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News release

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Comfortable, relaxed – and on drugs

According to unpublished ABS data, nearly one third of adult Australians depend on medications or other substances for their mental well-being.

New analysis by The Australia Institute combines for the first time the numbers of Australians who either take medication for mental well-being, consume alcohol at risky levels or depend on illicit drugs to help them through the day.

It shows that 27% of adults either take medications (such as anti-depressants and sleeping pills) for psychological reasons or consume risky levels of alcohol (more than four standard drinks a day for men). Adding those dependent on illicit drugs takes the total to over 30%.

“The fact that up to a third of adult Australians depend on drugs or other substances to get them through the day stands in stark contrast to our imagined identity as a carefree nation of people who take life in our stride”, said Institute Executive Director Dr Clive Hamilton.

“A large section of the population appears to go through life in a substance-induced state designed to cope with or shut out the stresses of modern life.

“For decades we have all been striving for the good life. Now that most of us have it, a large proportion of the population seems to be dependent on medications and other substances to avoid falling into a more or less permanent state of anxiety, depression or despair,” he said.

The report shows that men are more likely to seek refuge in alcohol while women are more likely to turn to pills. Victorians are less likely to rely on alcohol than people from NSW and Queensland.

The new figures from the ABS also show that low-income people are much more likely to rely on medication for mental well-being while high-income people are more likely to consume alcohol at high levels.

The report can be found under What's New on the Institute's website.