

National Mental Health Commission

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# Consultation summary: Digital technologies and youth mental health

May 2024



Australian Government  
National Mental Health Commission

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# Acknowledgements

## Acknowledgement of Country

The Commission acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands throughout Australia. We pay our respects to their clans, and to the elders, past present and emerging, and acknowledge their continuing connection to land, sea, and community.

## Recognition of Lived Experience

We recognise the individual and collective contributions of those with a lived and living experience of mental ill-health and suicide, and those who love, have loved and care for them. Each person's journey is unique and a valued contribution to Australia's commitment to mental health and suicide prevention systems reform.

The National Mental Health Commission (the Commission) acknowledges the assistance and cooperation of the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Youth Advisory Group convened by the Office for Youth, members of the project's Expert Advisory Group and the public who participated in our consultation survey.

## A note on language

The Commission appreciates that language surrounding mental health and wellbeing can be powerful and, at times, contested. Preferences are often not homogenous across and between groups of people and there is no single consensus on preferred terminology. It is always the Commission's intent to be respectful and use language preferred by most people to whom it refers.

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# Background

Young people's mental health and wellbeing has declined over the last seventeen years in Australia.<sup>1</sup> Since 2013, the prevalence of psychological distress in young people aged 15-24 years has increased at a higher rate than in previous years<sup>1</sup> and at a higher rate than that of other age groups in Australia.<sup>1,2,3</sup> While disaggregated data is limited, there is evidence that Indigenous people aged 18-24 years are more likely to have high or very high psychological distress compared to young non-Indigenous people in Australia.<sup>4</sup> In 2021-22, the highest rate of hospitalised intentional self-harm among Indigenous people was in the 15-19 age group and was almost twice as high as the rate among young non-Indigenous people.<sup>2</sup> There has been a greater prevalence of psychological distress among young people with disabilities aged 15-19 years compared to those without disabilities since 2012.<sup>5</sup> In 2019, there was also evidence of a higher proportion of 16-17 year olds who identified as LGBTQA+ reporting high or very high levels of psychological distress compared to the general population aged 16-17 years.<sup>6</sup> Young people aged 14-21 years were more likely to have suicidal thoughts compared to other age categories of the LGBTQA+ community.<sup>6</sup> Indicators of psychological distress include measures of self-reported distress, self-harm hospitalisations, rates of anti-depressant use and Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) mental health service usage.<sup>a</sup> Additionally, service providers reported that young people have been presenting to services with increasingly severe and complex problems.

The National Mental Health Commission (the Commission) undertook work to explore the decline in young people's mental health and wellbeing, finding that a range of societal and cultural shifts are likely each independently and in combination contributing to increased mental ill-health and distress. Digital technologies are becoming increasingly integrated with our daily lives, making it necessary for young people to use them to learn, work, socialise and play. The effects of digital technologies on mental health are not yet well understood, and evidence in this area is emerging. While there is a lack of research-based evidence to indicate that digital technologies directly cause distress, the rapid proliferation of digital technologies along with changes to our environment has amplified the effects of factors that contribute to mental ill-health. We also know digital technologies offer numerous benefits to young people including facilitating access to information and services, social connection, entertainment and providing opportunities for creativity and personal development.

**When the Commission uses the term digital technology, we are referring to the electronic tools, systems, devices, and resources that generate, store, share or process data.<sup>8</sup> Digital technologies include digital environments, services, and platforms – these are online spaces that may allow access to and uploading, distributing, and sharing of content, such as social media services and gaming platforms.<sup>9</sup> Social media refers to any online social network, which is a website or app that allows a user to create and share content online (e.g. TikTok, Instagram).<sup>10</sup>**

## Consultation methodology

The Commission has undertaken work to better understand the interplay between digital technologies and mental health. In 2023, the Commission held a three-part consultation consisting of (1) a public consultation via online survey; (2) input from an Expert Advisory Group; and (3) input from a Youth Advisory Group. The aim of the consultation was to better understand the components of digital technology that are impacting young people's mental health. The Commission released a [discussion paper](#) summarising our desktop review of available research to support the consultation and help us explore key questions relating to the impacts of digital technologies on youth mental health, hearing the perspectives of experts, young people, parents, carers, educators and service providers. The discussion paper and the consultation

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<sup>a</sup> It is important to note there is a significant lack of data available for children under the age of 12. Most available data focuses on age ranges over 15 years. There is also limited data available on the wellbeing of young people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities.<sup>7</sup>

focused on potential negative impacts of digital technology. It is important to note this was not an attempt to dismiss the known positive impacts, but rather ensure we are understanding where there may be risks and identify what would be effective measures to safeguard young people's mental health and wellbeing in our modern world.

To read more about the consultation process, as well as limitations of this work, see Appendix A. For survey questions, see Appendix B.

## Consultation summary

### Positive uses of digital technology

We heard there are a range of positive uses of digital technologies, with connection being the most often cited – that is, digital technology can facilitate positive connection and a sense of belonging. This was described as particularly important for those in marginalised communities or those who feel alone. Respondents also noted that digital technology enables people to connect with others beyond their own social circles and engage with people with different experiences.

Respondents also noted that digital technologies enable people to learn new things, access accurate information and online support, explore and understand one's own identity, flexibly complete school or work tasks, encourage wellbeing and physical activity (e.g., wearables, mindfulness/meditation apps), and access entertainment.

“ *Digital technology connects my child to her friends, allows her to access a wide range of knowledge and experiences, allows her to understand and have compassion for diverse views and experiences, allows her to understand the world we are living in, including digital advances, political structures, media structures, and public debates. All of this makes my task easier as a parent helping my child navigate the world - it is at our fingertips, and I can 'go with them' as they travel from the couch. – Parent or carer of a young person aged 13-25 years*

Respondents emphasised that efforts to reduce any negative impacts of digital technologies should be balanced with and do not detract from the positive impacts.

### Safer users

The survey responses frequently discussed how the negative impacts of digital technologies are dependent on how it is used. While there was a consistent call for more education on this, there was also a recognition that many young people are already demonstrating considerable skill in navigating digital technology – for example, by thoughtfully curating feeds to suit their interests and preferences or putting self-imposed limits on their use.

The importance of co-designing and developing education programs with young people was considered crucial to ensure these were effective and appropriately targeted. This relates both to learning how to mitigate the potential negative effects of digital technology as well as how to maximise the positive effects.

Consultation participants emphasised the need to ensure families know how to support young people to safely engage with digital technology, and the importance of adults modelling healthy engagement themselves. There was a clear preference for an evidence-based, coordinated approach to the education of parents/carers and young people on how to navigate digital usage, rather than an overwhelming array of independent programs.

### Safer digital technology

Consultation participants expressed a desire to see a '[Safety by Design](#)' approach to digital technologies continue, believing this is crucial to supporting the relationship between digital technologies and young people's mental health. Developed by the eSafety Commissioner, the Safety by Design approach focuses on how technology companies can reduce online risks by predicting, finding, and eliminating online harms before they occur. It encourages technology

companies to prioritise user safety, embed protections from the beginning of product design and development, and support users in managing their own safety.<sup>11</sup>

## Balanced engagement

A common suggestion to combat the negative impacts of digital technology is to disconnect. However, respondents said this was not always easy because digital technology is now a necessity for education and work as well as socialising. In addition, factors such as a fear of missing out, and pressure from peers make disconnecting difficult.

“ *Some of my friends get annoyed if I don't reply to them straight away, so I feel really bad especially if I've intentionally delayed a response because I am feeling too overwhelmed to respond immediately. It's hard to keep up with all the online socialising and I wish I could have a break and just disconnect.* - Young person aged 13-25

“ *This needs to be viewed through the lens of society as a whole – we are ALL expected to be accessible all the time whether by our employers, our family or our friends, far more than used to be the case.* - Parent or carer of a young person aged 13-25 years

## Collaboration

Given the way digital technologies are embedded across all aspects of life, consultation participants such as educators and Expert Advisory Group members were very clear that any reforms must involve meaningful collaboration with a broad range of stakeholders, both nationally and internationally. There are numerous Australian and international experts working in this space and it is critical that we combine our efforts when designing policy solutions to improve youth mental health and wellbeing.

## Research to improve understanding

Digital technologies are constantly evolving, as are the ways people engage with them. While the evidence base in this area is rapidly emerging, large scale, longitudinal and causal studies are limited, making it difficult to draw conclusions around causation. Additionally, existing research tends to rely on self-reported measures and focuses on the amount of 'screen time' generally rather than differentiating between different types of technology use.

Participants emphasised the need for further research to enable a more comprehensive understanding of how digital technologies are impacting young people and their families. There was a call for longer-term monitoring to strengthen our ability to track trends or emerging issues. Research should also consider the impacts of individual factors such as the challenge of disconnecting, fear of missing out, pressure from peers, and the necessity to use technology for education or employment, as well as demographic factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status and cultural background.

## What needs to happen?

As part of the consultation process, we asked participants what they thought could be done to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people and address the impact of digital technology on areas such as sleep, attention, physical activity and time spent outdoors. We also asked for solutions to help young people navigate content that promotes unrealistic comparisons via social media, or when engaging with social and cultural issues online (such as crisis events or issues in relation to local and global discrimination).

While potential solutions were provided, participant feedback emphasised the importance of co-designing solutions with a broad and representative sample of young people, the need to collaborate with a broad range of stakeholders and building on the limited research available in this area. Reflecting on this feedback and noting the small sample size of the consultation, the solutions collected have not been included in this summary. Refer to consultation limitations at Appendix A.

## Key Findings

- There is evidence of increased psychological distress amongst young people (15-24 years of age) over the last 17 years.<sup>1</sup>
- There isn't clear research-based evidence to suggest digital technology causes distress, however it can play a role in amplifying the effects of factors that increase distress (such as education and employment pressures, uncertainty about the future).
- It is crucial we better understand any potential negative impacts of digital technologies on mental health and wellbeing now, particularly (but not exclusively) for young people. However, any attempts to mitigate negative engagement with digital technology should not compromise the benefits of digital technology.
- We need to ensure young people's sense of autonomy over their digital interactions and involve them in the design of evidence-based education programs.
- Conducting research to enable a more comprehensive and evidence-based understanding of how digital technologies are impacting young people and their families is a top priority.
- Education on how to mitigate the potential negative effects of digital technology as well as how to maximise the positive effects is needed. We should also educate families on how to support young people to safely engage with digital technology.
- Promoting the work of the eSafety Commissioner and continuing to support a safety by design approach to digital technologies which is crucial to improving the relationship between digital technologies and young people's mental health is critical. This includes collaborating with digital technology organisations to ensure that they are taking a proactive and preventative approach to the safety of their products and services.
- Shifting societal norms and attitudes to enable balancing the benefits digital technologies can offer learning, working and socialising, with the right to disconnect, is necessary. Education institutions and workplaces have a role to play in ensuring they do not create a culture reinforcing the need to be always available.
- It is important we engage with a broad and representative sample of young people, families, educators, digital technology companies, researchers and service providers when designing policy solutions to improve youth mental health and wellbeing. Their insights are essential to ensuring we land on the right policy solutions, and these groups will have a clear role in implementing them.
- We need to recognise and support the role of communities and infrastructure (such as community sporting facilities, community events like park runs, gyms, roller-skating rinks and green spaces) in fostering a range of environments for social connection and belonging.

## Next steps

The Commission is committed to advancing the mental health of young people and recognises the significant change that digital technology represents to the world in which young people (and everyone) now lives, learns, works and plays. Therefore, the Commission has invested in further work to better understand how young people engage with digital technologies; what contributes to positive, negative, or neutral effects on mental health; and how these experiences differ across various cohorts. In 2024, we will initiate a comprehensive literature review of both Australian and international evidence. It is anticipated that this will contribute to future policy work and support the wellbeing of young people.

Figure 1. Project timeline outlining work to date and next steps





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# Appendix A

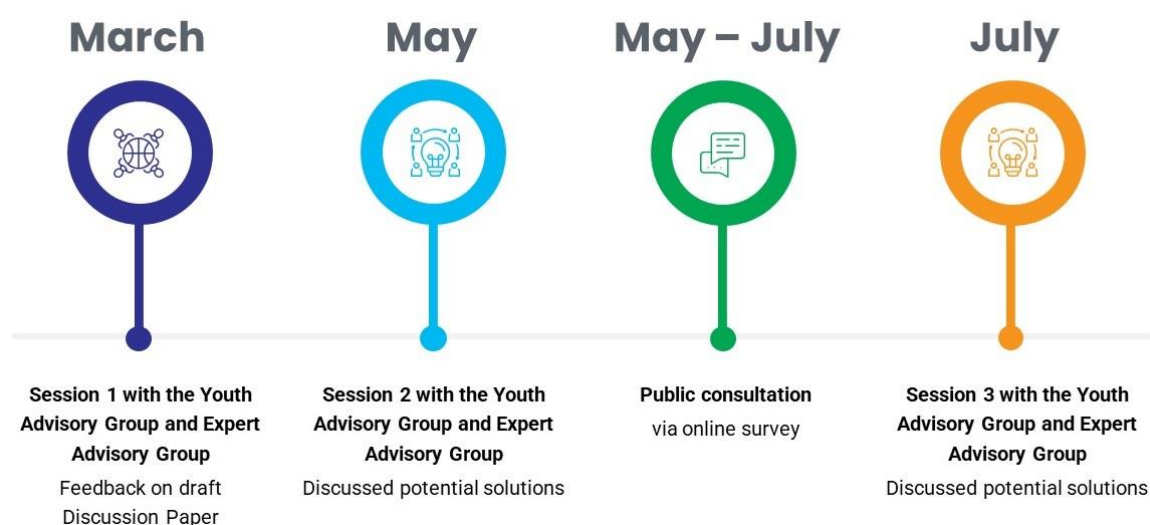
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How we consulted

## How we consulted

From March to July 2023, the Commission conducted a three-pronged consultation process with (1) a Youth Advisory Group, (2) an Expert Advisory Group, and (3) a public consultation survey. The aims of consultation were to better understand the aspects of digital technology that are influencing youth mental health, and inform the development of recommendations for how to support young people's mental health in an increasingly digitised world.

**Figure 2.** Project timeline of the consultation process in 2023



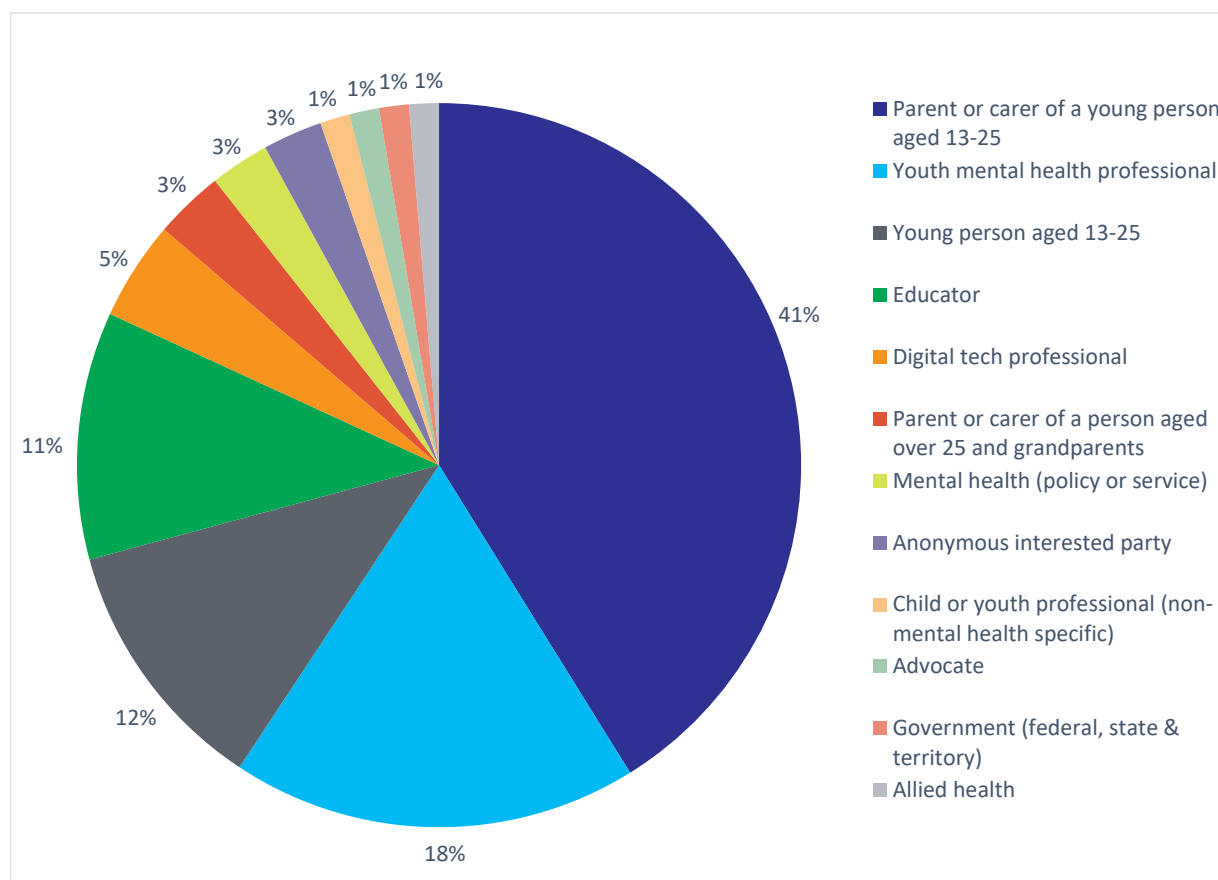
### Youth Advisory Group and Expert Advisory Group

Over three sessions between March and July 2023, the Commission consulted with the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Youth Advisory Group convened by the Office for Youth. In the same period, the Commission convened an Expert Advisory Group with expertise across digital technologies and youth mental health. The Youth and Expert Advisory Groups reviewed the draft discussion paper at their first sessions and the Commission used this feedback to revise the paper before its release for public consultation. For the remaining two sessions, the Youth and Expert Advisory Group members each shared ideas on policy solutions to support youth mental health when engaging with digital technologies.

### Public consultation

The discussion paper was released for public consultation via an online survey in May 2023. The online survey ran from 25 May to 2 July 2023 and received 226 responses. The purpose of the online survey was to hear about people's experiences with digital technologies and how they have impacted on people's mental health and wellbeing. The target audiences for the survey were young people, parents, educators, and experts in youth mental health and digital technologies.

Figure 3. Survey respondent by type



## Consultation limitations

The Commission acknowledges the following limitations to the consultation:

- Engagement with young people to date has been limited, with only eight young people aged 16-24 years on the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Youth Advisory Group. Similarly, the public survey consultation only heard from 26 young people (11.5% of all responses), with the majority of respondents (41%) being parents or carers of a young person.
- The hypotheses put forward in the discussion paper and subsequent public consultation drew conclusions that were informed by currently available evidence collated in our desktop research. Research into the ways young people engage with digital technologies and the positive or negative impacts this can have, emerging. As technology constantly evolves, research in this area can become quickly outdated.
- The discussion paper and hypotheses used in the online survey focussed on the potential negative impacts of digital technology on young people. As such, it did not thoroughly investigate the complete scope of young people's experiences with digital technology.

# Appendix B

## Survey Questions

# Survey Questions

## Demographic questions

About you:

**Question:** Are you answering this survey as:

- A young person aged 13-25 (Parental/guardian consent required)
- A parent or carer of a young person aged 13-25
- An educator (this includes teachers, principals, and school support workers)
- A youth mental health professional
- A digital technology professional
- Other (please specify)

**Question:** What is your age? What is the age of the young person you are a parent or carer of?

- 13-15 (Parental/guardian consent required)
- 16-18
- 19-21
- 22-25
- None of the above

**Question:** For young people under 18 years:

- To make sure you are as supported as possible when completing this survey, we require consent from a parent or guardian for you to participate in the survey. Please ask your parent or guardian to read the below information before clicking 'Yes' to provide their consent:
- By ticking the box below, you are telling us: you have read and understand the information about the survey provided on the main page; you consent to the National Mental Health Commission's collection, use and disclosure of your child's personal and sensitive information that they contribute to this survey, in accordance with the information provided; and you would like your child to proceed with the survey. Please tick the box if you agree to the above statements.
- Please close this survey window if you do not wish for your child to participate in this survey.

**Question:** How do you describe your gender? (Please select all that apply)

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- I use a different term (please describe)
- Prefer not to say

**Question:** Which state or territory do you live in most of the time?

- Australian Capital Territory
- New South Wales
- Northern Territory
- Queensland
- South Australia
- Tasmania
- Victoria
- Western Australia

## Mind and body

### Sleep

Many young people use digital technology right before they go to bed. This can affect their sleep quality and how much sleep they get each night. Sleep quality refers to how satisfying sleep is and can be related to how long it takes you to fall asleep, how many times you wake up during the night and how rested you feel when you wake up. We know that young people stay up late, but there is research that tells us young people have been getting less sleep over the last 20 years.

You can read more on sleep here. This link will take you to the section of our discussion paper which has more information on this topic.

**Question:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

*Digital technology use, particularly before bedtime, is negatively impacting young people's mental health and wellbeing by reducing overall amount of sleep and the quality of that sleep.*

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree.

**Follow up question, depending on response:**

- Why do you agree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you neither agree nor disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

**Question:** What could be done to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people to address the impact of digital technology on sleep? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something for any of the below groups to do: Governments; mental health and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue); digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok); schools; families; individuals.

**Question:** What have you or others done to address the impact of digital technologies on sleep? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something you, your family or community does. It could also be something governments, mental health, and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue), digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok) and/or schools are doing or have done.

### Attention

Digital technology is being purposely designed to gain and hold people's attention. Attention refers to how someone can focus on information and not think about other unconnected things. Attention is important for how we learn and function. With the increasing presence of digital technology, young people can be easily distracted by content delivered through algorithms which learn what they like and dislike and constantly update feeds. Many people also check news and social media feeds often, which takes them away from other tasks. Even when a person is not using their phone, computer or tablet, notifications alert them to new content which draws their attention.

Activities that feel meaningful to us, or are known to foster a sense of self, purpose and wellbeing often require sustained attention. This could be finishing a project you've worked hard on, building relationships with loved ones, solving a school or work problem, or a creative hobby. However, when we experience frequent distractions or interruptions, we are less likely to be able to sustain our attention on those activities that require longer periods of focus or deep thought.

You can read more on attention here. This link will take you to the section of our discussion paper which has more information on this topic.

**Question:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

*Digital technologies that are designed to capture and hold attention (such as social media and other mobile apps) are negatively impacting young people's mental health and wellbeing by making it harder to pay attention to other meaningful activities that encourage a sense of self, purpose and meaning.*

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree.

**Follow up question, depending on response:**

- Why do you agree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you neither agree nor disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

**Question:** What could be done to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people to address the impact of digital technology on attention? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something for any of the below groups to do: Governments; mental health and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue); digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok); schools; families; individuals.

**Question:** What have you or others done to address the impact of digital technologies on attention? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something you, your family or community does. It could also be something governments, mental health, and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue), digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok) and/or schools are doing or have done.

### Physical health and wellbeing

Physical activity and time spent doing other activities such as being creative, playing and spending time with friends and family are known to be protective factors for mental health and wellbeing. However, people are spending more and more time on digital technology which is drawing them away from time spent on other activities.

Digital technology that promotes healthy levels of physical activity (such as Fitbit's and Apple watches) can be effective in reducing sedentary behaviour. However, there are concerns that for young people, the technology may also contribute to increased negative emotions such as experiences of guilt, competition, and internal pressure, as well as exacerbate harmful compulsions and potentially trigger, sustain, or worsen eating disorders.



You can read more on physical health and wellbeing here. This link will take you to the section of our discussion paper which has more information on this topic.

**Question:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

*Increased use of digital technology is negatively impacting young people's mental health and wellbeing by decreasing time spent on other activities such as physical activity, and increasing negative emotions and behaviours associated with the use of wearable devices.*

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree.

**Follow up question, depending on response:**

- Why do you agree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you neither agree nor disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

**Question:** What could be done to support young people's engagement with meaningful activities, such as physical activity and time spent outdoors? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something for any of the below groups to do: Governments; mental health and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue); digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok); schools; families; individuals.

**Question:** What have you or others done to address the impact of digital technologies on physical health? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something you, your family or community does. It could also be something governments, mental health, and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue), digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok) and/or schools are doing or have done.

## Comparison and connection

### Social comparison

Digital technology, mainly through social media, allows people to constantly compare themselves with others. This could be comparing where or how they live, how good they are at things, or what they look like. Digital technology has also increased young people's exposure to targeted advertising and harmful messages about their body, and there are apps and tools that allow people to change how they look online. This means many people are presenting an unrealistic version of themselves on social media. There are concerns that young people are feeling the pressure to be 'perfect' online and this is impacting their mental health and wellbeing.

You can read more on social comparison [here](#). This link will take you to the section of our discussion paper which has more information on this topic.

**Question:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

*Digital technologies (mainly through social media) are negatively impacting young people's mental health and wellbeing by increasing how often young people compare themselves to unrealistic standards.*

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree.

**Follow up question, depending on response:**

- Why do you agree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you neither agree nor disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

**Question:** What could be done to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people when engaging with content that promotes unrealistic comparisons via social media? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something for any of the below groups to do: Governments; mental health and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue); digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok); schools; families; individuals.

**Question:** What have you or others done to support mental health and wellbeing in relation to digital technology and social comparison? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something you, your family or community does. It could also be something governments, mental health, and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue), digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok) and/or schools are doing or have done.

#### Pressures on parenting

Digital technologies have made more information available for families to consider when making parenting decisions. They have also increased the way families are being observed and held accountable for those decisions. Parents are also concerned about managing their child's use of digital technology both in relation to online safety and the impacts of screen time. Families have a big impact on young people's lives and family relationships and environments can contribute to the challenges young people experience. This means these pressures on parents and carers are likely to also have an impact on young people.

You can read more on pressures on parenting [here](#). This link will take you to the section of our discussion paper which has more information on this topic.

**Question:** Do you agree or disagree with this statement:

*Digital technologies have increased parental stress by increasing monitoring responsibilities and self-comparison, which is negatively impacting families and young people's mental health and wellbeing.*

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

**Follow up question, depending on response:**

- Why do you agree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you neither agree nor disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- For participants who identified as a parent or carer: What aspect of digital technology use do you think has the most positive impact on your mental health and wellbeing as a parent or carer? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- For participants who identified as a parent or carer: What aspect of digital technology use do you think has the most negative impact on your mental health and wellbeing as a parent or carer? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

**Question:** What could be done to support parents and carers to address the increased pressures experienced because of digital technology? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something for any of the below groups to do: Governments; mental health and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue); digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok); schools; families; individuals.

**Question:** What have you or others done to address the impact of digital technology on parenting? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something you, your family or community does. It could also be something governments, mental health, and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue), digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok) and/or schools are doing or have done.

### Learning, working, and disconnecting

One impact of digital technologies is the blurring of lines between school, work, and home. For example, as the use of digital technologies has increased, so too has the potential for exposure to bullying, including cyberbullying. Negative content can be created and distributed quickly and widely, making it hard to remove from the online record. This is negatively impacting young people's mental health.

Another example of digital technology impacting young people is its influence on education settings and workplaces. Digital technologies have enabled more flexibility for many education settings and workplaces, but this has also made it harder to disconnect from school and work. Increased workplace expectations regarding availability and response time have been linked to increased stress.

You can read more on learning, working, and disconnecting here. This link will take you to the section of our discussion paper which has more information on this topic.

**Question:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

*Digital technologies are negatively impacting young people's mental health and wellbeing by prolonging contact with stressors (e.g., being bullied online after being bullied in school) and increasing the requirement to be always accessible (e.g., the expectation to spend time with friends online through apps, video chat or gaming after school).*

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree.

**Follow up question, depending on response:**

- Why do you agree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you neither agree nor disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

**Question:** What could be done to reduce prolonged contact with stressors and the need to be accessible at all times?

If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something for any of the below groups to do: Governments; mental health and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue); digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok); schools; families; individuals.

**Question:** What have you or others done to address the impact of digital technology on learning and working? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something you, your family or community does. It could also be something governments, mental health, and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue), digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok) and/or schools are doing or have done.

## **Exposure and engagement**

### **Crisis exposure**

Digital technologies have made it easier to access information as well as increasing how often information is available. When news and information is always available, it increases exposure to crisis events and can cause increased stress. Too much information can lead to the sense of feeling overwhelmed with a loss of control over situations. Having information about crises and global events is important as it informs and can empower young people.

However, when these crises are complex and there are no clear solutions, the responding anxiety can be overwhelming and make young people feel confused or hopeless. It is clear there is a need to balance young people's desire and need to understand global crises and issues of concern with the burden of over-consuming information on these issues. When we talk about crisis information, we mean information about things like natural disasters, worsening climate change, pandemics, and local or global discrimination issues.

You can read more on crisis exposure here. This link will take you to the section of our discussion paper which has more information on this topic.

**Question:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

*Digital technologies are negatively impacting young people's mental health and wellbeing by increasing young people's exposure to information overload and crisis events, which is in turn increasing their feelings of uncertainty about the future.*

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree.

**Follow up question, depending on response:**

- Why do you agree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you neither agree nor disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

**Question:** What could be done to support young people's mental health and wellbeing when engaging with social and cultural issues online (such as crisis events or issues in relation to local and global discrimination)? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something for any of the below groups to do: Governments; mental health and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue); digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok); schools; families; individuals.

**Question:** What have you or others done to support mental health and wellbeing when engaging with crisis information online? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something you, your family or community does. It could also be something governments, mental health, and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue), digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok) and/or schools are doing or have done.

**Engaging with inappropriate content online**

Digital technologies are increasing young people's exposure to inappropriate content online. We suspect the age at which young people are being exposed to inappropriate content is also getting younger. Inappropriate content refers to images, videos or written words that can be upsetting, disturbing or offensive. A young person may seek out this information or see it by accident, and it can include content such as sexually explicit, violent, extremist, or hateful material.

Many websites and social media platforms use machine learning and algorithms to recommend content it thinks a person wants to see. This means that if a young person spends time engaging with potentially harmful content or harmful content is going viral, they may be recommended more of the same material or increasingly harmful material in their social media feeds. Engaging with inappropriate content can affect mental health and wellbeing but more research is needed to know what these affects are. We know that different types of inappropriate content (for example, sexually explicit vs. violent material) can be encountered for different reasons, will have differing impacts on a person, and will require tailored policy responses.

You can read more on engaging with inappropriate content online here. This link will take you to the section of our discussion paper which has more information on this topic.

**Question:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

*Digital technologies are negatively impacting young people's mental health and wellbeing by increasing how often they interact with inappropriate content (such as sexually explicit, violent, or hateful material) and exposing them from an earlier age.*

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree.

**Follow up question, depending on response:**

- Why do you agree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you neither agree nor disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

**Question:** What could be done to support young people's mental health and wellbeing when engaging with sexually explicit material? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something for any of the below groups to do: Governments; mental health and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue); digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok); schools; families; individuals.

**Question:** What has been done well to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people when engaging with sexually explicit material? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something you, your family or community does. It could also be something governments, mental health, and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue), digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok) and/or schools are doing or have done.

**Question:** What could be done to support young people's mental health and wellbeing when engaging with violent material? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something for any of the below groups to do: Governments; mental health and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue); digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok); schools; families; individuals.

**Question:** What has been done well to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people when engaging with violent material? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something you, your family or community does. It could also be something governments, mental health, and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue), digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok) and/or schools are doing or have done.

**Question:** What could be done to support young people's mental health and wellbeing when engaging with hateful material? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something for any of the below groups to do: Governments; mental health and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue); digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok); schools; families; individuals.

**Question:** What has been done well to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people when engaging with hateful material? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something you, your family or community does. It could also be something governments, mental health, and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue), digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok) and/or schools are doing or have done.

**Engaging with harmful and unreliable content online**

Many young people share information about mental ill-health online. This can be an important avenue for support, community, and self-expression. However, there are examples of online communities that actively promote or encourage mental ill-health, such as pro-eating disorder communities.

Additionally, the nature of social media means that almost anyone can post information that is not checked, and this can lead to incomplete or inaccurate health information being shared online. Sharing unsafe or unreliable information and advice can cause emotional distress or worsen existing behaviour, and some young people do actively seek out online content that is harmful for their mental health.

You can read more on engaging with harmful and unreliable content online [here](#). This link will take you to the section of our discussion paper which has more information on this topic.

**Question:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

*Digital technologies are negatively impacting young people's mental health and wellbeing by increasing exposure to groups and communities that promote harmful and unreliable information about mental ill-health, self-harm and suicide.*

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree.

**Follow up question, depending on response:**

- Why do you agree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you neither agree nor disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)
- Why do you disagree with this statement? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

**Question:** What could be done to support young people's mental health and wellbeing when sharing about their mental health experiences online? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something for any of the below groups to do: Governments; mental health and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue); digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok); schools; families; individuals.

**Question:** What have you or others done to support mental health and wellbeing when discussing distressing experiences online? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

- This could be something you, your family or community does. It could also be something governments, mental health, and suicide prevention service providers (for example, headspace, Beyond Blue), digital technology companies (for example, Apple, Instagram, Tik Tok) and/or schools are doing or have done.

## **General questions**

This is the last part of the survey. It will ask you questions about your experiences of digital technologies and mental health in general.

**Question:** Thinking about the topics we have discussed, what aspect of digital technology use has the most positive impact on your mental health and wellbeing? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

**Question:** Thinking about the topics we have discussed, what aspect of digital technology use has the most positive impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

**Question:** Thinking about the topics we have discussed, what aspect of digital technology use has the most negative impact on your mental health and wellbeing? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

**Question:** Thinking about the topics we have discussed, what aspect of digital technology use has the most negative impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

**Question:** How, if at all, do you use digital technology to support your mental health and wellbeing? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

**Question:** Is there anything else you would like to say or share with us about digital technologies and youth mental health and wellbeing? If no response, please leave blank (free text response)

End of Survey Questions





# Appendix C

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Expert Advisory Group members  
Youth Advisory Group members

## Expert Advisory Group members

- Professor Amanda Third, co-Director of the Young and Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University
- Professor Bronwyn Carlson, Head of the Department of Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University and the Director of the Centre for Global Indigenous Futures
- Associate Professor Elizabeth Scott, Principal Research Fellow at the Brain and Mind Centre, University of Sydney
- Dr Hannah Jarman, Research Fellow in the School of Psychology at Deakin University
- Professor Harriet Hiscock, consultant paediatrician and Group Lead, Health Services, Murdoch Children's Research Institute
- Professor Jennie Hudson, Professor of Clinical Psychology, Black Dog Institute
- Professor Jo Robinson, Orygen, the Centre for Youth Mental Health
- Dr Larisa McLoughlin, Principal Policy Officer, Mental Health Wellbeing Directorate at Wellbeing SA
- Professor Sharon Goldfeld, paediatrician and Director, Centre for Community Child Health, the Royal Children's Hospital and Murdoch Childrens Research Institute

## Youth Advisory Group members

Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Youth Advisory Group, convened by the [Office for Youth](#)

- Arsh, 16 years old, from the Northern Territory
- Ipshita, 24 years old, from Tasmania
- Isabelle, 17 years old, from NSW
- Jessica, 17 years old, from Victoria
- Katherine (Katya), 21 years old, from Victoria
- Sankara, 16 years old, from Victoria
- Saul, 16 years old, from Queensland
- Troy, 17 years old, from Western Australia

