

Prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales

batyr's National Youth Advisory Group



Introduction

batyr's National Youth Advisory Group (NYAG) is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the New South Wales (NSW) Government's inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in NSW.

We want to firstly recognise that diverse communities, particularly communities of colour and First Nations communities, are the experts when it comes to community building and connection. Their leadership in this area should be listened to and learnt from if we hope to genuinely shift the wave of loneliness impacting young Australians.

batyr's vision is that all young people should lead mentally healthy and fulfilling lives. As leaders in preventative mental health education, batyr gives young people the skills and tools to get through tough times and to look after their mental health, before reaching a crisis point. Our innovative peer-to-peer programs and digital interventions for young people aged 14-30 are proven to reduce stigma, increase help-seeking and improve mental health outcomes for young people and their communities.

As an organisation that reaches thousands of young people every year, batyr believes it is our responsibility to listen to and understand their experiences, and to elevate their voices in the decisions that affect them.

A critical element of how we achieve this is through our National Youth Advisory Group. This group currently consists of eight young people from across Australia who are passionate about representing their communities and creating lasting change to the youth mental health crisis. As members of this group, we bring our lived experience, skills and knowledge to voice the concerns of young people and advocate for change both within batyr and the mental health sector more broadly.

Loneliness has been a recurring topic of discussion for batyr's National Youth Advisory Group.

Loneliness & young people

Through the lived experience stories we hear and recent data reports, we know that 2 in 5 young Aussies (aged 18-24) are reporting as persistently lonely (Morgan et al, 2024). From our perspective and discussions, some factors impacting this include:

Cost-of-living crisis: Young people are focused on spending more time working to make a living and as a result, spend less time connecting with friends and creating new networks. This generates stress, pressure and a general lack of fulfilment. Further, mechanisms to create connection, such as sports or community groups, attending music or cultural events, are all increasing in cost and are therefore less accessible for young people.

Ongoing ramifications from the pandemic: The increased period of forced social isolation still affects young people today. Not only did this time lead to fewer opportunities for fostering and expanding social networks, but it also impacted young people's ability to learn and put social skills into practice. For young people who endured the pandemic during a transition period (for example, starting high school, completing high school or starting university) the strain of building relationships within such isolated constraints has perpetuated loneliness even until today.

Systemic barriers: The systemic barriers faced by marginalised communities significantly impact the ability for these communities to create connection. It is impossible to talk about loneliness amongst young people without also acknowledging the way that systemic barriers disempower and disconnect young people from themselves, from each other, and from their communities

Increasingly individualised lives: There is a strong narrative and social pressure for young people to consistently reach new goals, undergo self-growth, increase independence and overall improve themselves through individual activity. This self-growth journey perpetuates young people staying and retreating to our own bubbles.

What are our experiences with loneliness as a young person?

In my personal experience of mental ill-health, it was the times when I felt lonely and isolated that my mental health suffered the most. For me, this occurred during a transition period that young people commonly undergo – the chapter of leaving high school and starting university. As I struggled with navigating a changed routine and toxic friendships from high school that focused on pulling me down rather than lifting me up, I found myself in a state of languishing – not feeling much at all. This languishing perpetuated other mental ill-health experiences of low self-esteem, body image challenges and disordered eating. Thankfully I was able to foster new friendships with people I met from university and if it weren't for these new friendships, I would not be where I am today, specifically in seeking help for my mental health. These friendships helped me realise that I wasn't okay and that I was worthy to seek help for my mental health. And so from my own lived experience, I know that peer-to-peer relationships are incredibly powerful and meaningful when addressing youth mental health – hence why I am so passionate about evaluating and addressing loneliness amongst young people, which is a directly related cause and experience.

- Mel (Gadigal land, Sydney NSW)

Recommendations

Our recommendations for the government to address loneliness in young people include, but are not limited to:

Always be led by lived experience: Fundamentally, any recommendations and policy solutions should incorporate lived experience perspectives and meaningful consultation with young people – nothing about us, without us.

Bridge skills barriers to forming connections: Develop skills-based learning on how young people can form meaningful and long-lasting connections. This may potentially require undertaking a skills gap analysis to understand the impacts of forced isolation experienced on young people during the pandemic. Additionally, investing and endorsing peer-to-peer education that covers how to acknowledge and navigate feelings of loneliness could help young people become better equipped to reduce feelings of loneliness when they arise, and learn how to look after themselves so that this experience does not contribute negatively to their mental health.

Foster communities: Support young people in joining groups based on interests and skills, including taking up new skills. This does not have to be monetary in nature, for example, it could involve the creation of a database of local clubs and activities, including information about how to get involved for complete beginners – often, it is a lack of information that prevents people from joining a new group or returning after initial visits. It could also involve grants for people to acquire skills, e.g. renting a musical instrument to join a group.

Create more accessible and affordable third spaces: Third spaces, for all ages, are essential to building communities and maintaining individual well-being. Yet for young people, the cost of living crisis means that accessing third spaces at little cost is more important than ever. We see this with the rise of alcohol-free, social venues such as Yo-Chi (Williams, 2024). The government's assistance in facilitating and producing more young people-friendly third spaces could go a long way in reducing levels of loneliness.

Empower local community groups and reduce barriers to community connection: Local community groups are experts in creating connection, and have an integral role to play in supporting young people. Despite this, they face barriers that inhibit their ability to organise activities/events and build community, including challenges navigating local government policy or gaining access to safe spaces. The government should trust and empower local communities, particularly multicultural and First Nations and LGBTQIA+ communities, to support their young people.

As batyr's National Youth Advisory Group, we are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the NSW Government's inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales. Young people are the most impacted community when it comes to loneliness. Because of this, it's integral that our voices and lived experiences are a part of this conversation.

We would be eager to continue to be a part of this ongoing conversation and share our experiences and perspectives.

Kind regards,

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References

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for young PEOPLE**

