact through research policy and advocacy.

These remarkable achievements are a result of the many people associated with Better Place Australia who believe in the importance of helping others in need. Among them was our long serving Board member and Chair, Brendan Rowsell who resigned in September 2020. On behalf of the Board, I would like to thank Brendan for supporting the organisation through a time of significant transformation and development.

Better Place Australia should be proud of everything it has achieved in this difficult

year. It is well positioned to continue thriving and to move closer towards our vision of an Australia where everyone enjoys healthy relationships, values each other, and lives safer, more confident lives.



**Rachel Holthouse**  
Chair



**Rachel  
Holthouse**  
Chair

# CEO Report

## Times have changed, and so have we

Nearly three years ago we launched our new five-year strategy underpinned by the objective to truly position Better Place Australia as an organisation making a real, positive difference to the communities it served. It was acknowledged, that for Better Place to truly make an impact on the lives of our clients, just delivering the services we were funded to deliver would not be enough. The Board was visionary enough to understand that doing what is needed rather than just what is funded required unshakable commitment and investment in people, resources and innovation. Hence our strategic vision was backed by a financial management plan that re-invested a portion of our surpluses back into new strategic initiatives that strengthened Better Place's ability to respond to the growing needs of our communities. As a CEO there is nothing more motivating than to work for a Board that truly believes in making a difference and is willing to take risks, make investments, and live the values of the organisation.

The impact of such a bold strategy has been nothing short of transformational. Other than a new name and brand we have secured a permanent home for our head office by purchasing a floor of a brand-new building. We've relocated four of our seven offices and several co-locations to improve access to services and expand our geographical spread.

We also invested heavily in technologies moving our communications systems to a digital platform and providing much greater versatility across all our business systems.

Better Place launched *The Centre for Better Relationships*, its own self-funded research centre this year to build the body of knowledge in the sector. Additionally it gave me great pleasure to launch Better Pride, specialised mediation and psychological services for the LGBTIQ+ community.

No innovation strategy is complete without investment in people, so we implemented the One Better Place culture and well-being initiative which greatly improved cross unit collaboration and health and well-being. The entire senior leadership team participated in a tailored leadership development program with accredited training offered to team leaders.

The results of our strategy this year have been outstanding. We have achieved expansion across most of our funded programs including mental health services, elder abuse, financial counselling, and residential aged care mental health program. We now have approximately 125 staff which has almost doubled since 2017.

And then the world changed!

This summer Australia experienced some of the most horrific bushfires in its history.

Serge Sardo  
Chief Executive  
Officer



With a presence in Gippsland, Better Place responded with a level of commitment and determination that was truly unique. We were asked to be part of the local and state response effort to provide financial counselling support to affected communities. I'm so proud at our how quickly our people responded and how professional the enormous challenges were confronted.

In March COVID-19 completely upended our lives and forced us to vacate our offices and work from home. It was at this point that the previous year's investment in our people and technology systems enabled us to rapidly transition to home-based servicing and continue to support those most in need with very little disruption in service provision.

I can't express enough gratitude and pride for our dedicated staff who worked extremely hard to ensure our clients continued to receive much needed support during this pandemic. As we move into a new year, I would like to acknowledge our Chair Brendan

Rowswell who has since retired from the Board. Brendan led Better Place through some major transitions and gave me much support during the past three years.

I would also like to thank all the directors and executive team, along with every single staff member for their wonderful work, professionalism, and determination to realise a better place for our clients. I would like to extend my thanks to our funding partners whose support is pivotal to our work in the community. My final word is about our clients and their resilience and adaptability during this pandemic - truly impressive.

Let's keep our hopes up and heads high as we confront this pandemic and draw on our strengths and support the communities around us.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Serge Sardo'. The signature is fluid and cursive.

Serge Sardo  
Chief Executive Officer

# Board



## Rachel Holthouse Chair

Rachel is a specialist advisor in international education. Her most recent role until October 2019 was Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Global Development at RMIT University.

Her previous role was as Chief Executive Officer of RMIT Training, a company wholly owned by RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. The company is a successful provider of education solutions supporting professional development goals of clients worldwide.

Prior to joining RMIT Training in 2009, Rachel has held senior governance roles in the education sector in Australia, the UK and in Singapore. She has extensive international experience working with global partners and operating in highly regulated and multijurisdictional environments. Her achievements include establishing offices overseas and commercialising IP to develop digital and face-to-face learning products that effectively support training needs.

Rachel has a Bachelor of Arts from Monash University, RSA/Cambridge CELTA from RMIT University, a Diploma of Education from Melbourne University and a Masters of Applied Linguistics from Macquarie University. She is also a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

Chair from September 2020.



## Erika Owens Deputy Chair and Director

Erika Owens is the Director, Victim Support within the Victim Services, Support & Reform (VSSR) unit at the Department of Justice and Community Safety. She was previously the CEO of Crime Stoppers Victoria. She has also held executive positions as Senior Manager, Southern & Eastern Melbourne and later as General Manager, State Services at Relationship Australia (Vic) for 3 years. Prior to this, Erika worked in the Department of Justice for several years overseeing delivery of government reform and operations.

Erika has a Bachelor of Arts (Sociology and Australian Cultural Studies) from Victoria University, a Graduate Diploma in Arts (Criminology) from the University of Melbourne and an Executive Master of Public Administration from the University of Melbourne.



## David Speyer Director and Treasurer

David is Executive General Manager Victoria at Aruma. His passion is to enable the delivery of excellence to customers and his passion to create the dynamic environment for change and growth to thrive.

Today that means leading services to people living with disabilities to live a great life, the life they choose. Throughout his career in senior executive and leadership he has applied his commercial and financial acumen to complex change and turnaround through roles in finance, mergers and acquisitions, business reorganisations in multinationals and for-purpose national organisations.

David is Chair of the Finance, Risk & Audit Committee.

## Delia McIver Director

Delia McIver has significant experience at a senior executive level across the post-secondary education sector in the areas of People and Culture/Human Resources, safety, risk and corporate services, working across Australia and internationally in her career. Delia currently holds the position of Chief People Officer at Chisholm Institute. She has held similar positions as Executive Director People & Capability at Box Hill Institute and Director Human Resources at Victoria University.

Delia has a keen interest in the not-for-profit sector and has been a member of the Fitzroy Learning Network Board, Oakleigh Centre Board.

Delia is a graduate of the University of Melbourne, Monash University and La Trobe University and a member of the Australian Human Resources Institute.

Delia is Chair of the Nominations & Remuneration Committee.

# Board



## Anne Goldsbrough Director

Anne Goldsbrough has been a Victorian Magistrate since 1996.

Anne has a long-standing interest in the Court's Family Violence and Family Law jurisdictions and has presided over a portfolio of significant projects, such as the development and introduction of the specialist Family Violence Court Division of the Magistrates Court in 2005. She currently leads a Magistrates' Court with specialist family violence and mental health programs.

Anne contributes regularly to ongoing legal and judicial professional development both inside and outside the court, and to a range of community information and education programs, within Australia and internationally.

Anne completed her law degree at The University of Melbourne and previously studied in the areas of behavioural science, psychology and teacher training at La Trobe University.



## Dr Bruce Bolam Director

Dr Bruce Bolam is Executive Director, Health Protection, in the Department of Health & Human Services, Victoria. He has extensive experience in public health and behavioural science, gained through senior roles in research, healthcare, government and non-government organisations in Australia and the UK.

Passionate about reducing local and global inequalities in health and wellbeing, Bruce was an inaugural Co-Director of the World Health Organisation (WHO) Collaborating Centre for Leadership in Health Promotion hosted by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, VicHealth.

Bruce is a Fellow of both the Public Health Association of Australia and the UK Faculty of Public Health of the Royal Colleges of Physicians and holds several degrees in public health sciences. He maintains an active research profile and is regularly invited to speak at national and international scientific conferences.



## Emma Fenby Director

Emma Fenby is a Director in the Children, Families, Disabilities and Communities Division at the Department of Health & Human Services. Emma has led key reforms in the out-of-home care sector in Victoria, including the new model of kinship care. She is currently seconded as Executive and Strategic Advisor to the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, where she works with government, community service providers, researchers and philanthropic organisations to develop evidence and advocate for policy change to improve outcomes for children, young people and families experiencing vulnerability and hardship.

Emma was previously company secretary at a government statutory authority, following 10 years in commercial law practice. She has also worked as a lawyer on several inquiries and Royal Commissions, and led the government response to the Hazelwood Mine Fire inquiries.

Emma completed her Arts and Law degrees, and Masters in Law at Monash University. She is also a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors.



## Brendan Rowswell Retired Chair of the Board

Brendan is a Director at a leading public affairs firm in Melbourne whose clients are major Australian companies within the infrastructure, transport, higher education, information and technology, and health and energy sectors. He is an experienced government relations and communications specialist and regularly represents not-for-profit clients in their dealings with federal and state governments.

Brendan is a member of the Advisory Council of Artolution, an international public arts charity, based in New York. He was previously Public Affairs Manager at a Victorian industry association, and adviser to a federal Member of Parliament for two terms in Government.

Brendan was a member of the Finance, Risk and Audit Committee.

Retired as Chair of the Board in September 2020.

# Executive Team



## **Serge Sardo** Chief Executive Officer

Serge Sardo is the CEO of Better Place Australia. He has accumulated over 12 years' experience as a CEO and non-executive director for not-for-profit or government organisations. In his previous role as CEO of the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation, Serge was instrumental in establishing the Foundation as a world leader in the delivery of counselling, support and prevention programs to over 100 different locations.

Serge is a registered psychologist and has an MBA qualification complimented with strong commercial experience. With expertise in preventative programs, social policy and advocacy, he has delivered and managed a wide variety of community-based therapeutic and prevention services.

Serge is a member of the Board for the Family and Relationships Services Australia and chairs the Finance, Risk and Governance committee. He is also a non-Executive Director of Scope Disability Services.



## **Graeme Westaway** Executive Manager Brand, Digital & Corporate Communications

Graeme Westaway is an experienced senior executive with over 25 years' experience in brand, organisational development and growth, corporate strategy and client service development.

With a science, marketing and mediation educational background, Graeme brings to Better Place Australia an expertise in communication and stakeholder management, branding, services development utilising multiple platforms, growth generation, and organisational planning.

He has held a number of executive and senior leadership roles and has a background in developing and implementing strategies to drive revenue, digital engagement and service innovation across the not-for-profit, mutual and corporate sectors.



## **Jenni Dickson** Executive Manager Community Support Services

Jenni Dickson is the Executive Manager of Community Support Services at Better Place Australia.

Jenni joined Better Place Australia in 2013 and manages the areas of Mediation, Financial counselling, National Debt Helpline and Elder services, as well as Quality Improvement across the organisation.

She has over 20 years' experience in the healthcare and community services industry and has held previous management roles across both public and community health sectors.

Jenni has qualifications in Nursing, Community Health and Quality Management and has extensive experience in the Aged and Community Care sector. Working constantly to improve service standards, she was key in achieving QIC Accreditation for Better Place Australia. Jenni was also instrumental in developing Better Place Australia's Elder Abuse Prevention services.



## **David Turen** Executive Manager Human Resources

David Turen has extensive career experience in Human Resource Management and Industrial Relations in both the corporate and not for profit sectors. David has held HR leadership roles across a variety of organisations in health and community services, contact centres and commercial aviation.

David's portfolio covers responsibility over the full suite of people and culture functions including HR Strategy, Employee Relations, Performance and Reward Management, HR Consultancy and People Policy.

David has a Bachelor's Degree in Economics, a Master's Degree in Human Resources and Industrial Relations from the University of Sydney and is a Professional Member of the Australian Human Resources Institute (CAHRI). David is also a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors (GAICD).

# Executive Team



## **Andrew Johnston** Executive Manager - Psychological Services & Operations

Andrew Johnston has over 20 years' experience in organisational development, operational planning and development, and quality and risk management spanning across not-for-profit, aid and development, community, and private sectors. Andrew has held a variety of key leadership and senior positions at large non-profit, community, and private organisations.

Andrew has a passion for working with strategic, values-based people and has an educational background in business, management and leadership. He has also undertaken extensive work as an independent organisational development consultant supporting a range of not-for-profit agencies in the health/community service sectors.



## **Craig Dennis** Executive Manager Business Systems

Craig Dennis has over 30 years' of experience in IT systems, information management and information technology strategy. He has held a number of senior and executive roles, and has extensive experience in technology change consulting, and advisory and business leadership roles.

Craig's expertise in business automation systems for small to medium businesses has enabled Better Place Australia to develop new key IT strategies and systems.

Craig has a long history in volunteer work, including helping senior roles in the Country Fire Authority and consulting for a number of not-for-profits.



## **Chris Ritchie** Executive Manager Corporate Services

Chris has a Bachelor of Business with a major in Accounting and post graduate qualifications in business management.

He is a Fellow of CPA Australia and of the Governance Institute of Australia.

Chris has an extensive knowledge of finance, administration, contract administration, facilities management, corporate governance and risk management, with over 25 years in senior roles with ASX listed companies as a CFO, Director and Company Secretary.

# COVID-19 Responding to extraordinary change



COVID-19 has put our ways of working, digital capabilities and human spirit to a test unlike any other. We had to change quickly and efficiently while still providing our much needed services and remaining nimble in response to great uncertainty. Yet we've also witnessed remarkable behavioural shifts and displays of resilience among our clients and colleagues.

## High uptake of phone and virtual counselling services

Our practitioners and clients have taken readily to phone and video counselling services, and there is a stronger preference for the former. Having to use Zoom and other digital platforms to keep business and schooling going, and to stay in touch with family and friends, has helped our clients accept the change in how we're delivering our services.

We also enhanced our live chat service for clients who want to maintain their privacy or who fear for their safety in their initial contact with us. For a person at risk of domestic violence, an online chat service is inconspicuous unlike a phone call which can be overheard by the perpetrator.

Our service by delivery channel has changed dramatically to:

**60%**

by phone sessions

**30%**

by video sessions

## Positive behavioural change

Interestingly, our psychologists have reported an increase in the number of men who wanted to improve their relationships during COVID-19. Working from home meant spending more time with their partner, which brought their relationship dynamics into focus. These men wanted to explore what was not working in their relationships and learn to take responsibility for their own actions.

**154%**

increase in men seeking support between January and May

**29%**

increase in men attending relationship counselling

**26%**

increase in men attending individual counselling

We've seen how COVID-19 restrictions have increased the stress on family relationships. We are mindful that due to movement restrictions and added pressure on family violence services, many clients are required to shelter in place. We have adapted our assessment processes and models of care to ensure the safety of our clients at all times throughout the service.

# COVID-19 Responding to extraordinary change



## Increase in complexities faced by Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) clients

Family dispute cases increased in complexity and urgency during COVID-19. The cases have required more contact and a greater sensitivity to power imbalances and at times, coercion. Clients are seeking further safety supports, and there are instances when a court intervention is required. We increased our vigilance in regard to the presence of family violence and ensured appropriate support and referral where detected.

Limited options during COVID-19 also mean that people are putting up with less than satisfactory results. Issues relating to employment and housing insecurity, financial strain and isolation from support networks can make the separation process more difficult for many. The increase in households under pressure due to being forced to work, care and parent under one roof has added to the stress. The lockdown also produced new challenges around parenting plans.

While Better Place Australia's practitioners kept to the traditional FDR process, they saw an increase in requests for shuttle mediation, which stretched mediation timelines further.

## Funding for our Financial Counselling set up

Better Place Australia received funding from the Ecstra Foundation Response and Recovery grant to set up the hardware for fully integrated remote workstations. These workstations are used by our Financial Counsellors as they continue providing immediate support to vulnerable clients during the pandemic.

## Communicating service changes on our website

The Better Place Australia website was updated to communicate the new COVID-19 arrangements for all services. It outlined our phone and video capabilities, the availability of each service and how to access it, and our response to the pandemic from a safety perspective.

## Supporting staff with setting up remote workstations

In March 2020, we deployed remote work arrangements and digital technology for staff across our 23 locations. The transition was seamless for both our staff and clients. Our digital set-up included using cloud-based software, PureCloud and Zoom Professional for intake and services. Sharepoint and Microsoft Teams supported internal communication.

# Bushfires Supporting Victorians after the bushfires

Victoria's year of change began with the summer bushfires in its regional townships. It was only when the last flames were being put out that the real work began for the survivors and our Financial Counsellors.

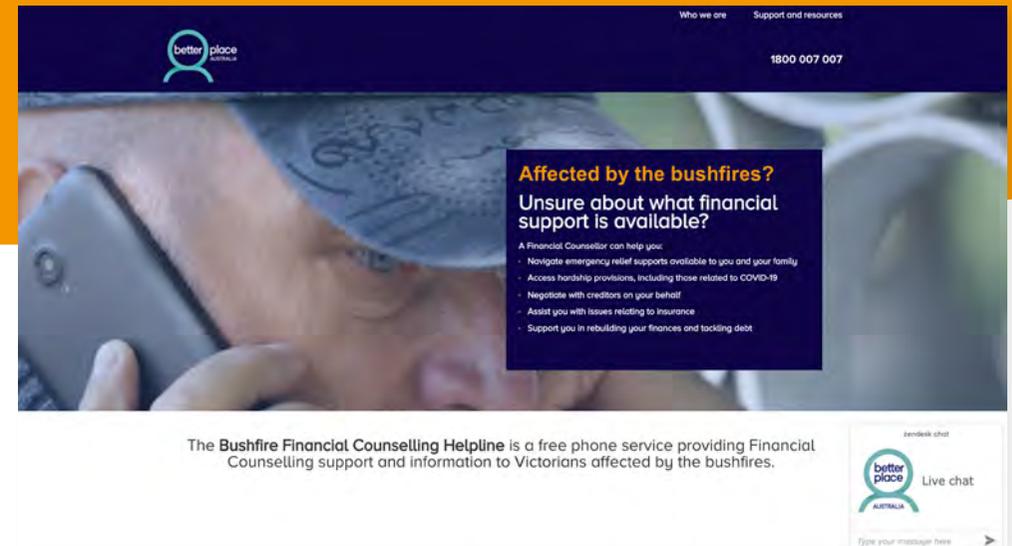
In January 2020, we set up our Bushfire Financial Counselling Helpline and website to provide bushfire-affected Victorians the financial information and support they needed to rebuild their lives.

The Bushfire Financial Counselling Helpline is serviced by the same Better Place Australia Financial Counsellors who manage our National Debt Helpline (NDH).

The website also provides online counselling and a resources list that includes insurance and legal assistance, relief for fines and tax information.

Our Financial Counsellors guided people through the range of emergency relief support, negotiated with creditors on their behalf, and helped them manage their debt and finances.

As people slowly got back on their feet, our Financial Counsellors helped them work out their entitlements, tackle debt and rebuild their finances. Where necessary, they also referred clients to other support services.



“Many people are often confused as to where to start and what options are available when speaking with insurers or financial institutions about their situation. Many may struggle with insurance or paying their mortgages and think they've reached a dead end. But they still have options.” – Charu, Financial Counsellor Team Leader with the NDH



# Client Profile

## Gender



Male	Female	Other
42%	57.6%	0.16%

## Current income



\$0 - \$50,000	\$50,001-\$100,000	\$100,001-\$150,000	Over \$150,000	Not disclosed
53%	15.7%	3.6%	0.9%	26.7%

## Highest level of education



Tertiary, Universities and Institutes	Secondary Year 12	Secondary Year 10	Secondary - Other	Primary	Never attended school	Not stated
34.1%	6.8%	5.7%	12.4%	3.3%	0.2%	37.6%

## Marital status



Single / Never married	Married	In a relationship	Separated	Divorce	Widowed	Other
18%	14.5%	6.2%	23.5%	6.4%	2.3%	29.5%

## Employment status



Employed	Unemployed	Parenting, Carer and unpaid work	Retired	Other/not stated
42%	31.4%	4.2%	1.5%	20.7%

# Strategic Pillar Update

1

## Make A Difference

Better Place Australia has a positive impact on its clients, staff and the communities it serves. The two underlying premises of this aim is that staff are critical to good client outcomes, and that by adopting a public health approach, with stronger focus on prevention, Better Place Australia will make a stronger positive impact on people's lives.

### Key priorities 2019–2020

- Client Centred – improve how we deliver services and address service gaps through social enterprises
- Sustainable outcomes through effective evidence-based services
- A highly skilled and professional workforce
- Implement a public health framework for service delivery informed by prevention



2

## Growth and Sustainability

This strategic pillar is to ensure Better Place Australia prospers well into the future, and continues to provide much needed services to those most in need. Continued growth and sound financial management will help Better Place Australia invest in new approaches to support individuals and communities, and grow the sector knowledge base through sound research.

### Key priorities 2019–2020

- Marketing and promoting Better Place programs
- Diversify as an organisation, and expand the breadth and depth of services
- Build philanthropy, fundraising model
- Invest wisely for good returns and capital growth framework for service delivery informed by prevention



3

## Enterprising

With a rapidly changing sector, a growing population, and increasing diversity and community needs, this strategic pillar aims to build a dynamic, creative, inventive and daring organisation that pushes boundaries and explores new frontiers.

### Key priorities 2019–2020

- One Better Place - Develop the systems and infrastructure needed to improve cross unit collaboration and participation
- Develop a culture where staff are technologically competent and digitally savvy
- Implement new technologies that provide easier access and better service to clients
- Change Management - From transactional to transformational, consolidate changes/ new services and optimise performance and outcomes



4

## Brand and Reputation

Better Place Australia has spent the last 35 years delivering much-needed services across Victoria. It has now grown to an organisation that sees 11,000 clients per year, has over 129 staff across 23 locations in Victoria. A leader in delivering high quality services, our next stage of development is to build stronger awareness of our brand and a reputation as a thought leader, influencer and innovator.

### Key priorities 2019–2020

- Build a strong sector brand
- Grow our influence across stakeholders, policy makers and the sector
- Launch and establish the Centre for Better Relationships
- Be a savvy communicator



# Our Achievements

## COVID-19 response

Better Place Australia's focus on technological development means we were well placed to move quickly when the emergency arose. When the lockdowns came into place in March, we had full capability to deploy our staff to work remotely and supply them with laptops, external monitors and keyboards to set up a home office. We developed Zoom video consulting protocols so practitioners could continue supporting new and existing clients. We also conducted home office safety assessments, which included the provision of fire extinguishers.

## Purchase of Head Office Cheltenham

Lv 1/16 Park Road –  
December 2019



## Launch of the Centre for Better Relationships (CBR)

The Centre for Better Relationships (the Centre) is the research and policy division of Better Place Australia. Its mission is to become a research leader in the family and relationships field, and improve lives through meaningful research, knowledge translation and sharing research findings with a broad audience.

We work closely with policy makers and non-government organisations to understand the relationship challenges facing Australian families, and to develop evidence-based policy and practice responses. The Centre's current four key projects comprise Rainbow Families, Elder Abuse, financial hardship and mental health interventions in health care.

## NDH service during the bushfires

The Bushfire Financial Counselling Helpline website and free phone line was set up to provide Financial Counselling support and information to Victorians affected by the bushfires. This service is run by Better Place Australia's National Debt Helpline (NDH) Financial Counsellors as an extension to our existing NDH service.

The website also lists resources such as support payments and emergency relief, assistance from financial institutions and service providers, insurance and legal assistance, relief for fines and tax information.

**Affected by the bushfires?**  
Unsure about what financial support is available?

**Have no insurance?**  
Are you struggling with debt?

Financial Counselling is available.

1800 007 007 Mon - Fri  
9am - 5pm  
bushfirefinancialcounselling.org.au

# Our Achievements

## Way Back Service

The Way Back Service is a Beyond Blue initiative providing non-clinical care and practical support to individuals following a suicide attempt or suicidal crisis. The service is available to individuals who have presented to the Casey Hospital or Dandenong Hospital following a suicidal crisis.

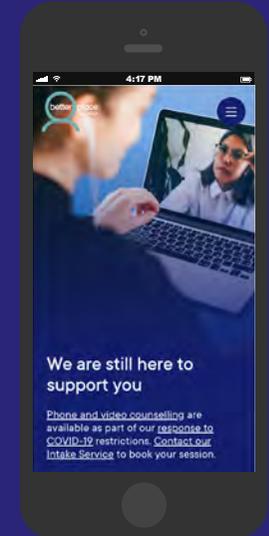
In February 2020, Better Place Australia won a tender to deliver the non-clinical aspect of this service in partnership with Beyond Blue and Monash Health. This service is funded through the South Eastern Melbourne Primary Health Network and is limited to three months for each client.

The service is run by Better Place practitioners from diverse cultural backgrounds who also refer clients out to other community support services or our own broader set of support services.

## Launch of a new Better Place Australia website

Better Place Australia's website was overhauled this year. We conducted user testing during the development phase and received excellent usability results. The new website is more intuitive and enables visitors to learn about our services at their own pace, using easy to understand terms. A mobile-responsive interface helps people of all persuasions access services and enquire via a channel of their choice in a user friendly digital experience.

[www.betterplaceaustralia.com.au](http://www.betterplaceaustralia.com.au)



## An enhanced Better Pride website section

As part of our commitment to our Diversity Strategy, we launched a new section to meet the needs of our LGBTIQ+ clients.

This section profiles our services in an approachable and relatable way, and also introduces our practitioners to our LGBTIQ+ allies and community.

[www.betterplaceaustralia.com.au/better-pride](http://www.betterplaceaustralia.com.au/better-pride)



## Staff Wellness activities during COVID-19

Mental and psychological wellness was top priority when our work lives and schedules were upturned by the pandemic. Better Place Australia moved quickly to introduce staff wellness activities that focused on taking care of their mental, physical and emotional health during this time.

Among the activities that received a positive response were free webinars on supporting children, maintaining healthy eating habits and managing burnout and fatigue. There was also a gentle yoga class and a reminder for staff to use the EAP service if they needed extra support.

# Our Achievements

## Implementation of PureCloud telephone system

In 2019, we had developed a cloud-based online system for the National Debt Helpline, which worked so well that we decided to install an organisation-wide system. So in March 2020 we implemented PureCloud, an online/cloud-based telephony. Its call centre functionality streamlined our operations and made remote working easier.



## Stronger support for older Victorians

Through successful grant applications and greater funding for existing services, we have been able to expand our following services:

- Psychological Services in Residential Aged Care Facilities (RACF) into Melbourne's North and West (commencing Oct 2020)
- Elder Abuse Prevention Services into five Orange Door locations in Morwell, Bayside, Geelong, North East and West.



## Leadership development program for Better Place Australia staff

Better Place's Leadership Development Program was established to further build and grow the capabilities of the Senior Leadership Team. Participants attended a full day workshop on managing and leading change and contemporary leadership approaches. They also had the opportunity to discuss challenges, opportunities for improvement and ways to strengthen team cohesion.



## Relocation of Ringwood to Croydon



# Our Achievements

## Increase in session numbers

# 31%

increase in total  
client sessions

### In Person Outreach

4.7%

2020

26.7%

2019

### Video

28.2%

2020

1.5%

2019

### Phone

58.8%

2020

15.3%

2019

### In Person

8.2%

2020

56.5%

2019

## Measuring our service impact

# 92%

of clients would recommend  
Better Place Australia.

# 88%

of clients reported that  
Better Place Australia had  
helped them achieve their  
goals.

# 96%

of clients found staff  
courteous and respectful.

# 85%

of clients were satisfied  
with our services.

# 50%

of people accessing  
specialised elders services  
have experienced elder  
abuse.

# Our Staff

## Navigating great change together

For every Australian, 2020 has been a year of change. It has called upon our resilience, flexibility and adaptability in a way like no other, and we're proud to say our people rose to the challenge together.

### Expanding our team and building new leaders

Better Place Australia is now a team of 129 staff across 23 locations. We strongly believe in creating a diverse and inclusive workspace, and our team clearly reflects our success in this area. Our key internal focus this year is on building our team's resilience and taking care of their mental wellbeing.

Better Place Australia is also never short of emerging leaders. This year, we used a performance matrix to identify potential leaders within the organisation and their respective focus areas of development. We then enrolled them in the nationally-recognised Diploma of Leadership & Management course. Those in our team who have graduated from this course are now making valuable contributions to our organisation.

### Championing wellness

One invaluable source of support was our Culture Champions. This volunteer group was formed in 2019 as part of our 'One Better Place' program and is represented by staff from different locations and areas of work.

The program's first initiative was introducing Wellness Coaching sessions, including yoga and mindfulness, at our main sites. The sessions had strong attendance and positive responses from our people as they faced a different way of living and working in Victoria.

Our Cultural Champions also looked at reward and recognition activities across the organisation, including commendations for top contributors. The Culture Champions also run internal surveys and campaigns on Better Place Australia's internal staff portal, The Loop, in an effort to keep staff connected and engaged.

### Adapting to a different way of working during COVID-19

The lockdowns in Victoria took place swiftly but our people responded just as quickly by creating makeshift workspaces and virtual counselling rooms in their homes. Going from being in the same room with their clients to providing phone and video counselling was a huge change that our practitioners adapted to remarkably well.

We continued to support new and existing clients throughout the lockdowns in both metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria. This year was not easy for our clients either, which meant we had to work harder to help them either stay steady on their feet or find their feet again.

During this time of need, our Financial Counsellors attended over 11,205 calls for support to the NDH Financial Counselling Helpline alone. Counsellors in other services

have supported a 43% increase in phone sessions and a 26% increase in video sessions as a proportion of total sessions.

### On-boarding staff quickly and easily

As our teams grew across various locations, departments and services, on-boarding new staff members became more complex. So we set up an online induction system in March 2020 called the Learning Management System (LMS). This system simplifies the on-boarding process, and helps new staff better understand how our services intersect and the function of each department. It also makes it easy for us to track their learning and step in quickly if they need help.

The LMS has the potential to grow with our needs. It now offers client courses like the Child In Focus (CIF) education program which is available as a separate branch with in-built automation.



# Advocacy: Elder Abuse



Over the past four years Better Place Australia has placed increasing emphasis on supporting and advocating for the rights of older vulnerable Victorians, especially those who are experiencing or at risk of elder abuse. Our Respecting Elders services aim to resolve conflict with family members or carers and provide assistance in relation to various types of elder abuse, including psychological, financial and physical. The service focuses on helping older people regain lost agency and strengthen their relationships with other family members. Services include counselling, financial counselling, mediation and mental health support for those living in their own homes or in residential aged care. The safety of the older person takes priority at all times during service delivery.

Sadly, demand for services and complexity of cases continue to increase. In recent years we have begun delivering our elder abuse support through Orange Door Hubs in Bayside Peninsula, Morwell, Inner Gippsland and North East Melbourne; later in 2020 this will be extended to the Barwon and Western Hubs.

However, direct service delivery is only part of the equation. The role of advocacy cannot be overstated.

Although up to 14 percent of older people are likely to experience elder abuse in Australia,

community awareness of the prevalence and complexity of elder abuse is not high enough. With the enforced physical and social restrictions of COVID-19, a new layer has been added to both the complexity of elder abuse and the difficulty of exposing abusive behaviour.

One of our advocacy objectives is to create better awareness and understanding of what comprises elder abuse, including recognition of prevailing ageist attitudes. World Elder Abuse Day (WEAD) on 15 June usually offers an opportunity for promotional and educational events throughout the communities in which we work. In 2020, the pandemic made the marking of WEAD very different. Better Place Australia took the opportunity to celebrate older people via various virtual platforms. We used social media and online activity to provide information about the prevalence of elder abuse and encourage engagement with isolated older people through technology and acts of (suitably distanced) kindness.

We also analysed community engagement with these online platforms. Despite broad media coverage of WEAD, it appeared that those most likely to be aware of elder abuse were those at risk or victims themselves (usually women) rather than younger family members, neighbours or friends, or even visiting service providers. In our experience,

even perpetrators are not fully aware that their behaviour which may have started out as 'benevolent' can quickly become manipulative, coercive, and restrictive – in other words, abusive. When combined with the victim's reticence to report their adult child, abuse remains unchecked.

This makes it even more challenging to connect with vulnerable older people and their families. During the first period of lockdown in Victoria, Better Place Elder Abuse Consultants became aware that many older Victorians were experiencing significant social isolation or greater dependence on family members, including moving in with an adult child or having an adult child move in with them. Our Financial Counsellors also witnessed an increase in the financial distress experienced by people who are already vulnerable or dealing with complex issues. For some, that has meant a return to reliance on parents or other family members for financial support

and somewhere to live, and unfortunately, increased friction.

By the time the pandemic-related restrictions were in place across Victoria, it had become clear that the combination of extended social restrictions and an uncertain financial future for people who are already struggling was a recipe for a wave of abuse and neglect of older people. Without active advocacy of this situation, however, that abuse remains largely hidden.

This concern led Better Place Australia to publish a discussion paper on the direct and indirect economic impact of the pandemic on older people living at home. [Hidden from Scrutiny](#) was released in July 2020 and will inform ongoing advocacy for the coming year.

# Advocacy: Elder Abuse during the pandemic

## Regina's story

Regina moved in with her adult child during the pandemic. Prior to this, she had been living an active social life and had access to community services.

When services reduced due to COVID-19 contact restrictions, she was cut off from social interactions and her support network. This worsened her depression and anxiety, which caused conflict with her child who threatened to withhold finances and restrict her contacts. The escalating social isolation and psychological abuse distressed Regina substantially.

Better Place Australia was concerned not only for Regina's physical safety, but also for her emotional, social, financial and psychological safety. Social restrictions made it harder for other family members, friends or neighbours to check in and monitor Regina's wellbeing.

We know too well that elder abuse often goes undetected because of the subtlety of the actions, a reluctance to get the perpetrator into trouble or a heavy reliance on the perpetrator for financial guidance. In this

instance our Family Consultants were able to engage positively with both Regina and her daughter through online counselling.

As well as supporting Regina directly, the consultants were able to influence her daughter's attitude and behaviour. We helped her realise that being a family member did not entitle her to take her mother's money or keep her shut in one room all day even she thought it was 'for her own safety.' We arranged for community contacts by phone and regular check ups from support outside the household. Other family members were consulted and we established contact through regular phone and videolink times.





# Advocacy informed by research

## Rainbow Families



The Centre for Better Relationships' first publication, *Rainbow Family Formation and Dissolution in Australia*, was released on 18 November, the day that both the Centre and Better Pride were launched.

*Rainbow Family Formation and Dissolution in Australia* sought to identify what is known about rainbow families' experience of family and separation and how they access family law services. The findings helped us to better understand and respond to the complex and ever changing needs of the individuals and families we serve.

The review revealed that in fact very little is known about their experiences, and that rainbow families' interactions with social services, including family law, are often marred by homophobia, discrimination, and heteronormative assumptions. The research suggests that social services practitioners are themselves socialised by heteronormativity and 'traditional' understandings of family, creating personal biases and assumptions (whether conscious or unconscious) that result in an inability to see or understand non-traditional families and their particular needs.

### Key findings

- Heteronormativity impacts rainbow families' decision making, their experiences of parenting spaces and services, feelings of legitimacy, and community support.
- Pathways to parenthood for rainbow families involve more complex decision making than it does for hetero families.
- Rainbow families continue to experience discrimination when they access services and employ a range of protective strategies to limit their experience of discrimination and homophobia. It is also likely that the discrimination and barriers to access in other service settings (e.g. health care services and schools) will be present when accessing family law services.
- Unresponsive legal and service systems have also, until recently, impeded rainbow families' access to institutions such as marriage and assisted reproductive technology. The language of the Family Law Act itself excludes rainbow families with its focus on the birth mother. There is also not enough protection for non-traditional parenting arrangements.

Despite these barriers, rainbow families have forged new pathways for family formation and parenting. For family law service provision to come anywhere near best practice, it is

essential that service providers understand family formation and dissolution from rainbow families' perspectives. The review offers a much needed overview of current knowledge in this field that will better inform practitioners and guide service design.

Better Place Australia initiated this research because we recognised the need to develop a better understanding of how the contemporary family law system serves, or fails to serve, rainbow families. Although much more needs to be known, the research also confirms that what rainbow families need right now is safe, equitable and non-discriminatory access to services. To that end, Better Place Australia established the Better Pride suite of counselling, mediation and psychological support services available to LGBTQI+ individuals and families. We also introduced ongoing inclusiveness training for all staff to equip them with better awareness and understanding of rainbow families, and the skills to respond to their diverse needs.

**“We are at a point in history where previously marginalised groups have been actively demanding social justice and can expect to play a part in decisions that shape their lives. Better Place’s Centre for Better Relationships and Better Pride services recognise that LGBTQI+ people are the experts in their own lives, and work to ensure this expertise is integrated into service planning and provision. Better Place Australia remains committed to listening, engaging, and empowering this community. We aim to continually bring research, lived experience, and good practice together. This will ensure that all families that all families, whoever they are, have equitable access to services that are relevant to their needs and to the challenges of our times.” – Dr Paula Fernandez Arias, Research Manager, Centre for Better Relationships**



centre  
for better  
relationships

# Centre for Better Relationships

The Centre for Better Relationships (the Centre) was launched in November 2019 as the new research and policy arm of Better Place Australia in the field of family and social welfare.

The Centre underlines our commitment to improving people's lives through meaningful research, knowledge translation and the sharing of research findings with a broader audience.

Our needs-driven research means we work closely with policy makers and non-government organisations to understand the relationship challenges affecting Australian families. The research findings help us develop evidence-based policies and practice responses that can change lives.

This approach enables Better Place Australia to keep improving client outcomes and contributing to best practice in the sector.

The Centre's launch also coincided with the publication of its first paper, *Rainbow Family Formation and Dissolution in Australia*, and the launch of Better Pride, a new service for the LGBTIQ+ community.

This triple release reflects Better Place's efforts to bridge the gap between research and practice, and produce evidence-informed responses to the varying needs and concerns of Victorians.

## Our Research Team

The Centre's team is made up of two well-respected researchers – Research Manager, Dr. Paula Fernandez Arias and Research Assistant, Emily Armstrong.



### Dr. Paula Fernandez Arias

Paula holds a Bachelor of Arts, English Literature and Linguistics (Hons) and a Master's Degree in Arts Gender Studies and Development. In 2016, Paula completed her PhD thesis, *We only meet in the lift, an examination of Australian Multiculturalism through the Resettlement Experiences of African Refugees*.

Paula has extensive research experience in the areas of families and relationships, mental health, filicide and incarceration. She currently holds the role of Associate Researcher at the Department of Social Work at Monash University. Her research work focuses on Social Theory, Social Policy and Qualitative Social Research.



### Emily Armstrong

Emily holds Bachelor's Degrees in Social Work and Health Science and a Master's Degree in Public Policy and Management. Her previous research experience has been in public health and adolescent transition, and evidence-based practice for social work in acute health settings.





centre  
for better  
relationships

# Centre for Better Relationships: Publications

The Centre's current three key projects to date have focussed on rainbow families, financial hardship and mental health interventions in health care.



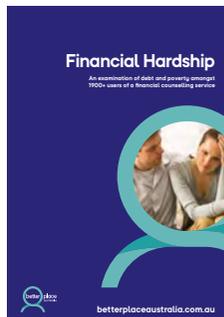
## Rainbow families

In November 2019, the Centre published its inaugural paper, *Rainbow Family Formation and Dissolution in Australia*, which reviewed family law services involving rainbow families. The review provided clear insight into the contemporary experiences of rainbow family formation in Australia but not enough on how they dissolve and use family law services.

## Findings

- While rainbow families are challenging and reshaping our notions of how families form and dissolve, they are also being restricted and harmed by it.
- There are many causes for celebration, including progressive policy changes. However there are also disappointments around continued discrimination and the invisible experiences of rainbow families and the LGBTIQ+ community as a whole.

"More work still needs to be done in this space to help us better understand its impact on our services. This work must be inclusive and the LGBTIQ+ community must be consulted in our service improvements. Service providers also need to ensure they provide their services in an inclusive and culturally safe environment." – Dr. Paula Fernandez Arias



## Financial hardship

The Centre published an October 2019 report that studied the demographics and nature of debt for over 1,900+ users of our Financial Counselling and Capabilities (FCC) service in FY18. The report concluded that complex financial systems make financial counselling services an essential part of supporting people in financial hardship.

## Findings

- An alarming number of Australian households live below the poverty line.
- Twice as many women used the FCC service compared to men.
- Mental health was the most common reason for delay in seeking support.

"More women than men are financially affected by COVID-19. It's important that they build their financial literacy, otherwise they run the risk of future financial hardship. Affordable housing is a key component of reducing financial stress for many people especially single mothers. We also need more regulation to prevent unscrupulous money lenders from preying on those who are in financial distress." – Dr. Paula Fernandez Arias



## Mental health interventions in health care

In December 2019, the Centre published an overview of academic and non-academic literature on the effectiveness of speciality mental health care interventions in aged care. This review aims to provide best practice principles based on the limited research in this field.

## Findings

- There are few specialist mental health care initiatives in aged care settings.
- The number of people affected by depression in aged care settings is high.
- Best practice suggests personalised interventions are best.
- The aged care system in Australia is under considerable strain.

"There is growing concern for the mental health of aged care residents after COVID-19 brought it into clearer focus. Mental health issues have a detrimental impact on all other aspects of an aged care resident's life. Non-medical interventions are uncommon but seem to have positive outcomes." – Dr. Paula Fernandez Arias

# Social Media and Web Presence

## Widening our digital presence

In 2020, clients reached us through:



Online chat



Phone

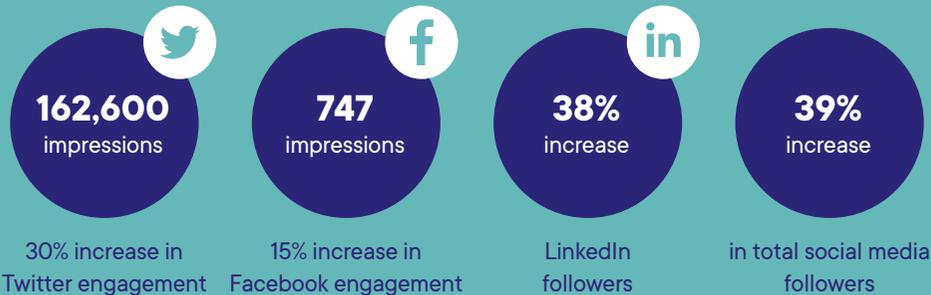


Social Media



Referrals

## Social Media



## Top three best performing social media posts



Release of Centre for Better Relationships "Hidden from Scrutiny report"



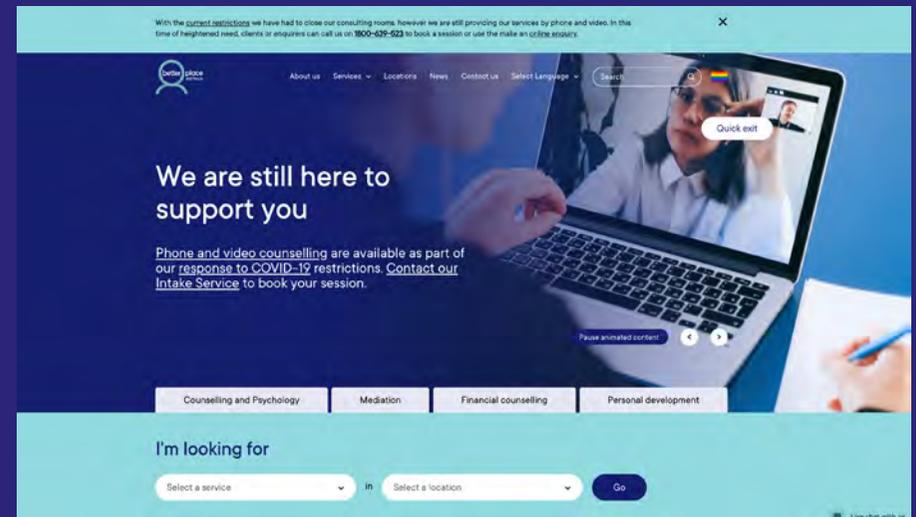
COVID-19 Translated Resources for the community



New Directors Dr Bruce Bolam and Emma Fenby join Better Place Australia

## Online – betterplaceaustralia.com.au

Growing our services; expanding our digital reach



## How our clients reached us

Phone, Live Chat, Website Enquiry, Email, External Reference

# Social Media and Web Presence

## Centre for Better Relationships – [betterplaceaustralia.com.au/research](http://betterplaceaustralia.com.au/research)

The Centre for Better Relationships (the Centre) is the research and policy division of Better Place Australia. The Centre conducts research and policy analysis in the field of family and social welfare and also conducts ethical applied research in line with the values and mission of Better Place Australia.



### Most read report

Rainbow family formation and dissolution in Australia

## Better Pride – [betterplaceaustralia.com.au/better-pride/](http://betterplaceaustralia.com.au/better-pride/)

Better Pride for the LGBTIQ+ community is a safe and high-quality service that is inclusive to all clients and respects the needs, wants and aspirations of everyone. The service intends to fill the service gap for rainbow families during and after separation, and ensure all families have access to equitable services.



Most visited page Better Pride Psychological Services

## Supporting Victorians through challenging times

### National Debt Hotline (NDH) bushfire support

Better Place Australia provides free Financial Counselling support and information on the phone to Victorians affected by the bushfires. The Bushfire Financial Counselling Helpline is part of the NDH supported by Better Place Australia. This hotline services Victorians in need of Financial Counselling.

### NDH Financial Counselling Helpline

57% resolved their issues through a Financial Counsellor.

43% were referred to an appropriate service provider.

Top 5 debt issues:

1. Financially impacted by Bushfires
2. Difficulties with utilities
3. Rent Arrears
4. Credit Card issues
5. Debt

Over 11,205 calls to the NDH Financial Counselling Helpline.

### Bushfire Financial Counselling website

Victorians also visited the Bushfire Financial Counselling website to find out more information or for support.

50%

website visitors are above 55

63%

website visitors are female

# Better Place Assist

## Our clients first point of contact

### Better Place Assist Process

Clients and prospective clients can make contact by phone and through our website. This initial contact allows our team to assess a client's need and situation, and put them in contact with the relevant Better Place Australia service.

The introduction of Purecloud and the Customer Service function means that all incoming enquiries are able to be handled efficiently and ensures that the client's enquiry is handled to conclusion by the correct team.

This improved flow has meant that the number of call-backs has been reduced and the Intake team is able to continue delivering service to clients in a timely manner despite increasing demand.

### Referral Process

#### 1 Contact

**Phone** 1800 639 523  
**Email** enquiry@betterplace.com.au  
**Website** Live Chat on website.  
Secondary consultations welcomed

#### 2 Assess and Book

Call or email responded to within next working day

- Risk and needs assessment conducted
- Appropriate service referred to
- Case file opens
- Appointment booked

#### 3 Service

Client attends service.

Services are outcome-based and delivered by skilled and experienced clinicians. Continual assessment for risk of family violence throughout service delivery.

#### 4 Outcomes

Clients rate their experience with client satisfaction survey.

### More than just customer support

The Better Place Assist team is the first point of contact for those wanting to find out more or access Better Place Australia services. Intake staff are qualified and trained to assess and manage risks. Team members engage, screen and assess, refer and coordinate care support to clients, including providing complex risk assessments and action a plan to mitigate any identified risk.

### Better Place Assist

- Access the right service
- Immediate front-line response
- Live Chat
- Risk assessment and screening
- Referred by external organisations or other staff
- Referrals: Warm, External and Wraparound
- Facilitate integration and coordination of care for clients
- Provide information and resources
- Statewide directory and information gateway
- Book into appointments, programs and groups
- Prioritise the most vulnerable

# Case Study: Respecting Elders Services



Elka, 85  
Widow  
6 adult  
children

## Scenario

Elka has close connections to her local church and Greek community but her access to activities and support were restricted during COVID-19. She recently had a stroke, which left her with physical impairments that impact some of her daily activities. Nevertheless, she continues living independently in her own home.

While Elka has good relationships with her children, there is a history of conflict among the siblings and their partners relating to family business interests and previous bad decisions. This has caused Elka significant distress.

One of Elka's sons, who has mental health issues and a history of gambling, recently pressured her into lending him \$70,000. This left her in a financially vulnerable position.

When one of her grandsons lost his job during COVID-19, he moved into Elka's spare room as

he was unable to pay his rent. Initially all went well, but then he started taking over her home. He ignored her requests to respect her way of living by disregarding her religious practices and not complying with COVID-19 restrictions.

Elka's mounting stress and anxiety caused her to become reclusive and depressed. Elka's daughter referred her to Better Place Australia for support, advocacy and help in managing the family conflict.

## Process

A Greek interpreter was initially engaged in meetings to assist with communication but once Elka developed a relationship with the Family Consultant, she was comfortable communicating in English.

The Family Consultant worked with Elka to clarify her wishes and to identify a plan moving forward. Elka expressly stated that she wanted her grandson to move out so

she could regain her independence and way of living. She also wanted to discuss the repayment of the loan with her son and look at options for retrieving the money.

A referral was made for a Financial Counsellor to assist Elka with her financial situation and determine her financial literacy. It quickly became clear that Elka would need legal and advocacy support to help in negotiations with her son on the loan repayment.

Elka was referred to a community legal service to help her with the loan. Then the Family Consultant arranged a family meeting to discuss a planned approach for repayment with agreement from her son and support from other family members.

## Outcome

Elka's grandson moved out of her home with the support of family, community and the police. Better Place Australia helped him find

alternative accommodation and employment options through referrals to an alternative agency.

The Family Consultant counselled Elka and helped her re-engage with some of her religious and community activities. She soon reported feeling stronger and less depressed.

"This was a very difficult situation for me because it involved my family, I wouldn't have known how to get my house, money and life back if it wasn't for this service. I am very happy that it has been resolved without causing more conflict or compromise on my part." - Elka

# Case Study: Better Pride Support Services



Mason, 18,  
College student

Experiencing  
panic attacks

## Scenario

Mason came out to his family when he was 17. While they were supportive, his school was not and so he tried to hide the fact that he was gay. But word got out and Mason became the target of bullying and intimidation.

Soon he began suffering severe panic attacks while on campus. He eventually transferred to a different school but although he was warmly accepted there, the panic attacks continued.

His mother contacted Better Place Australia after Mason said he planned to drop out of school because it was causing him too much anxiety.

## Process

Better Place Australia's Better Pride Counsellor first worked on gaining Mason's trust before encouraging him to learn to be comfortable with himself.

Using psychotherapy, the Counsellor challenged Mason's negative thinking and helped reframe his beliefs of himself. The therapy also helped him focus and work on his strengths. Mason was able to rebuild his self-esteem and gradually put the bullying behind him.

The Counsellor then introduced Mason to a form of therapy that involves imagery, relaxation, body movements and breathing techniques, further helping him manage his anxiety and gain control over the panic attacks.

As Mason was a talented pianist, the Counsellor encouraged him to use music as a way of soothing his anxiety. Eventually Mason learnt to recognise his anxiety triggers and would play the piano to prevent the anxiety from escalating.

## Outcome

Mason's panic attacks significantly eased after a few months. As he continued using the newly acquired techniques he was able to reflect on his feelings and take back control of his life.

Mason grew more confident about widening his friendship circle in school. He soon found a supportive group of friends who accepted him unconditionally and reflected his strengths back to him. This newfound support led him to change his mind about dropping out of school.

By his last session, he had found clear direction in life and was also in a healthy relationship. Before the sessions ended, he visualised himself bidding farewell to his old school – a symbolic way of closing the door on that experience. Today Mason volunteers at a LGBTIQ+ support group to help other young people who are coming out.

“With the help of my counsellor I came to understand that my new identity is my whole self and to learn to let this self show up in every part of my life.”

- Mason

# Case Study: Accessible Psychological Services (API)



Jack, 45  
Married with no  
children

Has a history  
of anxiety and  
depression

## Scenario

Jack's struggle with depression and anxiety began in school where he was body-shamed and bullied. An introverted child, he could not stand up for himself and grew increasingly self-conscious about his physical appearance. Being raised by an emotionally distant father also caused him to retreat further into himself.

As an adult, Jack strived to please those around him, especially in his workplace. He often took on more work than he could handle and would compare himself to others, which crushed his self-esteem.

Eventually the stress and feeling of being overwhelmed became unbearable and he attempted suicide last Boxing Day. His wife, who sensed something was amiss, managed to prevent this and called the Crisis and Assessment Team. After speaking to Jack, they referred him to Better Place Australia.

## Process

After conducting a risk assessment, the Psychologist designed a plan that Jack could carry on him and refer to during times of high stress.

The Psychologist took an emotion-focused therapeutic approach and its conversational style helped Jack relax and open up about his past. He was able to explore the source of his negative thinking and why he had such high expectations of himself.

The Psychologist then used cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), a useful form of talk therapy, to challenge Jack's negative thoughts and encourage him to focus on his strengths instead of his shortcomings. The sessions also focused on behavioural activation and assertiveness training where Jack came up with ways to communicate effectively with his workmates, re-engage with family and friends, and take regular mental breaks.

Jack also took a psychological wellbeing assessment at the start, middle and end of his sessions. His initial score was 31, which meant severe psychological distress. A month later he scored 24, and by the end of the sessions his score was 19, which indicated he was likely to be psychologically well.

## Outcome

Within a few months of undergoing the API program, Jack reported fewer negative thoughts and less ruminating over incidences. Among the positive steps he had taken were reaching out to family and friends for support, and not beating himself up so much. Both his depression and anxiety gradually reduced, and he reported no longer feeling suicidal. Jack had also learnt the tools and strategies to help him through some of life's future challenges.

"I found it very helpful that the coping strategies were discussed with me rather than prescribed to me. This made me feel enlightened and motivated after each session, which encouraged me to keep working on myself." - Jack

# Case Study: Family and Relationship Services



Hana, 40

Multicultural  
background  
Single mother  
to 2 children

## Scenario

Hana and her children had experienced family violence at the hands of her ex-partner. She was referred to Better Place Australia through a domestic violence support agency. When Hana turned up for her first session, she was exhausted, fearful and drained. She also had limited understanding of what she and her children had experienced.

Going from a high violence relationship to being alone for the first time had cost Hana her self-confidence and independent streak. Before her marriage, she had loved travelling but now she was afraid to even venture out into the city.

English was not her first language and this further isolated her from support networks. Her relationship with her two children was fraught as they felt caught in the middle. This caused a breakdown in family dynamics.

## Process

The Family And Relationship Services (FARS) Practitioner began by helping Hana understand what constituted family violence and safely unpack her family's experience. Over the next three months, they worked together with an interpreter to re-establish Hana's independence and help her regain her confidence.

Hana was given domestic violence resources in her native language and became actively involved in her own safety planning. The Practitioner introduced her to a domestic violence resource centre, information for survivors and support groups of women with shared experiences. She was also given parental advice from Child First to support her new role as a sole parent.

The Practitioner used a strengths-based approach to guide Hana in uncovering her own insights into her situation. Being part of

that discovery process empowered her to rebuild her self-confidence and gain lasting skills.

Then Hana was asked to set goals for herself and her counselling sessions, including determining what a healthy relationship would look like, re-establishing her independence and re-uniting her family.

By then Hana had broken off all contact with her ex-partner and was able to focus solely on herself and her children. The Practitioner worked with her on strategies to re-engage her kids and support them in discovering their own strengths. Hana's main purpose when it came to her children was to keep them safe and help them live as normal a life as possible.

Before her sessions ended, the Practitioner put her in touch with Women's Legal Aid for support on managing housing matters and shared finances with her ex-partner.

## Outcome

Hana regained her self-confidence and independence. She's now planning a holiday with her kids once the travel bans are lifted. She has also returned to studying – something she has wanted to do for a long time. Hana's children are doing better at school and their relationship with her is on the mend.

“When I started my sessions, all I wanted was to find myself again. When I was done, I felt like I had returned to myself. It's a wonderful feeling.” - Hana

# Case Study: Family Mental Health Support Services



Justine, 42  
Single parent

Diagnosed  
with Major  
Depression,  
Borderline  
Personality  
Disorder

Morgan, 18

Intellectual  
Disability, At risk of  
homelessness

## Scenario

Morgan first became involved with Better Place Australia when she was 16 and we have supported her on and off over the years.

Justine and Morgan have always had a tumultuous relationship due to Justine's depression. The complex family dynamics saw Morgan having to parent her own mother, which impacted her significantly. Morgan experienced difficulties at school both academically and socially. At home she faced family violence at the hands of her mother who eventually kicked her out of the house.

Finding herself homeless and couch surfing, Morgan reached out to Better Place Australia's Family Mental Health Support Services (FMHSS) to gain confidence and independence.

## Process

The FMHSS Practitioner supported Morgan in the following ways:

- Advocating for her at school to arrange for speech and cognitive assessments. The results indicated an intellectual disability.
  - Accompanying her to the Births, Deaths and Marriages Department to obtain her birth certificate and apply for a Medicare card and Low Income Health Care concession card so she could start living independently.
  - Offering tutoring sessions to improve her academic performance.
  - Submitting applications to Centrelink for Disability Support Pension with the ongoing, intensive support of a Centrelink Social Worker.
  - Organising and advocating for her in Care Team meetings.
- Referring her to housing support service. At the time, she was too young to sign a lease and had no other family members to move in with.
  - Advocating for her with VicRoads so she could get her driving license and improve her independence.
  - Providing 1:1 emotional support around the loss of family, identity and independence.
  - Providing her self-care strategies to improve her mental and physical health.
  - Helping her develop communication skills to improve her relationships and gain the confidence to set personal boundaries and begin to develop social connections.
  - Educating her on mental health and the child protection system, and empowering her to speak up and say what's on her mind.

## Outcome

By the end of the sessions, Morgan was able to respectfully dissolve her relationship with her mother and set firm personal boundaries. She was also successfully independent. She walked out of her last session a strong, resilient young woman who, despite her significant hardship, had succeeded in all aspects of her life and had a bright future to look forward to.

"I would like to thank FMHSS and the support it has given me, and for the encouragement, care and passion. They helped me believe I'm worth more than how people treat me and let me talk instead of shutting me down. I'm proud of myself for staying in school, and for getting through the hard times." - Morgan

# Case Study: Family Dispute Resolution



David 42 and  
Shelley 38  
Separated for  
8 years

Billy, 11  
Lives with  
his mother

## Scenario

When David and Shelley separated, they agreed that Billy would live with his mum and see his dad on a regular basis. An informal arrangement was made regarding visits to David but lately, Billy was no longer visiting his dad's house. David wasn't able to get an explanation from Shelley so he reached out to Better Place Australia for help in mediating the situation.

## Process

David underwent a risk assessment, after which the Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) Practitioner agreed that it was appropriate to invite Shelley to an assessment appointment.

In a separate assessment, Shelley revealed that Billy no longer wanted to see David because his dad was too engrossed in his work or social activities to pay him proper attention.

Shelley wanted Billy to maintain his relationship with David but did not want to dismiss his needs. She found it difficult to have this conversation with David who would become agitated and overbearing.

The Practitioner suggested a one-off individual mediation preparation session with a Family Relationship Counsellor to prepare for a co-mediation session. David and Shelley agreed.

During their individual sessions, David realised how his actions had contributed to the situation with Billy. Shelley, on the other hand, felt more confident and empowered to discuss Billy's social and emotional needs as part of a facilitated and supported discussion with David.

The ensuing mediation session emphasised both parties putting Billy at the centre of the discussion. David and Shelley were encouraged to constructively discuss their concerns over Billy.

## Outcome

David and Shelley resolved most of their issues and were able to reach an agreement that focused on Billy's needs.

The separate counselling sessions prior to mediation enabled both David and Shelley to gain self-insight and understand each other's positions. This prepared them to be able to work together during the mediation sessions to put Billy's best interests at the forefront. David agreed not to pressure Billy into visiting him while Shelley proposed Billy be given support through the Supporting Children After Separation Program (SCASP) so he could have a safe space to express his feelings.

The FDR Practitioner also offered David further personal counselling sessions to work through any remaining anger or communication issues.

“Ultimately, it was the wraparound services that contributed to the success of this case. The Better Place Australia team was able to hold a space of mediation and offer the whole family support through pre-mediation sessions and SCASP.”  
– FDR Practitioner

# Case Study: Financial Counselling



Nadia, 65.  
Unemployed  
Saddled with  
two loans

## Scenario

Nadia lost her job earlier this year and has been unable to find reemployment due to the pandemic and the poor job market for seniors. While she qualified for JobSeeker, it was not enough to make repayments on the two loans on which she was guarantor.

Two years ago, Nadia's son-in-law and daughter approached her to be a guarantor for a secured loan with a car finance company and an unsecured personal loan to purchase a car. At the time, Nadia had a good relationship with both of them and willingly agreed. A year later, the couple skipped town with the car attached to the unsecured personal loan.

Creditors soon began harassing her for the repayments. Nadia had only just been making ends meet when she was still employed but she did not have any financial capacity to carry two loan repayments now. She would

also be transitioning to an aged pension in five months and was at risk of losing her residential home if the creditors took her to court.

Nadia came to us through the National Debt Hotline (NDH) looking for options, support and information. She said she no longer felt in control of any decision-making and was now living with the repercussions of past decisions.

The Better Place Australia NDH Counsellor decided Nadia needed further support and advocacy from a Financial Counsellor. The NDH Counsellor put an internal referral through and was able to secure Nadia an appointment with a Better Place Australia Financial Counsellor within two weeks.

## Process

The Better Place Australia Financial Counsellor completed a full assessment of Nadia's financial position and provided suitable options. The Financial Counsellor then negotiated a six-month moratorium on loan repayments and permission from the car finance company for Nadia to sell the vehicle to pay out the loan.

In the moratorium period, Nadia successfully applied for and received the full aged pension. She also sold the financed vehicle and was left with a smaller debt.

The Financial Counsellor was then able to negotiate a debt waiver on both loans on compassionate and financial hardship grounds as Nadia's ability to gain work was limited and her only source of income was the aged pension.

## Outcome

Nadia left her first financial counselling session with a lighter heart knowing that a plan was in place. She said she felt in control again and expressed relief that someone understood that it was her financial incapacity rather than her unwillingness to repay the debts.

"I felt trapped, isolated and was at a loss of what to do. But thanks to your phone consulting service, I could be "seen" by a Financial Counsellor and be given this peace of mind." - Nadia

# Case Study: Child counselling

## Shuttling between parents



Musa, 47  
Siti, 39  
Separated



Joe, 12  
Ike, 9

### Scenario

Musa and Siti separated two years ago and are now with new partners. Their sons, Joe and Ike, split their time equally between both homes and get along with their stepparents.

Recently Musa and his new partner welcomed their baby. Shortly after, Joe began acting up in school and Ike withdrew into himself. Their parents contacted Better Place Australia because they wanted a neutral person for their kids to talk to about their worries.

Musa wanted both boys to work towards being more assertive in communicating their needs. He also wanted Joe to be more mindful and aware of how his behaviour was affecting others.

Siti, on the other hand, wanted Joe to be accountable for his “problematic behaviour” and for Ike to open up about his anxiety. Both she and Musa felt that Ike was adapting his behaviour to different family environments and was not being himself.

### Process

The Child Counsellor found that both boys were expressing distress in their own ways. Joe told the Child Counsellor that he constantly worried about things beyond his control and this anxiety triggered his anger.

He acknowledged that he would often get out of sticky situations by playing the victim. After he was suspended from school for his behaviour, Joe said he would like to learn how to take control and responsibility of his actions.

Meanwhile Ike admitted to being worried about his parents’ wellbeing and felt the need to keep them happy. He bottled up his feelings to “protect” those of his parents.

The Child Counsellor worked with the brothers to help them understand that if they changed their thoughts it would help them change their feelings and behaviour.

The Child Counsellor also used art and strengths-based techniques with Ike. He was able to paint his feelings and draw on his strengths to find alternative ways to manage his emotions. He could then use this technique at home and bring his paintings to the next session to discuss with the Child Counsellor.

### Outcome

After a month, Joe said he noticed he was not being told off at school as much. He also realised boundaries made him feel safe, and needed his mother to establish more structure and discipline at her house.

Ike grew more comfortable expressing his feelings to his family and was able to better maintain his friendships at school. His paintings also became lighter and brighter, and his self-talk was more positive.

“I was able to focus on my strengths which improved my confidence and assertiveness. This reduced my anxiety and helped me relax and focus more at school.” - Joe

# Financial Statements

<b>Statement of Profit and Loss</b>	<b>2020 (\$)</b>	<b>2019 (\$)</b>
Revenue	12,227,258	11,167,805
Expenses		
Reversal of impairment of non-current asset	–	73,249
Impairment of non-current asset	–	(42,402)
Employee benefits	(8,873,186)	(7,271,874)
Depreciation & amortisation	(789,803)	(270,603)
Marketing	(194,517)	(168,473)
Occupancy & utilities	(234,358)	(842,962)
IT software & support	(218,856)	(431,655)
Professional fees	(234,747)	(354,403)
Communication costs	(203,403)	(147,142)
Other expenses	(706,579)	(500,048)
Interest expense	(113,620)	–
<b>Surplus for the Year</b>	<b>658,189</b>	<b>1,211,492</b>

<b>Statement of Financial Position</b>	<b>2020 (\$)</b>	<b>2019 (\$)</b>
Assets		
Current assets	7,557,896	5,408,875
Non-current assets	4,973,675	2,808,925
<b>Total assets</b>	<b>12,531,571</b>	<b>8,217,800</b>
Liabilities		
Current liabilities	3,514,021	1,408,611
Non-current liabilities	2,379,536	538,720
<b>Total liabilities</b>	<b>5,893,557</b>	<b>1,947,331</b>
<b>Net Assets</b>	<b>6,638,014</b>	<b>6,270,469</b>

# About Better Place Australia

Better Place Australia has spent over 35 years helping people build resilience, empowering them and enabling them to enjoy healthier relationships.

We have evolved into one of the most successful providers of counselling and community support services in Victoria, seeing over 11,000 new clients a year across 23 locations.



## Better Place Australia Suite of Services

### Counselling and Psychological Services

- Child and Youth Counselling
- Relationship Counselling
- Family Counselling
- Psychological services
- Couples Counselling
- The Way Back Support Service

### Family Mental Health Support (Family Counselling)

### Family Dispute Resolution

### Mediation

### Elder abuse prevention support services

### Residential Age Care Facility mental health support

### Financial First Aid

- Financial Capability
- Financial Counselling

### Skills Building

- NMAS training
- STAR School Learning Programs
- Parent & Group Programs

Locations

[www.betterplaceaustralia.com.au/locations](http://www.betterplaceaustralia.com.au/locations)



# Better Place Australia

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Better Place Australia is partially funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services. Visit [www.dss.gov.au](http://www.dss.gov.au) for more information.

Better Place Australia gratefully acknowledges the financial grant support received:

#### Commonwealth Government

- Attorney General's Department
- Department of Social Services

#### Victorian Government

- Department Health and Human Services

#### Health Networks

- South Eastern Melbourne Primary Health Network (SEMPHN)
- North Western Melbourne Primary Health Network (NWMPHN)

#### Philanthropic supporters

- The Jack Brockhoff Foundation
- Ecstra Foundation
- Victoria Law Foundation
- Financial Counselling Australia

We would also like to acknowledge the pro-bono support of our professional services partners who have been generous in their in-kind hours.



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Better Place Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians and their Elders past, present and future in each of the communities where we work.