

Coping with COVID: the mental health impact on young people accessing headspace services

August 2020



Executive summary

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, at the end of March 2020 the Australian Government urged Australians to stay at home unless it was essential to go out (Stage 3 lockdown). In mid May 2020, restrictions slowly began to ease. This report presents the results of a survey of 3,575 young people who received services at a headspace centre between 25th May and 5th June. The survey asked about the impact of COVID-19 on their current mental health and wellbeing, the impact COVID-19 and lockdown restrictions had on their lives, the strategies they were using to cope, and the impact of COVID-19 on their future aspirations.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has clearly had an impact on young people

- Three-quarters (74%) of participants reported that their mental health was a little (47%) or a lot worse (27%) since the outbreak of COVID-19.
- **Mood and wellbeing** – Eighty-six per cent of young people reported a negative impact on either their mood, wellbeing, or sleeping. In particular, 75 per cent reported a negative impact on their mood and 59 per cent reported a negative impact on their sleeping.
- **Activities and routine** – Ninety per cent of participants reported a negative impact on at least one area related to their activities and routine, in particular 75 per cent reported a negative impact on their routine and 55 per cent reported a negative impact on exercise or physical activity.
- **Relationships** – Impact on relationships was an area of mixed responses for many participants. Seventy-seven per cent of young people reported a negative impact on some aspect of their relationships. In particular, 70 per cent reported a negative impact on their relationships with friends.
- **Work and study** – Work and study was another important area of impact for young people. Seventy-seven per cent of young people reported a negative impact on either their work, study or financial situation, including 65 per cent who reported a negative impact on their school or university situation. Sixty-one per cent of 18 to 25 year olds reported a negative impact on their work situation.
- **Home life** – A smaller proportion (45%) of young people reported a negative impact on questions relating to their home and living situation, compared to other aspects of their lives.
- Twelve per cent of young people reported that they had delayed seeking support from headspace (somewhat or a lot) due to COVID-19.

“This changes day to day but it makes me feel lost and like I have no direction due to the loss of work and total isolation from everyone. I don’t know how I will start everything back up and I don’t know what to strive towards.”

– *Female, age 21-23, NSW*

“I have lost motivation to do most activities that aren’t considered ‘essential’ and don’t really see myself doing anything in the future, aside from graduating high school.” – *Female, age 15-17, NSW*

74%

of young people surveyed reported that their mental health was worse since the outbreak of COVID-19

86%

of young people surveyed reported a negative impact on their mood, wellbeing or sleeping

77%

of young people surveyed reported a negative impact on their work, study, or financial situation

Young people reported that COVID-19 has had a substantial impact on their confidence in achieving future goals

- An area of concern for young people was the impact that COVID-19 was having on their ability to achieve their future life goals. Young people reported that the COVID-19 situation has had a substantial impact on their confidence achieving their goals, with half of respondents indicating a high impact (a response of 7 or above on a scale of 1 to 10).
- When asked to explain why this was the case, young people noted job prospects (21% of the 1,964 young people who provided qualitative feedback) and education (23%) to be areas of concern, as well as their general mental wellbeing (15%), delayed plans (17%), and the inability to engage in extra-curricular activities such as sport (17%).

“I ended up losing my job and dropping out of uni. Had to move home cause I couldn’t afford to keep living. There was a reason I left home.”
– Female, age 21-23, ACT

“Unemployed and struggling with managing my mental health, it’s been a heavy curveball to try and remain excited for opportunities and goals in the future. I already found it hard being without financial support / without any sort of income and feel generally like a speck of dirt floating around not really contributing, but now that this global pandemic has been thrown in the mix opportunities are even more scarce.” – Female, age 21-23, QLD

“Corona has impacted my school work, my actual work and has made it hard to believe that I will have the grades or the money to survive outside of year 12, let alone accomplish my academic dreams.” – Female, age 15-17, QLD

Young people also reported positive impacts, including increased compassion and empathy for others

- Sixty-nine per cent of young people indicated that they felt more empathy towards vulnerable people, and 51 per cent felt more compassionate or generous towards others. A small proportion (8%) of those young people who provided qualitative feedback indicated that they felt more hopeful about their future, or hopeful for positive social change as a result of the pandemic.
- Some young people reported positive impacts on their financial situation (22%), interaction with family members (20%), and their exercise or physical activity (18%). Twenty-eight per cent reported only positive impacts on their lives.

“Due to having more time to myself to focus on me and my interests and goals, I feel as though I have an idea of where I want my life to lead in the not-so-distant future. Being able to enjoy some time alone and start up new and old hobbies was great for me, as well as setting up part of a financial plan too.”
– Male, age 21-23, VIC

“Also, in a few ways, I gained faith in the community or at least some of the community. I feel hopeful for the future and really proud of my generation.”
– Female, age 18-20, QLD

50%

of young people reported that COVID-19 had an impact on their confidence achieving future goals



“Unemployed and struggling with managing my mental health, it’s been a heavy curveball to try and remain excited for opportunities and goals in the future.”

Female, age 21-23, QLD

Family and friends remain a key support for many young people

- Ninety per cent of young people spoke to either family or friends to help them cope with the impacts of COVID-19, and ‘talking to family’ was the most frequently reported coping strategy, revealing the value of family in young people’s mental health treatment and support. Eighty-two per cent of young people who reported talking to family indicated that this was a helpful strategy.

Young people have been proactively engaging in a range of multi-faceted self-care strategies

- Young people demonstrated that they had been drawing on a range of strategies to support their wellbeing. Talking to others was the most frequently reported strategy, either to family or significant others (82%) or to friends (73%), while many young people also engaged in activities and hobbies (82%). Young people reported adopting a multitude of strategies, with an average of 4.6 strategies. One positive outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic is that some young people reported having more time to engage in these activities and strategies.
- The vast majority of young people who reported engaging in help-seeking indicated that these strategies were helpful. Seeking in-person or phone / video support from a healthcare professional was rated as helpful by almost all young people who used these strategies (92% for each).

“I am more hopeful and confident for the future, for I believe Covid-19 will turn out to be a blessing in disguise. Times like these unite like-minded people and create new balanced ways of being and existing, creating exciting new possibilities and opportunities for the future. I am also incredibly grateful that Covid gave a lot of us a break to recalibrate and gain clarity & direction.”

– Female, age 24-25, QLD

Findings from this study illustrate some encouraging positive outcomes. Young people have demonstrated considerable positivity, reporting increased compassion and empathy for others, and the role of family is an important support for many. While COVID-19 has had an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of many young people, it is also evident that they have been engaging in proactive and multi-faceted self-care.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic is still unfolding, with significant uncertainty in areas that impact young people’s wellbeing (such as work, study, and social connection). It is clear that the pandemic has disrupted many young people’s lives and, while impacts are clearly already evident after only a couple of months, there are likely to be longer term effects on young people. Demand for support is likely to increase over time, as the longer term impacts of job losses, disruption to education, disconnection from friends and family, and general mental health problems arise.

Important implications for headspace are:

- headspace services will be a critical resource to manage the impact of COVID-19 on young people in the immediate and long-term
- Family and friends remain a key support for many young people
- Work and study will be an area of significant need for many young people
- Young people’s resilience needs to be reinforced and enhanced.



“Times like these unite like-minded people and create new balanced ways of being and existing, creating exciting new possibilities and opportunities for the future.”

Female, age 24-25, QLD

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Purpose

This report describes the impact of COVID-19 on young people accessing headspace services, in particular the impact on their mental health and wellbeing, and any strategies they are using to cope. It is part of a three-phase project to understand the impact of the 2020 pandemic on the mental health of young people who have accessed headspace services, their experiences of telehealth, and the experience of staff who have provided these services. The project aims to inform headspace about the impact of COVID-required practice and service changes and to identify lessons for future service delivery.

The three-phase project to understand the impact of the 2020 pandemic comprises:

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| Project 1 | headspace centre services-based staff experiences of delivering telehealth services |
| Project 2 | Young people's experiences of telehealth services |
| Project 3 | The impact of COVID-19 on young people accessing headspace services |
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This report presents findings from Project 3, examining the impact of COVID-19 on young people accessing headspace services.

Background

headspace centre services (including centres, satellites and outposts)¹ aim to create highly accessible, youth-friendly, integrated service hubs that provide evidence-based interventions and support to young people aged 12–25 years with their mental health, health and wellbeing needs (Rickwood et al., 2018). headspace centres offer an enhanced primary mental healthcare service platform prioritising young people who present with mild to moderate mental health concerns. headspace services comprise a national network of more than 110 headspace centres operating across metropolitan, regional and rural areas of Australia, along with a range of satellites, outreach and other supports. In 2018-19, headspace centres provided over 426,000 services and supported almost 100,000 young Australians to strengthen their wellbeing and manage their mental health (headspace, 2019).

On 11th March 2020 the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. This was soon followed by a range of measures to manage the impact and spread of the disease, including limitations on domestic and international travel, restrictions for in-person businesses and services (including education institutions and many places of work), limiting the number of visitors in people's homes and the size of public gatherings, and advice for people to physically distance themselves from others wherever possible (Australian Government, 2020).

¹ For the purposes of this report, headspace centres include all headspace centre services including centres, satellites and outposts, but not broader programs and services such as eheadspace.

On 11th March 2020 the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic.

Emerging international research reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have a significant impact on mental health with, for instance, over half (53.8%) of participants in a population study in China rating the psychological impact of the pandemic as moderate to severe (Wang et al., 2020). A study from the United States found that compared to a similar population surveyed in 2018, participants in 2020 were eight times as likely to screen positive for serious mental illness. The impact was greater for younger demographics, with people aged 18 to 44 experiencing a tenfold increase in serious mental distress (Twenge, 2020).

An Australian survey of 13,829 people found that mental health problems were at least twice as prevalent as in non-pandemic circumstances (Fisher et al., 2020). Also in Australia, mental health experts examined the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health, wellbeing and rates of suicide, with modelling by the Brain and Mind Centre at the University of Sydney and the NHMRC Centre for Research Excellence suggesting there may be a 25 per cent increase in suicides (Australian Medical Association, 2020). Experts also predict that young people will be disproportionately impacted by increasing unemployment rates if Australia experiences an economic recession (Fryer, 2020). With Australia's unemployment rate already having increased to 7.4 per cent by June 2020 (compared to 5.2% in June 2019) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020), this may be a source of significant immediate and long-term stress for young people.



The mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to be multi-faceted, including immediate anxiety relating to contagion and consequences of the disease, pressures relating to measures required to manage the contagion at a population level (such as physical distancing requirements and the impact on a number of different industries), and longer term risk factors such as unemployment and family and domestic violence. Researchers have also found that the impact of a pandemic can be exacerbated by regulations and restrictions required to manage its spread and impact (Holmes et al., 2020; Van Bortel et al., 2016). Social connectedness is an important protective factor for young people's mental health (Hjemdal et al., 2006; Mallinckrodt & Wei, 2005), and with COVID-19 restrictions requiring people to physically distance from many friends and family, this is one area that may be particularly challenging for young people.

Social connectedness may be a particularly challenging area for young people with COVID-19 restrictions.

Disaster recovery research also provides an important evidence base for understanding the impact of the pandemic on young people. Although most young people will spontaneously recover from experiencing a disaster, these incidents have the potential to cause long-lasting distress (Gibbs et al., 2014). In addition to causing individual trauma, disasters can lead to collective trauma which can disrupt communities and relationships, outlast individual trauma, and extend to individuals that may be distant from the disaster (Hirschberger, 2018). Young people's experiences and mental health trajectories can vary substantially, and in some instances, young people can experience positive change or growth (Meyerson et al, 2011).

Using the social determinants of health model of risk and protective factors, access to education and work, social participation and connectedness, and safe and secure housing are all important contributors to young people's mental health and capacity to lead a flourishing life (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, some young people were experiencing threats to these protective factors. For example, in 2015, VicHealth identified the 'rising bar' of entry to the labour market as a potential 'megatrend' which may affect young people's mental health in the long-term (VicHealth, 2015). These structural risk factors are likely to be points of vulnerability for many more young people in the months and years following the pandemic.

With young people in Australia already experiencing high levels of need for mental health support, and a high prevalence of clinically relevant mental health problems (Slade et al., 2009), it is crucial to consider the mental health and wellbeing implications of the pandemic, to be able to manage short to medium-term mental health issues directly related to the pandemic as well as longer term structural risk factors, such as unemployment. In designing this project, headspace felt it was important to investigate both the immediate self-reported mental health and wellbeing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the strategies and help-seeking actions young people were engaging in to mitigate negative impacts and enhance positive supports.

Aims

The aim of this project was to understand the impact of COVID-19 on young people accessing headspace services, specifically exploring:

- the positive and negative impacts of COVID-19 on young people's mental health and wellbeing, and
- the adoption and usefulness of strategies that young people engaged to manage their mental health and wellbeing during COVID-19.

Methods

Procedure

All young people who received an occasion of service at a headspace centre over a two week period (25 May to 5 June 2020) were invited to participate in a pre-session survey. A preamble to the survey was included at the end of the standard headspace Minimum Data Set (MDS) questions that all young people answer on each visit to a headspace centre. The preamble explained the purpose and length of the additional questions and what the results would be used for, and the young person was given the option to opt-in by clicking *Next* or opt-out by clicking *Skip*.

This study received ethics approval through the Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee (Reference: 2020-04-395).

Measures

The survey questions asked young people about the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health and wellbeing, focusing on:

- the impact of COVID-19 on their decision to seek support or delay seeking support
- positive and negative impacts of COVID-19 on aspects of their mental health and wellbeing, including relationships, work and study, mood and lifestyle
- any positive outcomes they had experienced
- strategies they used for managing their mental health and wellbeing, and how helpful these were, and
- whether COVID-19 had impacted their confidence in achieving their future goals.

Data from the headspace MDS was used to provide demographic and service-related data.

Participants

Of the 6,807 young people who received a headspace service during the data collection period, 3,575 opted in and commenced the survey (53% response rate). Responses were received from 113 centres¹, with a range of 1 to 118 responses per centre (M=14.6, SD=23.2).

Thirty-four per cent of respondents were from New South Wales and the ACT, 30 per cent from Queensland, 16 per cent from Victoria, 9 per cent from Western Australia, 5 per cent from South Australia, 4 per cent from Tasmania and 2 per cent from the Northern Territory. Sixty-one per cent were from major cities, and 39 per cent were from non-metropolitan areas.

Fifty-nine per cent of respondents were over 18 years and 70 per cent of respondents were female (see **Figure 1**). There were 32 per cent of respondents who were LGBTIQ+, six per cent were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and 12 per cent were from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds. Compared to all young people who received services during the survey period, survey participants were significantly more likely to be older (18.6 years vs 18.2), and identify as LGBTIQ+ (32% versus 28%).

¹ At the time of data collection there were 114 headspace centres operational across Australia.

Two-thirds of respondents received services under the category of ‘Mental health – Psychological intervention’ (see **Figure 2**). It should be noted that information on ‘Main service provided’ in the headspace MDS was missing for 18 per cent of respondents. Fourteen per cent of young people were on visit 1 of their first episode of care (meaning this was their first ever session with headspace).

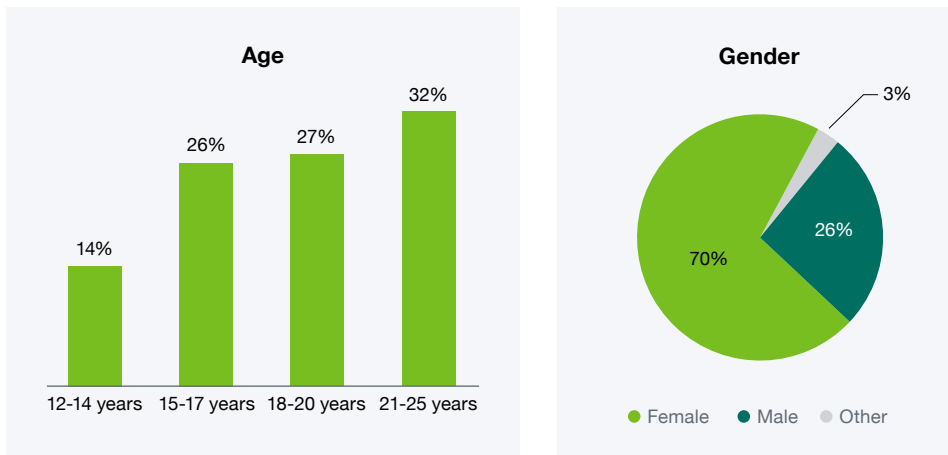


Figure 1. Participant demographics (n=3,575)

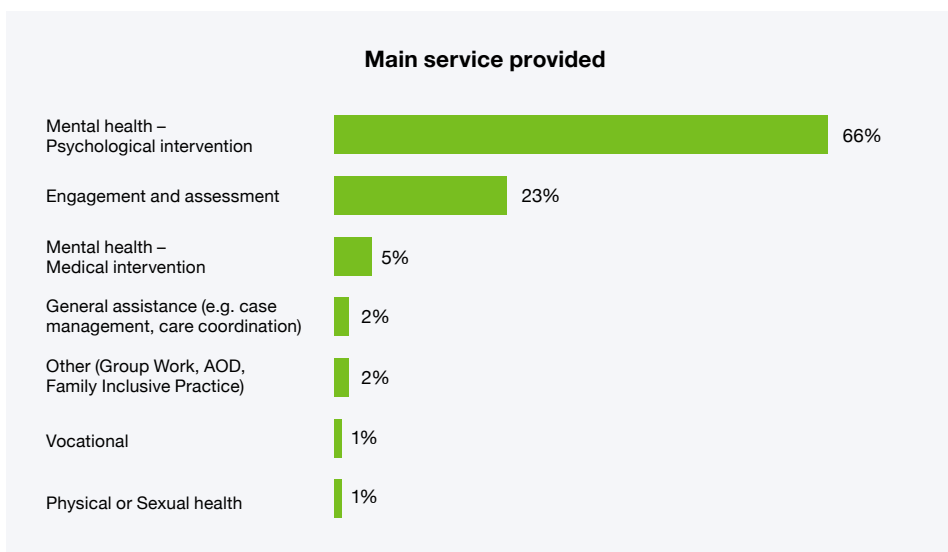


Figure 2. Main service provided (n=2,943)

Findings

The data analysis approaches undertaken are described in Appendix A.

Overall impact on mental health and decision to seek support

Almost three-quarters of young people (74%) indicated that their mental health was a little or a lot worse since the outbreak of COVID-19 (see Figure 3). Just under one in five young people indicated that COVID had contributed (somewhat or a lot) to their decision to seek support, and 12 per cent reported that they delayed seeking support from headspace due to concerns over COVID-19 (see Figure 4). Gender and age differences were examined but any differences were not of sufficient strength to report (see Appendix A for explanation). New clients (on their first visit of their first episode of care) were slightly more likely to indicate that they delayed seeking support due to COVID-19 compared to young people who had previously sought support from headspace (see Table 1).

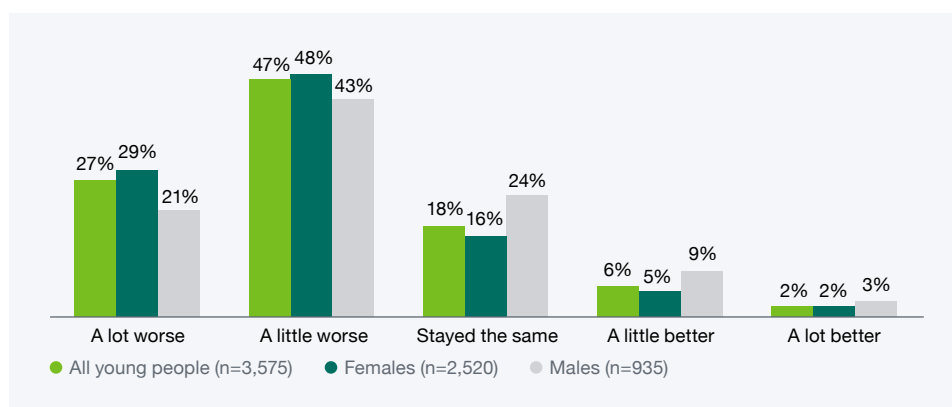


Figure 3. Young people's mental health since the outbreak of COVID-19

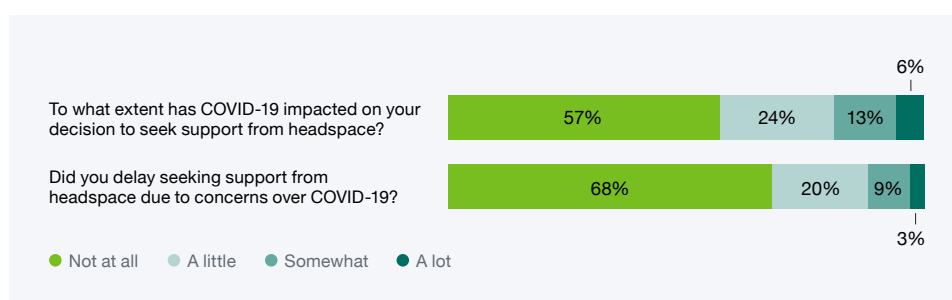


Figure 4. Impact of COVID-19 on decision to seek help (n=3,575)

	Not at all (%)	A little (%)	Somewhat (%)	A lot (%)
New clients (visit 1, episode 1) (n=324)	66	18	10	6
All other clients (n=3,086)	68	20	9	3

Table 1. Percentage of young people reporting the impact of COVID-19 on their decision to seek help, new clients versus all other clients

Positive and negative impacts on young people's lives

Young people reported a range of positive and negative impacts as a result of COVID-19, as presented in **Figure 5**. Notably, the most frequently reported negative impacts were on mood and routine, with three-quarters of young people indicating that the COVID-19 situation had negatively impacted these aspects of their lives. Approximately two-thirds also reported an impact on their interactions with friends and their school, university or study situation. However, young people also reported that they had experienced some positive changes, with around one in five reporting an improvement in their financial situation, interactions with family members, or their levels of exercise or physical activity (see **Figure 5**).

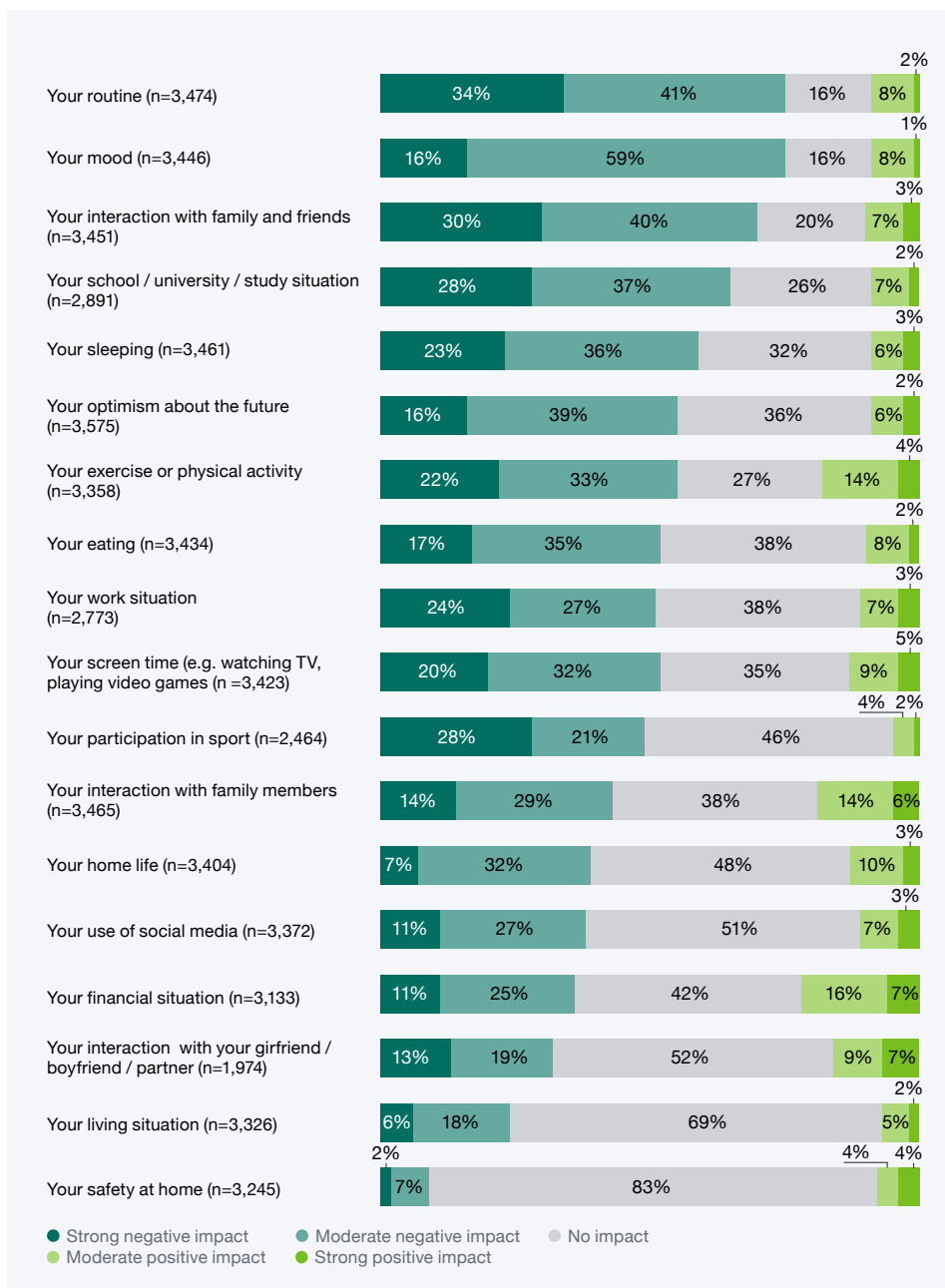


Figure 5. Positive and negative impacts of COVID-19 on young people's lives

The following analysis explores the impacts presented in **Figure 5**, grouped into five domains: mood and wellbeing, relationships, home life, work and study, and activities and routine.

Most young people (62%) reported a mix of positive and negative impacts on their lives. Interestingly, 28 per cent reported only experiencing positive impacts and a small minority (4%) reported experiencing only negative impacts. Ninety-six per cent of young people reported experiencing any negative impacts from the pre-defined list presented in **Figure 5**, and 58 per cent reported experiencing any positive impacts. **Table 2** presents these impacts by domain, showing that participants were most likely to report negative impacts in the domains of activities and routine or mood and wellbeing. In terms of positive impacts, most were related to their activities and routine, followed by relationships and impact on work and study situation.

Domain	Any positive impact (%)	Any negative impact (%)
Mood and wellbeing	19	86
Relationships	29	77
Home life	16	45
Work and study	28	77
Activities and routine	35	90
Overall	58	96

Table 2. Percentage of young people reporting any positive or negative impacts (by domain), n=3,575

Mood and wellbeing

Young people frequently reported negative impacts on their mood and wellbeing (**see Table 3**). Eighty-six per cent of participants reported a negative impact in any of the three areas of mood, sleeping, or optimism for the future. Young people were most likely to report a negative impact on their mood, and over half also reported a negative impact on their sleeping and optimism for the future. However, a minority of young people reported improvements, with 9 per cent reporting that their mood had improved (moderate or strong impact), 9 per cent reported that their sleep had improved, and 8 per cent reported improvements in their optimism for the future (**see Figure 5**). Gender and age differences were explored (**see Table 3**), but any differences were not of sufficient strength to report.

	Females (%)	Males (%)	12-17 years (%)	18-25 years (%)	Total (%)
Your mood (n=3,446)	78	64	69	79	75
Your sleeping (n=3,461)	62	51	58	60	59
Your optimism about the future (n=3,575)	57	51	48	60	55

Table 3. Percentage of young people reporting negative impacts of COVID-19 on mood and wellbeing, by gender and age group

Relationships

Impact on relationships was an area of mixed responses for many participants (see Table 4). Seventy-seven per cent of young people reported a negative impact on any of the three areas of relationships with friends, partners, or family members. Of their relationships, young people were most likely to indicate a negative impact on their interaction with friends. While many also reported a negative impact on their relationship with family, one in five reported a positive impact on their relationship with their partner. Gender and age differences were explored (see Table 4) but any differences were not of sufficient strength to report.

	Females (%)	Males (%)	12-17 years (%)	18-25 years (%)	Total (%)
Your interaction with friends (n=3,451)	71	66	65	73	70
Your interaction with your girlfriend / boyfriend / partner (n=1,974)	32	33	30	33	32
Your interaction with family members (n=3,465)	44	38	36	46	42

Table 4. Percentage of young people reporting negative impacts of COVID-19 on relationships, by gender and age group

Home life

A smaller proportion of young people reported negative impacts on questions relating to their home and living situation, compared to other aspects of their lives (see Table 5). Forty-five per cent of participants reported a negative impact on any of the three areas related to their home life: their living situation, home life or safety at home. Less than one in 10 reported a negative impact on their safety at home. In terms of positive impacts, 13 per cent reported a positive impact on their home life, but fewer reported positive impacts on their living situation (7%) or safety at home (8%) (see Figure 5). Gender and age differences were explored (see Table 5) but any differences were not of sufficient strength to report.

	Females (%)	Males (%)	12-17 years (%)	18-25 years (%)	Total (%)
Your living situation (n=3,326)	24	22	20	27	24
Your home life (n=3,404)	41	34	35	42	39
Your safety at home (n=3,245)	9	7	8	10	9

Table 5. Percentage of young people reporting negative impacts of COVID-19 on home life, by gender and age group

Work and study

Work and study was another important area of impact for young people (see **Table 6**). Seventy-seven per cent of young people reported any negative impacts on their financial, work or study situation. Of work and study impacts, the most frequently reported negative impact was to school, university and study with just under two-thirds of participants reporting a negative impact in this area of their lives. Half also reported a negative impact on their work situation. However, young people were less likely to report a negative impact on their financial situation (36%), and more than one in five reported a positive impact on their financial situation (see **Figure 5**). Unsurprisingly, 18 to 25 year olds were significantly more likely to report a negative impact on their work situation compared to 12 to 17 year olds. Gender differences were also explored (see **Table 6**) but any differences were not of sufficient strength to report.

	Females (%)	Males (%)	12-17 years (%)	18-25 years (%)	Total (%)
Your financial situation (n=3,133)	38	30	29	40	36
Your work situation (n=2,773)	53	49	34	61	52
Your school / university / study situation (n=2,891)	67	58	71	59	65

Table 6. Percentage of young people reporting negative impacts of COVID-19 on work and study, by gender and age group

Activities and routine

Ninety per cent of participants reported a negative impact on any of the areas relating to their activities and routine, including their eating, routine, physical activity, participation in sport, screen time, or social media (see **Table 7**). Change of routine was the most frequently reported negative impact (equal to mood), with three-quarters of young people reporting a negative impact on their routine. Just over half of young people reported a negative impact on their exercise or physical activity, however almost one in five reported a positive impact in this area of their lives (see **Figure 5**). Interestingly, while screen time was frequently reported as a negative impact, half of participants reported no impact on their use of social media. A significant gender difference was evident for impact on eating, with females being more likely to report a negative impact (see **Table 7**). Other gender differences were trivial. Age differences were explored for the activities and routine domain but any differences were not of sufficient strength to report.

	Females (%)	Males (%)	12-17 years (%)	18-25 years (%)	Total (%)
Your eating (n=3,434)	57	38	49	54	52
Your routine (n=3,474)	77	68	69	79	75
Your exercise or physical activity (n=3,358)	56	50	52	57	55
Your participation in sport (n=2,464)	51	43	50	47	48
Your screen time (e.g. watching TV, playing video games) (n=3,423)	55	42	50	53	52
Your use of social media (n=3,372)	43	29	35	41	39

Table 7. Percentage of young people reporting negative impacts of COVID-19 on activities and routine, by gender and age group

Strategies

Young people were asked about the strategies they used to cope with the COVID-19 situation, and how helpful these strategies were. **Figure 6** presents the percentage of young people who reported that they used each coping strategy, with strategies in dark teal representing talking to others; light teal representing activities and self-care; and green representing help-seeking. Talking to family members or significant others was the most frequently reported strategy, equal to activities and hobbies. Other self-care and activity-based strategies included staying active, eating well, seeking general online support and mindfulness. In terms of help-seeking, almost two-thirds reported seeking support, through phone or video consultation, and more than a third reported seeking support in-person.

Importantly, the vast majority (90%) of young people reported either talking to family or talking to friends as a strategy to cope with COVID-19. Furthermore, young people reported adopting a multitude of strategies to cope, with 93 per cent using two or more of the talking to others or self-care strategies listed in **Figure 6**. The mean number of self-care strategies used was 4.6 (SD=1.9). Gender and age differences were explored for the coping strategies used by young people but any differences were not of sufficient strength to report.

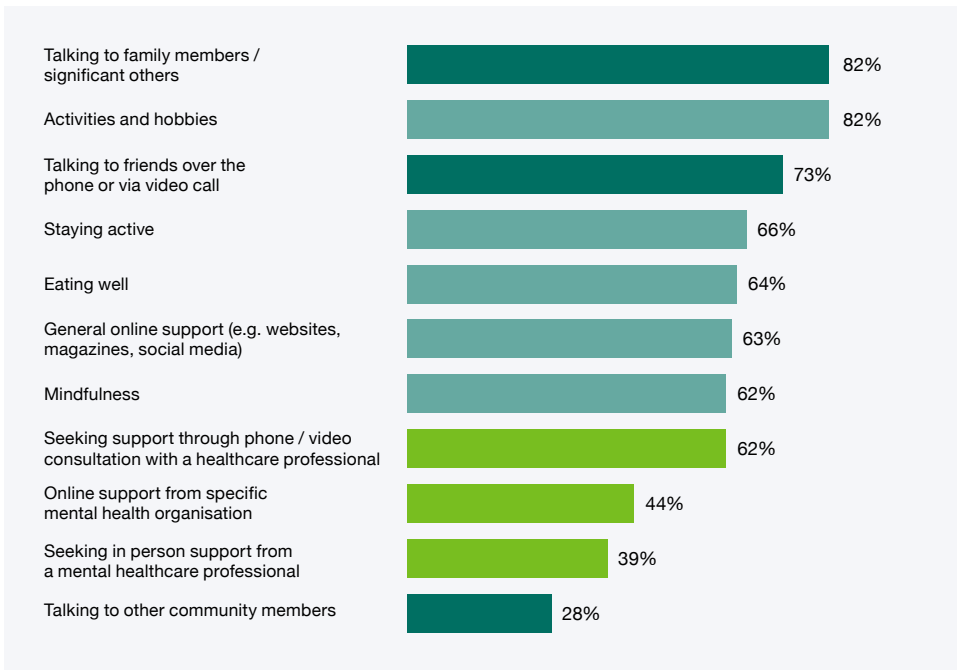


Figure 6. Percentage of young people who reported using these strategies to cope with the COVID-19 situation (n=3,379)



Helpfulness of strategies

Young people were also asked to rate how helpful each of the strategies were that they had used to manage the impact of COVID-19 on their lives.

Talking to others

Talking to others was the most frequently reported strategy used by young people (82% talking to family, 73% talking to friends, and 28% talking to other community members – see Figure 6). As shown below in Figure 7, of the three 'talking to others' strategies, talking to friends over the phone or via video call was reported to be the most helpful. Talking to family members or significant others also rated highly. Talking to other community members was not frequently reported as a strategy used by young people, and those young people who did talk to community members were less likely to indicate that this was helpful.

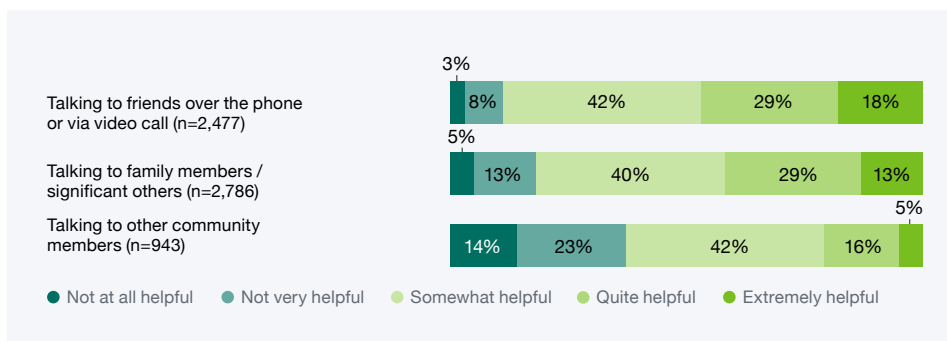


Figure 7. Percentage of young people reporting helpfulness of talking to others

Activities and self-care

Many young people also reported engaging in activities and self-care to varying extents depending on the particular strategy (82% activities and hobbies, 66% staying active, 64% eating well, 63% general online support, and 62% mindfulness – see Figure 6). Figure 8 shows that, of the five strategies listed under the 'activities and self-care' domain, young people were most likely to report that engaging in activities and hobbies and staying active were helpful strategies to cope with COVID-19. Mindfulness and eating well similarly rated highly in terms of helpfulness.

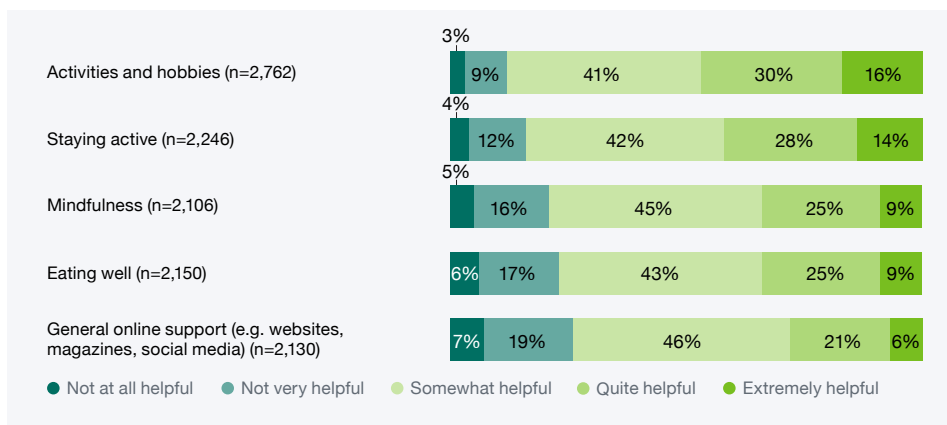


Figure 8. Percentage of young people reporting helpfulness of activities and self-care

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Help-seeking

The vast majority of young people who reported engaging in help-seeking indicated that these strategies were helpful. **Figure 9** shows that seeking in-person or phone / video support from a healthcare professional were each rated as helpful by almost all young people who used these strategies (92% for each). Young people were less likely to indicate that help-seeking strategies were not at all or not very helpful, compared to other strategies such as activities and self-care and talking to others (see **Figure 7** and **Figure 8**).

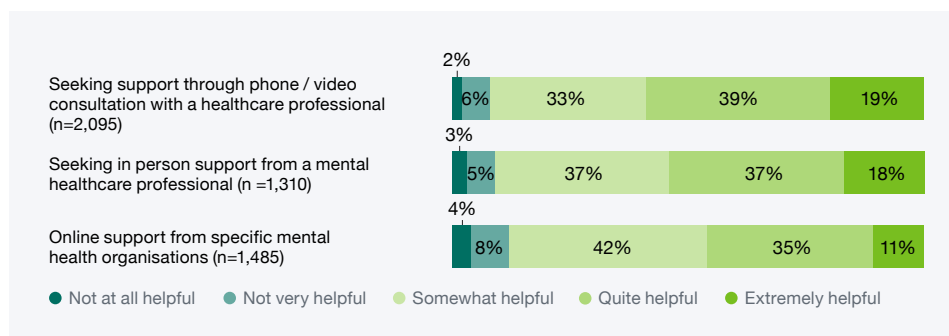


Figure 9. Percentage of young people reporting helpfulness of help-seeking

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Positive impacts

Young people were specifically asked about any positive impacts they may have experienced over the past week. As presented in **Figure 10**, the most frequently reported positive impact was being able to spend more time with pets. Many young people reported positive impacts on their emotional state, with over two-thirds of young people reporting feeling more empathy towards vulnerable people, and half feeling more compassionate and more grateful or fortunate. Forty-nine per cent agreed that they had more time to do hobbies. Consistent with data presented in **Table 4**, connection to friends and family varied in young people's responses; while many agreed that they felt a greater connection to friends and family, there were also many who disagreed with these statements. Young people were more likely to disagree than agree that they felt a greater connection with school peers or colleagues and their community.

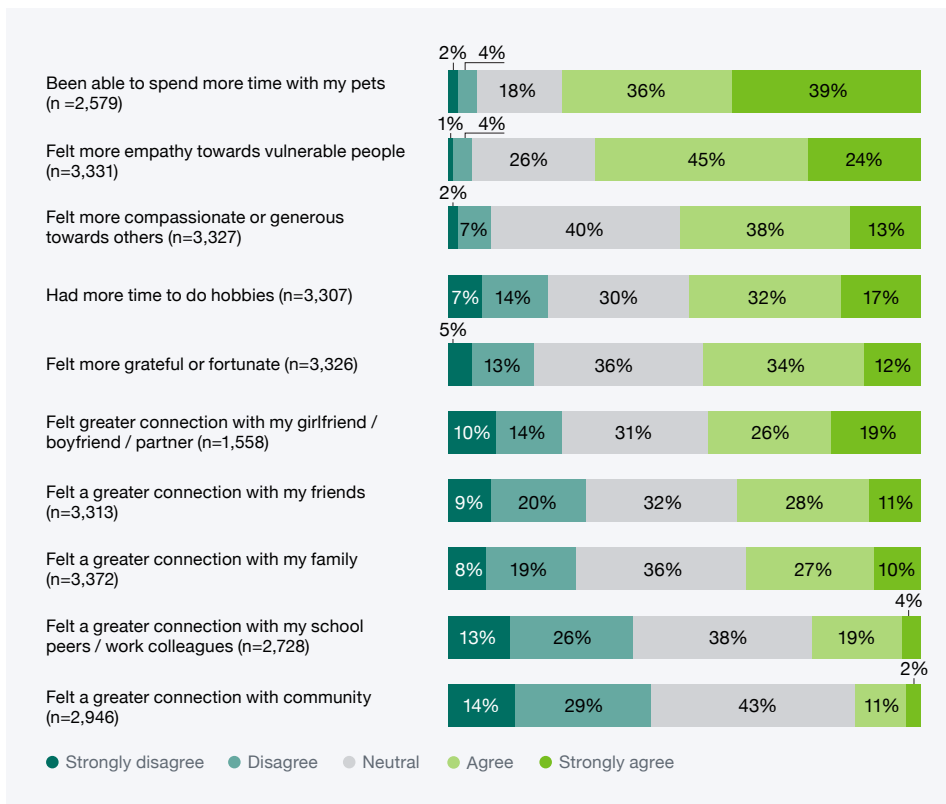


Figure 10. Percentage of young people reporting positive impacts in past week
Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Confidence achieving future goals

Young people were asked whether the COVID-19 situation had impacted on their confidence in achieving their goals. **Figure 11** shows that many young people did feel that COVID-19 had impacted on their confidence, with half indicating a high impact (a response of 7 or above on a scale of 1 to 10). The mean score was 5.8 (SD=2.86). Gender and age differences were explored but any differences were not of sufficient strength to report.

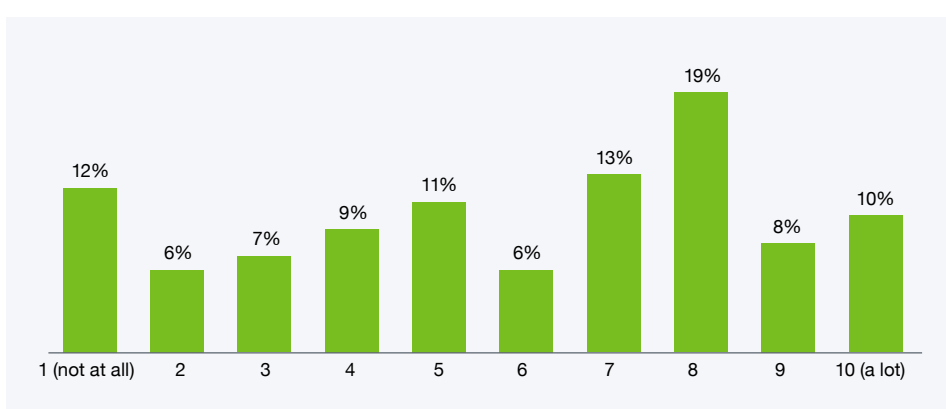


Figure 11. Level of confidence in achieving future goals (n=3,353)

Young people were asked to comment on the rating they provided for the question 'To what extent has COVID-19 impacted on your confidence in achieving your future goals'. Of the 3,575 young people who responded to the survey, 55 per cent (n=1,964) provided a comment to this question. A number of themes were evident from these responses; each of the key themes is discussed below.

When asked to explain why COVID-19 was impacting their confidence achieving their future goals, the most frequently mentioned responses included worries and stress associated with job insecurity (21% of young people who provided comments) and study related concerns (23% of young people who provided comments). A substantial proportion of young people reported that their work hours had been cut down, that they had lost their job, or that they were worried about their potential future job prospects. In many cases this had a flow-on effect to other areas of their lives, where financial instability affected young people's mental health and self-esteem. Young people also expressed concerns regarding their studies, and they either reported struggles with their learning, lack of motivation, feeling like they were falling behind, or that they had doubts whether they would be able to complete their education and how this would impact their life trajectory in general.

"Before the virus I was working 70+ hours a fortnight now I'm down to 30 if I'm lucky so financially it's taken all my savings. – *Female, age 18-20, WA*

"I ended up losing my job and dropping out of uni. Had to move home cause I couldn't afford to keep living. There was a reason I left home."
– *Female, age 21-23, ACT*

"Being stood down from work with no pay for a while took a toll on me in every way possible, I eventually got to the point where I was too anxious to leave the house and didn't want to go anywhere or see anyone because I felt fat and ugly. I felt like I was losing myself and having panic attacks again after a very very long time without, it was hard going back to work."
– *Female, age 21-23, QLD*

"Unemployed and struggling with managing my mental health, it's been a heavy curveball to try and remain excited for opportunities and goals in the future. I already found it hard being without financial support / without any sort of income and feel generally like a speck of dirt floating around not really contributing, but now that this global pandemic has been thrown in the mix opportunities are even more scarce." – *Female, age 21-23, QLD*

"I have been trying extremely hard to find work ever since I graduated high school (8 months ago) and it has already been difficult due to lack of experience, living in a small town that relies on networking to find jobs and lack of willingness to hire 18+ people with no experience (because its expensive and 'time wasting'). The bushfires and COVID were back to back tragedies and made the job market even more competitive. Why would anyone hire an adult with no experience in any industry over someone who just lost their job with 20+ experience?" – *Female, age 18-20, NSW*

"Completing Uni is a lot harder when everything is online. I have lost a lot of motivation resulting in my grades dropping. Whilst I'm willing to push through I know a lot of people around me are wanting to drop out until face to face classes come back. The overall morale is low." – *Female, age 18-20, QLD*

"Corona has impacted my school work, my actual work and has made it hard to believe that I will have the grades or the money to survive outside of year 12, let alone accomplish my academic dreams." – *Female, age 15-17, QLD*



"Why would anyone hire an adult with no experience in any industry over someone who just lost their job with 20+ experience?"

Female, age 18-20, NSW

“Coronavirus has caused significant disruption to my prospective graduate or even internship jobs. They are being cut significantly by their respective companies. Additionally it has caused significant disruption to my uni life and my ability to study, making me feel less positive with how I am going this year and my results. Also I feel I am getting significantly less with my education and uni life.” – *Female, age 21-23, QLD*

Delayed plans and barriers to engaging in activities

Approximately 17 per cent of young people who provided comments expressed they were mostly affected by their future plans and goals being put on hold. They reflected that they had to postpone getting their driving licence or travel plans, and that they were unable to engage in sport or exercise or other hobbies. There were some cases where the lockdown restrictions impacted young people’s lives to a greater extent, where they had to isolate from their family or significant others, they had personal health concerns or they lived with a person who was at risk of COVID-19.

“Before the pandemic, I was determined to get my license and a job asap, but now both of those things are either impossible or nearly impossible. I feel trapped.” – *Female, age 18-20, QLD*

“Feels like an invisible stop on what I want & feel like I can do because I couldn’t see my friends or ride my motorbike due to not being allowed out for no reason but essential supplies. Now the restrictions have been lifted it’s been a bit better. I’ve started to eat a bit better and exercise way more while the gyms have been shut.” – *Male, age 21-23, TAS*

“Due to travel restrictions, work dried up and financially that has been incredibly hard. It influenced my decision to leave Australia, which has become my home in order to seek work back in America, leaving behind my husband and cat for an undetermined amount of time.” – *Female, age 24-25, NSW*

“My health in general hasn’t been great so I feel pretty equally nonplussed about most of my [life prospects]. The past two days I’ve barely been able to remain conscious so life [prospects] are feeling particularly impossible today. Dude I can’t even do my groceries.” – *Male, age 21-23, QLD*

Mental well-being and motivation

Young people reported the pandemic impacted their general mental health and wellbeing, with 15 per cent of young people who provided comments mentioning this theme. They expressed feeling a lack of motivation or hope, feeling stuck or frustrated, being unproductive, and in some cases they noted that the pandemic had negatively impacted their mental health and self-esteem. They often stated that the pandemic impacted ‘a lot’ or ‘everything’ and that they generally lost their motivation. Young people noted a number of reasons for their poorer mental health including the loss of routine, social isolation, relationship issues, and anxiety over education / job or health concerns related to COVID-19. A few indicated that they had developed unhealthy eating habits or had feelings of loneliness.

“I would be lying if I said my mental health hasn’t been affected due to Covid 19.” – *Male, age 24-25, NSW*

“I have lost motivation to do most activities that aren’t considered ‘essential’ and don’t really see myself doing anything in the future, aside from graduating high school.” – *Female, age 15-17, NSW*



“I have lost motivation to do most activities that aren’t considered ‘essential’...”

Male, age 24-25, NSW



“Before the pandemic, I was determined to get my license and a job asap, but now both of those things are either impossible or nearly impossible. I feel trapped.”

Female, age 18-20, NSW

“This changes day to day but it makes me feel lost and like I have no direction due to the loss of work and total isolation from everyone. I don’t know how I will start everything back up and I don’t know what to strive towards.”

– Female, age 21-23, NSW

“I feel it’s impacted my mental & physical health state & goals. COVID-19 has impacted my daily routine and I work my best when I have a routine. Now I’m working from home I feel more sluggish. I don’t feel I have the extra energy to exercise or see friends. When I usually work from the office, I thrive off the fast pace environment. Getting up early to go to the gym & make it on the bus to get to work by 9. Then socializing with my friends after 5pm. With my gym, workplace & restaurants all closed, I feel little push to do anything extra or out of my work responsibilities.” – Female, age 21-23, NSW

“I feel its impacted negatively on my education to a large extent. Due to a family member I care for who is vulnerable – an enhanced risk of fatality – I had been issued to stay home by their doctor to decrease the risk of contraction. Having no internet meant I wasn’t able to access work-consequently I fell behind in my subjects – hence still trying to catch up. This has caused me to feel heightened anxiety, depression, and just feeling completely overwhelmed on top of the other mental issues I face. I have just felt really down because I want to achieve good grades and Covid-19 had added to the pressures I already face.”

– Female, age 15-17, QLD

Young people who felt unaffected

Approximately 13 per cent of young people who commented indicated that they had not been affected or that the impact had been negligible as they either did not have any particular goals or didn’t feel particularly impacted by the lockdown restrictions. They explained the restrictions enabled them to have more time to reflect and focus on their goals, plans or studies, or that they generally had more time to do their hobbies.

“I wasn’t doing anything with my life before all of this started so nothing has changed in that aspect at all.” – Female, 21-23, QLD

“Coronavirus hasn’t really impacted my confidence at all because I’ve still been working on the days that I can, and I still try to have a positive outlook for the future.” – Female, age 12-14, VIC

“The time in quarantine has led to having more time to reflect on my future goals and what the world should look like - which then goes deeper into reflecting on my own capabilities and self-worth. All of which are things I struggle with.”

– Male, age 21-23, TAS

“I have been able to step back and set myself for action. When things move back to normal I will be much more prepared for life.” – Male, age 21-23, NSW

Worrying about future

Approximately 12 per cent of young people expressed concern about the future in general. Young people reported that they were generally uncertain about what the future holds, and expressed concerns about the global economy or commented on broader societal issues.

“We are used to seeing the world a certain way, the majority of people know what is expected of us and every day would be just like every other day, the last couple of months has me questioning myself so much and I have been eating more food and feeling abnormally unwell at times.” – Male, age 24-25, NSW



“The future now seems a lot less structured and more unknown than before, it’s going to be pretty tricky getting a new job...”

Female, age 18-20, WA



“I have been able to step back and set myself for action. When things move back to normal I will be much more prepared for life.”

Male, age 21-23, NSW

“With the future being so uncertain right now, it’s hard to be confident in what I want to do when everything in life is going to change after COVID-19. Even if / when we are able to return back to our ‘normal lives’, it won’t be the same – nothing can ever be the same again.” – Female, age 15-17, WA

“The future now seems a lot less structured and more unknown than before, it’s going to be pretty tricky getting a new job when moving up to the city to study, guess the future has just been switched up on us all so it’s a shock but it’s just different, so it’ll just be a different path to the one I thought I was going to be taking.” – Female, age 18-20, WA

Young people who felt more hopeful

A small proportion of young people who commented (8%) indicated that they felt more hopeful about their future, or hopeful for positive social change as a result of the pandemic. They stated they had developed, or witnessed from others, more compassion within the community and endorsed the lockdown restrictions as a positive change.

“Due to having more time to myself to focus on me and my interests and goals, I feel as though I have an idea of where I want my life to lead in the not-so-distant future. Being able to enjoy some time alone and start up new and old hobbies was great for me, as well as setting up part of a financial plan too.” – Male, age 21-23, VIC

“Also, in a few ways, I gained faith in the community or at least some of the community. I feel hopeful for the future and really proud of my generation.” – Female, age 18-20, QLD

“I am more hopeful and confident for the future, for I believe “Covid19” will turn out to be a blessing in disguise. Times like these unite like-minded people and create new balanced ways of being and existing, creating exciting new possibilities and opportunities for the future. I am also incredibly grateful that Covid gave a lot of us a break to recalibrate and gain clarity & direction.” – Female, age 24-25, QLD

“My greatest hope after Covid 19 is that as a community we can come together to help one another and understand how lucky we are and maybe not take the simple things for granted anymore.” – Male, age 24-25, NSW



“Also, in a few ways, I gained faith in the community or at least some of the community. I feel hopeful for the future and really proud of my generation.”

Female, age 18-20, QLD

Discussion

Summary of main findings

The findings from this project indicate that most young people accessing headspace centres have been negatively impacted by COVID-19. With three-quarters of participants reporting that their mental health was a little or a lot worse since the outbreak of COVID-19 and one in five reporting that COVID-19 had impacted their decision to seek support from headspace, the pandemic has clearly had an impact on young people. Young people were most likely to report a negative impact on their routine (75%), mood (75%), interaction with friends (70%) and their school, university or study situation (65%). However, some young people also reported positive impacts, most notably on their financial situation (22%), interaction with family members (20%), and their exercise or physical activity (18%).

Impact on relationships was an area of mixed results for many participants. While 70 per cent indicated a negative impact on their interaction with friends and 42 per cent on their relationship with family, 20 per cent reported a positive impact on their relationship with family. For young people who had a girlfriend / boyfriend / partner, half (52%) reported no impact but a third (32%) reported a negative impact and 16 per cent reported a positive impact on their relationship with their partner.

The qualitative data revealed that young people felt COVID-19 had impacted their confidence in achieving their goals, with many noting job prospects (21% of the 1,964 young people who commented) and education (23%) to be areas of concern, as well as general mental wellbeing (15%), delayed plans (17%), and inability to engage in extra-curricular activities such as sport (17%).

Despite these challenging findings, young people also reported a number of positive impacts and identified some protective factors that enabled them to cope with the current situation. Specifically, 69 per cent of young people agreed that they felt more empathy towards vulnerable people, and 51 per cent felt more compassionate or generous towards others. Young people also agreed that they had been able to spend more time with pets (75%) and had more time to do hobbies (49%). A small proportion of young people who provided qualitative feedback (8%) indicated that they felt more hopeful about their future, or hopeful for positive social change as a result of the pandemic.

Importantly, young people demonstrated that they were drawing on a range of coping strategies to support their wellbeing, including talking to others, activities and self-care, and help-seeking. Talking to others was the most frequently reported strategy, either to family member or significant others (82%) or to friends (73%), while many young people also engaged in activities and hobbies (82%). Ninety per cent of young people spoke to either family or friends to help them cope with the impacts of COVID-19, and 'talking to family' was the most frequently reported coping strategy. Eighty-two per cent of young people who reported talking to family indicated that this was a helpful strategy.

The vast majority who engaged in help-seeking reported it to be helpful. Seeking in-person or phone / video support from a healthcare professional was rated as helpful by the vast majority of young people who used these strategies (92% for each). Talking to friends over the phone or via video call was also reported to be helpful for 89 per cent of young people who used this strategy. Eighty-eight per cent of young people who engaged in activities and hobbies and 83 per cent of young people who used 'staying active' as a strategy to cope indicated that these approaches were helpful. Young people reported adopting a multitude of strategies to cope with the impact of COVID-19, with participants adopting an average of 4.6 strategies.

75%

of young people reported a negative impact on their mood

65%

of young people reported a negative impact on their study situation

90%

of young people reported speaking to family or friends to help them cope

Limitations

The results need to be interpreted in the context of the limitations of the study and methodology. While the response rate for the survey was high (53%), there was some bias in the study population in ways that make it not fully representative of the national headspace client group. This is common in survey research as particular characteristics make people more likely to opt-in to undertake surveys, but should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. In particular, younger cohorts were under-represented and LGBTIQ+ young people were over-represented in the sample.

Furthermore, this project only includes the experiences of young people who chose (and were able) to access headspace centre services during the COVID-19 pandemic, and does not include perspectives from young people who did not access services or who were accessing other services (such as eheadspace). Future studies could examine the relative impact of COVID-19 on the general population of young people in order to better understand future service needs and inform the development of a range of relevant support and recovery options, from universal population level supports through to more intensive interventions for young people already experiencing psychological distress and mental ill-health prior to the pandemic.

Implications for headspace

A number of key messages are evident from these findings, which have implications for headspace services going forward.

headspace services will be a critical resource to manage the impact of COVID-19 on young people in the immediate and long-term

- With the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic influencing young people's mental health, and accompanying risk factors such as work and study, ongoing responsiveness to the pandemic must consider both the impact of immediate situational stressors and longer-term risk factors. Demand for support from headspace and other mental health services is likely to increase, particularly since 12 per cent of this help-seeking cohort of young people indicated they delayed seeking support (somewhat or a lot) due to COVID-19. Notably, ensuring young people's hope and optimism for the future will be essential for youth mental health services along with positive messaging and supports for all young people.
- Some young people will be particularly vulnerable due to related risk factors such as financial pressures, employment instability, loneliness and safety. Formal support is critical in supporting young people to manage the multitude of impacts on their day-to-day lives, wellbeing, and social and occupational functioning.

Family and friends remain a key support for many young people

- The role of family continues to be an important support for many young people, reinforcing the value of family in young people's mental health treatment and support. headspace needs to continue to work towards embedding family inclusive practice and involving families in young people's care wherever appropriate and possible. Greater focus and more resources are required to provide information and support to families to better enable them to help their young person through the ongoing impacts of the pandemic.

Work and study will be an area of significant need for many young people

- With job losses, the destabilising of industries that disproportionately employ young people, and disruption to young people's study and education plans, work and study will increasingly be an area of significant need for young people. As headspace Work and Study expands its capacity, this service will become an increasingly important part of the integrated and holistic support that headspace provides to young people during and post the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Young people have legitimate fears for their future (such as work and study prospects and their ability to engage in travel). In supporting young people, headspace services should recognise, validate and respond to these concerns while also dealing with mental health specific issues such as anxiety and feelings of hopelessness.

Young people's resilience needs to be reinforced and enhanced

- Young people frequently use activities, hobbies and self-care to help them manage their mental health, and one positive outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic is that some young people reported having more time to engage in these activities and strategies. In the context of 'healthy headspace' messages, which encourage young people to engage in these strategies for effective self-care and prevention, this is encouraging.
- headspace should continue to drive health promotion, through centres, eheadspace and other digital services, in order to promote positive lifestyle and coping strategies. headspace should also continue to encourage young people to develop self-care strategies, through targeted campaigns such as '7 tips for a healthy headspace' (headspace.org.au/tips/) and resources provided via initiatives such as headspace Connect.



Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted many young people's lives, and while many impacts are already evident, taking a long-term view of service responsiveness, early intervention and prevention will be critical to managing the immediate effects and ongoing impacts on young people's mental health and wellbeing. Demand for support is likely to increase over time, as the longer term impacts of job losses, disruption to education, lack of physical contact with friends and family, and general mental health problems rise.

headspace services will be a critical resource to manage the impact of COVID-19 on young people in the immediate and long-term, and work and study are likely to be areas of increasing need for young people in the future. It is also important to acknowledge that young people have demonstrated considerable positivity, such as reporting increased compassion and empathy for others, and the role of family is clearly an important support for many. Young people have shown the capacity to support themselves through actively engaging in a range of self-care and help-seeking strategies.

These findings indicate that COVID-19 is having an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of many help-seeking young people, and while they are engaging in proactive and multi-faceted self-care, they still need substantial support now and in the future to safeguard and build their resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic is still unfolding, with significant uncertainty in areas that impact young people's wellbeing (such as work, study, and social connection). Long-term service planning and demand management will be crucial, well beyond the end of COVID-19 restrictions. This should include the ongoing availability of flexible support options such as telehealth to reduce barriers to help-seeking and maximise access for young people, during and beyond lockdown restrictions.



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Appendix A: Approach to analysis

The survey asked a range of fixed response questions and one open-ended question.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS, using descriptives and inferential statistics. All participants who commenced the survey were included in the results, so the sample size varies by analysis due to variation in how many participants answered particular questions. Significance tests were undertaken to examine whether there were any differences in the answers to the questions according to demographics. Given the large sample size and high power, significance was set at $p < .001$ and effect sizes at .30 and above to prevent reporting of reliable but trivial differences.

Qualitative responses were analysed using a Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2008) approach. Microsoft Excel was utilised to document initial codes and emerging key themes across the responses. Due to the large volume of the data and data saturation, a combination of techniques were used to capture the main themes for each topic representatively. Saturation is a widely accepted methodological technique in qualitative research (Thorne, 2020) and occurs when no additional information is being found within the data, rendering further analysis unnecessary. In this survey, data saturation was reached quickly as participants provided consistent responses. Therefore, about half ($n=1,055$) of the overall responses ($n=1,964$) were coded using inductive techniques, while the remaining data were examined and only coded if new codes / themes emerged.





headspace would like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's First People and Traditional Custodians. We value their cultures, identities, and continuing connection to country, waters, kin and community. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and are committed to making a positive contribution to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, by providing services that are welcoming, safe, culturally appropriate and inclusive.



headspace is committed to embracing diversity and eliminating all forms of discrimination in the provision of health services. headspace welcomes all people irrespective of ethnicity, lifestyle choice, faith, sexual orientation and gender identity.



headspace centres and services operate across Australia, in metro, regional and rural areas, supporting young Australians and their families to be mentally healthy and engaged in their communities.

headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health



headspace

National Youth Mental Health Foundation