Insights Report

The current state of youth mental health

A look at the current challenges faced by Australia's young people

—

2022

PROJECT
ROCKIT

Background

The last two years have been full of statistics. They've overrun the news, our social feeds and conversations worldwide. But statistics are not just numbers. They represent real people. And in the case of this report, our young people.

As the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are revealed it is clear to see that the mental health of young people has been significantly impacted. These impacts are multifaceted and include everything from anxiety directly related to COVID-19 and the measures in place to stop its spread, to social and economic concerns, and stress about school and future goals. They're also dynamic – as our situation continually changes (the implementation or easing of restrictions, for instance) so too can young peoples' ability to manage their mental health.[1].

While COVID-19 has affected people worldwide in a number of ways, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)[2] young people have experienced higher rates of psychological distress, educational disruption, loneliness, unemployment, domestic violence and housing stress than older Australians[3].

This report explores the statistics from a number of surveys undertaken with Australian youth over the past 2 years to build a better understanding of the challenges young people are facing in all aspects of their worlds. It is our hope that this report gives those working with young people the information that they need to meet them where they're at with the resources and support they need to get through.

Overall mental health

The coronavirus pandemic has had a significant, negative impact on the mental health of young people. In a 2021 headspace survey 74% of young people reported that their mental health was worse since the outbreak[4]. 86% reported COVID-19 had a negative impact on either their mood, wellbeing or sleeping[5]. And according to UNICEF almost half (47%) of the young people they spoke to said that COVID-19 had negatively impacted their levels of stress and anxiety[6].

Yet as mental health issues rise, the ability for young people to manage with them is decreasing. A UNICEF report shows that just 45% of young people felt they are able to managing well, compared to 81% before the pandemic. In many ways this is a result of the timing of the pandemic. For young people, it came at a really important time when social connections are central to mental health and development. When many big milestones are celebrated and when young people should be out in the world building up experiences. So despite the amazing ability young people have to pivot when faced with life's challenges even the most resilient young people have been impacted by the constant uncertainty and unease of an ever changing pandemic.

Existing mental health concerns exacerbated

While the rise in poor mental health is concerning on its own, it is important to consider the pre-pandemic base from which we started. Australia's young people were already experiencing high levels of mental health related problems[8].

According to a report from yourtown and the Human Rights Commission using data from Kids Helpline, many young people expressed that COVID-19 was impacting on their existing mental health conditions, including anxiety and depression, obsessive and compulsive behaviours, eating disorders, intrusive thoughts, self-harm and suicidality[9].

This was particularly true of teenagers and young adults who tended to link their COVID-19 related concerns to pre-existing mental health diagnoses.

Kids Helpline data further shows that of those who noted COVID-19 had impacted their existing condition, 17% raised suicide, 9% raised self-harm, 1% raised substance abuse and 1% raised body image[10].

What we also know about young people is they understand the importance of good mental health and are motivated to take positive action. They know they need to prioritise it, they know the basics to maintain it and they have the right language for it - but in a time of so much change and uncertainty, when routines have been disrupted and we're all still getting back into the swing of the 'new normal' it can be difficult for anyone to on top of their mental health.

Increase in body image related concerns

There has been a sharp increase in the number of young people seeking help with body image according to data released by ReachOut and the Butterfly Foundation. 75% more people visited ReachOut's content about body image in June 2020, compared to the same time the previous year and there has been a 48% increase in calls to the Butterfly Foundation's Helpline during the pandemic[11]. Many callers to Kids Helpline noted that changes to routine and ability to access normal exercise activities exacerbated existing body image issues[12]. This shows us that the great strategies many young people had developed to protect and maintain good mental health work, but they may need some extra support to adjust when restrictions alter their day-to-day lives.

COVID-19 related issues

The disruptions caused by COVID-19 were significant and far-reaching. A UNICEF survey completed in April 2020 showed that almost every participant had experienced some level of change to their lives[13]. Social disconnection, disruptions to education and having to stop extracurricular activities were the three most common changes young people reported[14]. But their challenges weren't limited to these concerns. Home life, relationships, employment and planning for the future were also discussed across several surveys exploring COVID-19 related issues for young people.

Social isolation

Research suggests that the effects of a pandemic can be exacerbated by the measures implemented to manage its spread[15]. Something we've seen clearly amongst young people.

The majority of Australian young people (88%) had to stop seeing friends as result of restrictions during the pandemic[16]. Despite being known as the 'digital generation' in April 2020 the AIHW reported that 70% of young people said that the pandemic and government response to it had negatively affected their social connectedness[17]. A UNICEF report showed similar results[18].

Given social connectedness plays such an important role in protecting the mental health of young people in particular[19], it comes as no surprise that restrictions and regulations requiring physical distance from family and friends, the closing on face-to-face schooling and a rise in unemployment resulted in an increase of social isolation and feelings of loneliness.

70%

In April 2020 the AIHW reported that **70% of young people** said that the pandemic and government response to it had negatively affected their social connectedness[17].
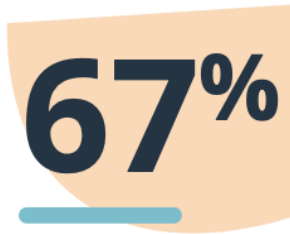
Education

According to UNICEF, 67% of young people had concerns about their education being 'disrupted or held back' due to the pandemic[20]. Headspace shared similar findings with two thirds of respondents (65%) stating concerns with education, study and/or university[21].

Kids Helpline data also showed that the educational impacts of COVID-19 were the third most frequently raised concern at 20% of all callers[22]. High School aged young people were more likely to raise education as an issue than children and young adults[23]. Students with limited access to technology and those who moved between households frequently also raised issues related to home learning and socialising online. Some young people also share devices with siblings and parents making homeschooling difficult[24].

But concerns with education extended beyond this year, with 50% of young people saying that COVID-19 had an impact on their confidence in achieving future goals[25]. This suggests students will need to be supported to rebuild their confidence and motivation surrounding their goals.

Routine

90% of young people reported a negative impact related to their activities and routine[26]. In fact, a change in routine was the most frequently reported negative impact next to mood (both recorded by 75% of respondents) according to headspace. Exercise (55%), eating (52%), participation in sport (48%) and screen time (52%) were also negatively impacted[27].

67%

According to UNICEF, **67% of young people** had concerns about their education being 'disrupted or held back' due to the pandemic.[20]

50%

50% of young people said that COVID-19 had an impact on their confidence in achieving future goals.[25]

90%

90% of young people reported a negative impact related to their activities and routine[26].

Unemployment

52% of young people reported that COVID-19 had a negative impact on their work[28]. Work-related concerns during the pandemic included working in an environment that increased the risk of contracting the virus, abuse from customers and changes to tasks or workplaces[29]. Although loss of work wasn't a prominent concern in any reports we reviewed, according to experts[30] young people will be most at risk by increasing unemployment rates should Australia experience another recession.

Home life and relationships

For many, the pandemic created new or added tensions at home. While data from headspace shows that 45% of young people had a negative impact in at least one area related to home (their living situation, home life or safety at home), this number is low compared to impacts in other areas of their lives[31]. Kids Helpline data also shows that a number of young people spoke about increases in issues within families related to financial stress, inability to access outside support and activities and living within such close proximity to family for an extended period of time[32]. New arguments arose from COVID-19 related tensions too, including parents' hesitancy to let children go out to socialise or visit romantic parents, arguments about online learning or extra financial stress[33].

Young people's relationships also suffered due to COVID-19 with 77% reporting challenges with friends, partners or family members to headspace[34]. Friendships were the relationships most negatively impacted (70%)[35]. Although 42% did report negative impacts to family interactions, 20% said that the pandemic had a positive impact on their relationship with family[36].
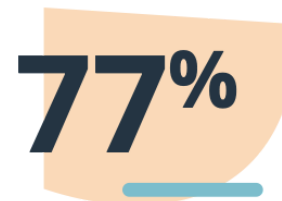
Rural and regional young people

While everyone's experience living during the pandemic will be unique, for some young people COVID-19 wasn't the first crisis for the year.

Those living in regional and rural areas faced bushfires and droughts in the lead up to the pandemic. According to UNICEF, young people in regional areas showed a larger decline in their ability to cope (from 84% to 43%) than their city based peers (from 79% to 46%)[37].

For many of these young people, COVID-19 made a lot of the existing challenges of living regionally worse. For example, access to the internet, technology support and opportunities for social connectedness. This also made this cohort feel at a disadvantage to those who were better resourced for online learning[38].

52%

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77%

Young people's relationships also suffered due to COVID-19 with **77%** reporting challenges with friends, partners or family members to headspace[34].

The online world

For many young people the online world is a place of solace amidst the chaos of the pandemic. It's where they can go to chat with friends, play games, watch television and movies, research things they're interested in or listen to music. And while some of these things can actually be great for wellbeing, others can lead to negative experiences that contribute to or exacerbate mental health concerns.

That's why it is so important to understand the online world in which young people are living. Because while they're digital natives and often the first to use new platforms, they still need our support to navigate this world and establish social norms with their peers.

Time online

According to the eSafety Commission young people spend an average of 14.4 hours per week online, or just over two hours per day[39]. Most young people use the internet to browse topics of interest or watch movies and TV, but 98% also use it to chat with friends[40].

Data from our Digital Ambassadors Program also shows that 35% of young peoples' favourite thing about communicating online is hanging out with friends, 28% said accessing entertainment and 16% said building their skills.

Social media

Young people use an average of 4 social media services[41]. This number increases with age, with 12 to 13 year olds using 3.5 services compared to 4.5 for 16 to 17 year olds[42]. The top social media platforms[43] are:
YouTube - 72%
Instagram - 57%
Facebook - 52%
Snapchat - 45%

New service TikTok will be one to watch after a rapid increase in young Australian users from 12% in 2017 to 38% in 2020[44].

Online experiences

More than 4 in 10 Australian young people report having at least one negative experience online in the 6 months up to September 2020[45]. This number increases to over 50% for those aged 14-17[46]. Close to 30% of the negative experiences are related to bullying happening at school, according to respondents showing that the connectivity the internet provides isn't always positive[47].

The most common negative experiences online[48] include:

- being contacted by a stranger or someone not known to them – 30% (26% of males and 35% of females)
- receiving inappropriate, unwanted content such as pornography or violent material – 20%
- being deliberately excluded from events/social groups – 16%
- receiving online threats or abuse – 15% (18% of males compared with 11% of females)
- having things said online to damage their reputation – also 15%

Data from our Digital Ambassadors program shows the top four concerns about how social media affects young people are:

1. Poor mental health
2. Negative body comparisons
3. Image-based abuse
4. Cyberbullying

This data also showed that those experiencing bullying online are most likely to want others to want others to help by being someone to talk to (26%), followed by publicly standing up from them (24%).
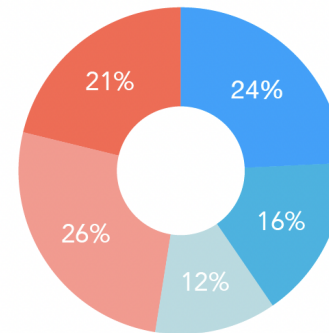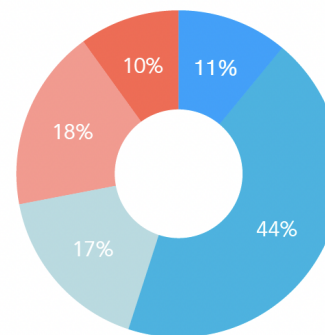

If you were experiencing bullying online, how would you want people to help you?

- By publicly standing up for you
- By helping you ask an adult for help
- By saying something positive about you
- By being someone to talk to
- By just showing you they care

n = 4044

Young people are most likely to block someone when bullying is occuring (44%), mute them (18%) or report abuse (17%).

Which online safety tool would you be most likely to use?

- Turning off comments
- Blocking
- Reporting abuse
- Muting someone
- Restricting your audience

n = 4255

Having a negative experience online did make young people more empathic and conscious of their interactions online. 100% of those who had a negative experience went on to engage in positive behaviours, such as posting nice comments about others, supporting and listening to friends going through a difficult online experience and making sure people were not excluded[49].

Digital Ambassadors' top pressing questions:

- *"What should I do after I get cyber bullied and feel down?"*

- *"How do you deal with personal images that you were silly with and they got out to a few people you wish they never saw?"*

- *"What if the person who posted really private photos and videos of u lived far away?"*

- *"Is it okay to hide/take a break from something thats toxic?"*

- *"Why do people take their anger or problems on people they don't even know or talk to?"*

- *"How do you not get affected by what people say about you?"*

- *"How interesting that on Instagram any time you write COVID-19 it can be flagged and linked to information. Would be cool if this could be done for bullying/racism too?!"*

The online support young people want

We asked our Digital Ambassadors what the top issues were that they wanted to see more positive action on online, they include:

1. Mental health
2. Challenging racism
3. Body positivity
4. Kindness
5. Gender equality
6. Community and connection

It may also come as a surprise, but three quarters of young people want more online safety information made available through trusted channels[50]. Specifically, they want more information about how to support friends who are in trouble (46%), how to block someone or use privacy settings (44%) and how to report negative online experiences (40%)[51]. And what are their trusted channels? Schools or online safety classes (43%), a trusted eSafety website (40%) or a parent/carer (38%)[52].

As more and more young people launch into the online world, we know that not all of their experiences will be positive ones. But what is positive is the willingness many young people have to access information on how to safely navigate the online world and to support friends going through challenging times.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has changed our lives in extraordinary and unprecedented ways. For young people, these disruptions came at a pivotal time. A time when social connections aren't just important, they're a central aspect of development into adulthood[53]. A time when routines provide the certainty needed to feel secure[54]. A time when consistent love, support and positive interactions can make all the difference to confidence and motivation. And a time when many major milestones would typically be celebrated.

This pandemic has not only robbed our young people of two years of their ordinary lives, it's changed the way they experience the world. What it's like to have a job, to connect with friends and family, to go to school, to travel and even to plan for their future.

This report shows that the educational, social, health, economic and recreational impacts of COVID-19 are widespread amongst young people. They're complex and dynamic. And that calls for a whole new level of support.

Support that gives hope, that shares resources and builds skills. Support that can be relied on, that will be there for them in the short-term and in the days, weeks and years down the road as long-term impacts inevitably arise.

So we need to take action now, to build these supports that will arm our young people with what they need because early intervention and prevention in the wake of this pandemic will be critical to the recovery of young peoples' mental health.

Endnotes

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