

Support for Youth Mental Health in Schools

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***Please note:** The Chief Minister's Round Table of Young Territorians is an independent advisory body. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and are not necessarily reflective of those of the Office of Youth Affairs or the Northern Territory Government.*

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Acknowledgements

- The Honourable Chief Minister, Michael Gunner MLA;
- The Honourable Minister for Territory Families, Dale Wakefield MLA;
- Office of Youth Affairs;
- Michele Oliphant, NT Department of Education;
- Denise Poyser, NT Department of Health; and
- Members of the 2016 Round Table.

Abbreviations

ABBREVIATION	DEFINITION
DOE	Department of Education
NT	Northern Territory
NTG	Northern Territory Government
SEL	Social and Emotional Learning

Terms Used in this Report

Mental health: “A state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” – World Health Organisation (2014).

Youth: Individuals aged 12-25 years of age.

Young Territorian: An individual aged between 12-25 years who lives in the Northern Territory.

Mental Health Research Team: Breanna Duncan, Sam Swan and Jake Lake.

Executive Summary

This community based project focusses on the support services available for young Territorians experiencing mental health issues.

Members of the 2016 Chief Minister's Round Table of Young Territorians (Round Table) chose to explore some of the early intervention support strategies that are available to senior school students in Years 10, 11 and 12. Members also looked at possible space within the current school timetable for information about mental health to be available to students.

Poor mental health is a growing concern in Australia and young Territorians have expressed it is an important issue that has a significant impact on their lives.

In the Darwin region there are support services available to assist young people with their personal mental health. These services are offered through non-government organisations and by schools. However, our research indicated that there are barriers that limit young people from accessing these services. Although schools provide counsellor services it is more likely that young people will seek help from other sources such as their friends and family rather than professional help.

The Mental Health Research Team considered personal experiences of young people and held discussions with NT Government education and health officers. It was concluded that there would be many benefits in running the Department of Education's proposed Social and Emotional Learning Program in senior secondary school if consultation with young people continues to assist tailoring the program to meet demographic needs.

There is an option for the Social and Emotional Learning Program to be delivered in compulsory classes such as the Positive Learning Plan. The high level of interest noted from young Territorians wanting school-based programs to address managing mental health suggests consideration for the topic to be offered as a separate subject. This may be a better option than trying to include it within another compulsory class.

Supporting young people in managing their mental health is an effective early intervention strategy. The Mental Health Research Team offer the following recommendations to Government regarding issues impacting young people and their mental health:

1. Continue to consult with young Territorians in secondary school regarding social and emotional learning programs and adapt these to suit the needs of this age group.
2. Encourage teachers and school staff to be trained in Youth Mental Health First Aid to build their confidence when dealing with students who may be impacted by mental health issues.
3. Commit to the long term plan to roll out the Social and Emotional Learning Program.
4. Involve students in helping to develop the school counsellors program.

Introduction

Poor mental health is a growing problem in Australia and an important issue impacting young Territorians. Mental health was rated as the second biggest issue effecting young Territorians in the Youth Issues Survey conducted by Round Table members in January 2016. Breanna Duncan, Sam Swan and Jack Lake formed a research group to focus on mental health support services available for young people aged 14 – 18 (attending school).

The various causes of poor mental health are not isolated to a distinct characteristic. A complex interaction between biological, psychological and environmental factors can impact an individual's state of mind therefore, making this an important issue to address (Mind 2015). Although the causes of poor mental health varies, effective support can still improve an individual's wellbeing.

Young people identified a range of issues and concerns around mental health in the 2016 Youth Issues Survey undertaken by the Round Table. The Mental Health Group felt it was important to focus on how individuals seek support and further explore ways to enhance protective barriers that could improve the chances of young Territorian's obtaining a positive stable foundation while at school.

Further interest developing this idea came from personal experiences that Round Table members have faced from their exposure to the negative impacts of poor mental health on friends and family.

Initially, when discussing the results of the survey, Round Table members felt there was a stigma around mental health and that the topic wasn't discussed regularly in secondary school. Research was conducted around:

- what non-government organisations supported youth;
- what policies were in place to support youth; and
- what strategies the Northern Territory Government were interested in employing to support youth facing mental health issues.

A second survey was conducted in by the Mental Health Research Team in September 2016 to explore young people's opinions regarding mental health support. Specific questions were asked about mental health, school counsellors and different ways information about mental health could be delivered in schools; particularly focussing on utilising the Personal Learning Plan (PLP) program to include mental health information.

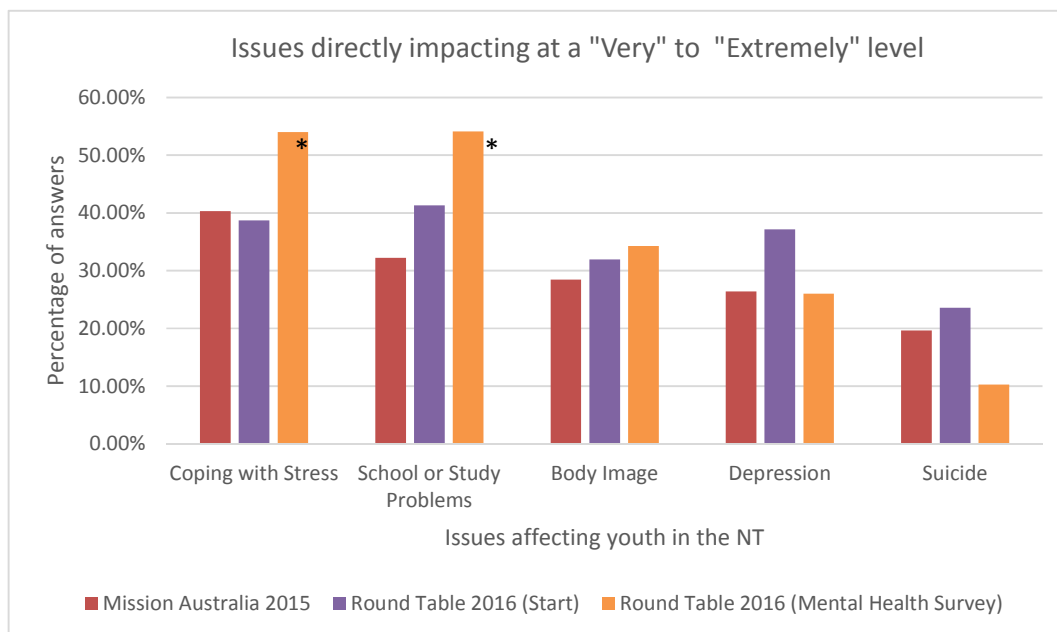
It should be noted that the September 2016 survey was focused on Darwin region.

Discussion/Major Findings

Initial research was conducted to determine what information had already been established by previous surveys and the programs or support services that were available to young Territorians. Further information obtained from the Mission Australia Survey 2015 showed that 11.9% of young people in the Territory felt they would not be able to achieve their goals due to physical or mental health issues. The national rate was 10.3% (Cave, L., Fildes, J., Lockett, G. and Wearing, A. 2015).

Survey Analysis and Comparison

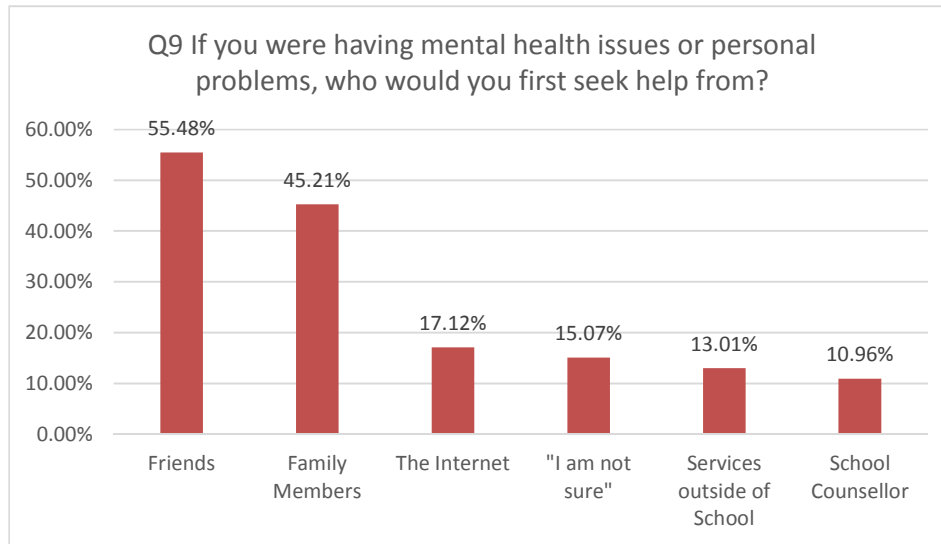
Results were compared from the Mission Australia Survey completed by 243 young Territorians aged 15 – 19, the NT Youth Issues Survey completed by 191 young Territorians in early 2016 and the Mental Health Survey completed by 146 young Territorians in September 2016. The following statistics regarding the level of importance of the issues impacting youth were found:



**Note: The survey conducted by the Round Table research team combined “Stress and Coping with Exam Pressure” as one issue.*

From the comparative graph we can see that there is a higher percentage of youth in the Territory impacted by issues such as struggling with school or study problems, body image, depression and suicide. Later in the year, coping with stress and struggling with school or study has a significant increase.

When respondents were asked, “If you were having mental health issues or personal problems, who would you first seek help from?” the results were as follows:



When collating the results of the Mental Health Survey, 55.48% of respondents stated that they would first seek assistance from their friends, 45.21% selected family members, 17.12% selected the internet, 15.07% said “I am not sure”, 13.01% selected services outside of school and 10.96% stated they would seek the school counsellor.

The survey results show that the majority of youth seek assistance from their friends. It is acknowledged that that most people seek support from others they feel safe around, however it is also important to note that mental health issues impact other people such as friends, family, carers and the community (Government of Western Australia 2010).

When asked: “Do you know of any mental health services for young people outside of school?” the majority responded “Yes” (54.79%) and 36.3% of respondents were aware of the examples of services. 45.21% responses stated “No” to this question. This demonstrates that there is a significant number of youth that are not aware of support services available outside of school.

From this it appears that some young people may not get the assistance they need as they are not aware of the support available to them. Additionally, because many youth go to their friends for support, there would be a significant amount of youth that would not know where to refer their friends if they needed help.

School Counsellors

School Counsellors are key stakeholders in supporting a student’s social and emotional wellbeing in school (Northern Territory Government 2016). The Mental Health Survey shows that the majority of students would go to other sources over the school counsellor. This is a significant matter as there are students who are not accessing the support they require to assist them in managing their mental health. Furthermore, with only one counsellor available per Senior School, the opportunity for the counsellor to deliver ‘preventative mental health programs’ becomes limited.

In discussing the results of the survey with a School Counsellor, the respondent noted that these responses are standard and are reflective of other studies conducted. It is generally believed that the results are influenced by the stigma of mental health.

When exploring this further to see if youth knew that there was a School Counsellor at their school (Question 7) the responses were mostly “Yes” (63.7%), however 4.79% stated “No” and 17.12% stated “I am not sure”. The combined results of “No” and “I am not sure” equates to 21.91%, which is approximately 1 in 5 young people at school who, could but, may not be accessing the School Counsellor for support.

When asked “If you were having mental health problems, would you feel comfortable speaking to the school counsellor?” the majority of respondents stated “Yes” (39.73%). However, when participants who responded “No” (31.51%) and those who responded with “I am not sure” (28.7%) are combined it shows that more than half of young people (60.28%) would most likely not feel comfortable to seek support from their School Counsellor.

Non-Government Organisations that Support Youth

Research into available programs currently being run in the NT showed that there was a variety of support programs available to youth. Issues regarding mental health are ongoing and people’s moods will fluctuate depending on what is going on for them (ReachOut.com 2015).

Non-government organisations that are available to support young people and their mental health are:

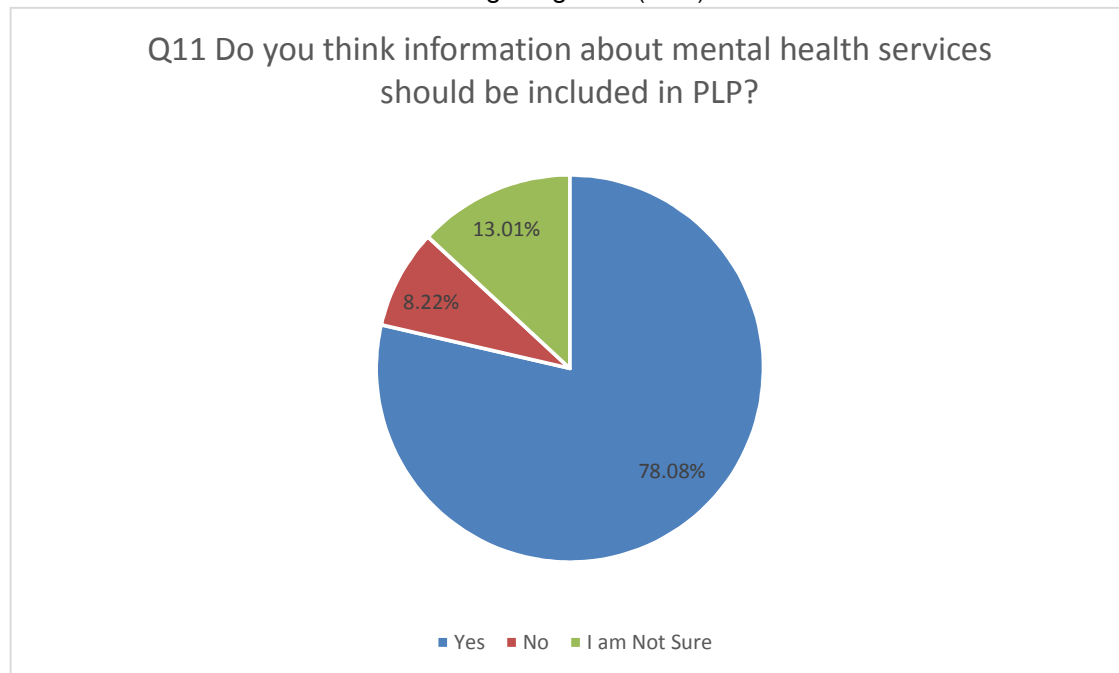
- TEAMhealth: Child and Family Wellbeing Service and Family and Youth Service (Gunbulanya) (<http://www.teamhealth.asn.au/pages/Services.html>)
- Headspace: counselling services and Youth Early Psychosis Program (<https://www.headspace.org.au/headspace-centres/darwin/#services>)

Non-government organisations that are available to support young people in other ways which indirectly can impact their mental health are:

- Anglicare NT: ReConnect, YHOPP & YASS Housing Programs, Moving On, Youth Diversion Program (Remote only) and Pandanus (<https://www.anglicare-nt.org.au/services/>)
- Catholic Care NT: Youth Diversion Program, DAISY, PHaMS and Counselling. (<http://www.catholicarent.org.au/services>)
- Mission Australia: Counselling, Spin 180 and PHaMS program (<http://sd.missionaustralia.com.au/1/NT/>)

Personal Learning Programs in Schools

Through the survey, it was asked “Do you think information about mental health services should be included in Personal Learning Programs (PLP) at school?”



More than 100 participants responded that information about mental health services should be included in PLP offered within the school curricula. Many comments were received that supported the delivery of mental health information and coping strategies in PLP:

“...so many people experience mental health issues during their lives and often they don’t know how to cope with ti. It would be wonderful to see PLP teaching kids how to get past those tough times.” Female, 16 – 18, Darwin

“School need to have mental health awareness workshops. Sex education, education about suicide and common health related issues” Male, 18+, Tennant Creek

“PLP was wasted on doing just academic planning, not nearly enough mental health and coping mechanisms were covered” Female, 16 – 18, Darwin

“I think that is a fantastic idea, but I don’t know if the information would stay with students through to the more stressful years of high-school. I think a better idea would be to have ongoing information and possibly support sessions...”
Male, 16 – 18, Darwin

This demonstrates that there is a broad interest from young people in obtaining more information about mental health and ways to manage it within schools.

Additional school based support available to assist a large cohort of students across the Territory include programs such as:

- Rock and Water;
- safeTALK;
- MindMatters; and
- Smiling Minds.

There are difficulties in delivering these kinds of programs, such as: the programs are not always delivered to the whole student cohort, teacher availability to deliver the programs is limited and the school timetable structure may limit students attending without impact on other subjects.

Social and Emotional Learning

To explore whether PLP would be an appropriate forum to discuss better mental health strategies, a meeting was held with Michele Oliphant of the Department of Education. Ms Oliphant discussed the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) program currently being trialled as a curriculum to be introduced in Primary and Middle Schools. This teaches children and young people the foundations of social and emotional wellbeing so children will be able to better recognise emotions and build resilience.

The group was very interested to hear about this prevention and early intervention focussed program and looks forward to the results of the trial and the potential roll out of this program across NT schools.

The level of consultation being conducted with young people in the Student Voice pilot is positive and members of the Round Table were pleased to hear the voice of young Territorians is contributing to the project development. As a result, the program is being adapted to suit the population of the NT and further adapted to include community involvement to suit remote areas.

It is of concern that the current cohort of the senior years (10 – 12) will not receive this program content yet. Further research will be conducted to ensure the information is relevant and appropriate for this cohort. There are challenges for secondary school timetables needing to ensure required subjects for the SACE curriculum and for obtaining an ATAR to go to University are met.

It is acknowledged that while there is a focus on the SACE curriculum during the senior years, there is a gap in important information that would assist in supporting Year 11 and Year 12 students complete their NTCET. Meta-analysis conducted by Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor and Schellinger (2011) has shown that social and emotional learning programs in schools improved academic performance of students by 11%. This research shows that there “significant positive effects on targeted social-emotional competencies and attitudes of self, others and school” (Durlak et. al. 2011, p. 13). Aronson (as cited in Durlak et. al. 2011) found that “students who are more self-aware and confident about their learning capacities try harder and persist in the face of challenges” (p. 14).

Enhancing a student’s wellbeing and resilience increases student’s capacity for learning and their likelihood of completing school (Australian Catholic University & Erebus International 2008). Not only will students be able to improve their academic achievements, they will develop positive coping strategies and build their resilience to be more positive members of society.

Quotes from Youth Regarding Mental Health Issues

From the survey conducted in September 2016, the following responses were noted:

“It would be good [for more young people] to know so young people are well informed and can help those around them in need” Female, 16 – 18, Darwin

“I feel like young people try hard to maintain good mental health but with the individual circumstances they're in (pressure/expectations, body image problems etc) Despite their efforts they still struggle to cope with it and maintain a good mental health. It shouldn't be them that need to 'do more' to maintain a good mental health, it should be everyone contributing somehow towards someone who is struggling to maintain one” Female, 16 – 18, Darwin

“Need to breed confidence in young people to not be embarrassed by the topic” – Male, 16 -18, Darwin

Conclusion

The impact of mental health issues on young Territorians in senior secondary school is significant.

Overall the survey results demonstrated that young people have a strong interest in accessing information about mental health and are keen to develop strategies to manage their own mental health. There was interest in receiving this information within the PLP currently delivered in schools.

There are many mental health support services available that can assist school students with their mental health issues, however there are barriers in accessing the support services due to waiting lists, ineligibility or suitability of a service, access to school counsellors, school timetables and competing demands of school programs.

The findings demonstrated that young people are more likely to seek help from friends and family rather than seeking professional help to manage issues around mental health.

An area of great potential is the Social and Emotional Learning Program in NT schools, however the current DoE trials are only for primary and middle school students. This leaves a large cohort of senior school students without access to this program and this is of concern. The senior years is a time when stress and anxiety impacts significantly on youth due to exams and assignments.

Information regarding Social and Emotional Learning could be delivered in compulsory classes such as the Positive Learning Plan, but due to the level of interest from young Territorians in delivering programs addressing these aspects it could be considered to have its own subject, rather than taking away from another compulsory class.

Recommendations

From the research, discussions and personal experiences surveyed the research team offer the following recommendations to Government regarding issues impacting young people and their mental health:

1. Continue to consult with young Territorians in secondary school regarding social and emotional learning programs and adapt these to suit the needs of this age group.
2. Encourage teachers and school staff to be trained in Youth Mental Health First Aid to build their confidence when dealing with students who may be impacted by mental health issues.
3. Commit to the long term plan to roll out the SEL Program.
4. Involve students in helping to develop the school counsellors program.

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NTG see Northern Territory Government

ReachOut.Com, 2015, *All About Feeling Crap*, <http://au.reachout.com/all-about-feeling-crap>

World Health Organisation, 2014, *Mental health: a state of well-being*, http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental_health/en/

Appendix A - Youth Mental Health Survey



Youth Mental Health in the Northern Territory

Sam Swan, Breanna Duncan, Jack Lake and Aimee-Leigh Frencken are members of the 2016 Chief Minister's Round Table of Young Territorians (Round Table). These members are investigating youth mental health in the Northern Territory.

According to the World Health Organization, mental health is "a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community".

Your comments will remain anonymous and will be used for the purpose of data collection.

All queries can be directed to the Office of Youth Affairs on 8999 2987 or email oya@nt.gov.au

* 1. What is your age?

- 10 – 12
- 13 – 15
- 16 – 18
- 18 +

* 2. What is your gender identity?

- Male
- Female

Other (please specify)

* 3. Do you identify as:

- Aboriginal
- Torres Strait Islander
- Neither

* 4. Which region do you live in?

- Darwin
- Palmerston
- Alice Springs
- Katherine
- Tennant Creek
- Nhulunbuy
- Remote
- Other

* 5. Rate how you are directly impacted by the following things?

	Not at all	Slightly	Somewhat	Fairly	Extremely
Stress and coping with exam pressure	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Depression	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Drugs alcohol abuse	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Suicide	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Discrimination	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Body image	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Family problems	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Domestic violence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Expectations from parents/family	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 6. Do you think poor mental health is a growing problem for young people living in the Territory?

- Yes
- No
- I am not sure

* 7. Do you have a counsellor at your school?

- Yes
- No
- I am not sure
- I do not go to school

* 8. If you were having mental health problems would you feel comfortable speaking to the school counsellor?

- Yes
- No
- I am not sure

If no, please specify

* 9. If you were having mental health issues or personal problems, who would you first seek help from from?

Family members

School counsellor

Services outside of school

The internet

Friends

I am not sure

Other (please specify)

* 10. Do you know of any mental health services for young people outside of school?

- Yes
- No
- If yes, please specify

* 11. Do you think information about mental health services should be included in Personal Learning Programs at school?

- Yes
- No
- I am not sure
- Please add comments

* 12. When do you think mental health information should be included in schools ?

- Primary School (Years 1-6)
- Middle School (Years 7-9)
- Senior School (Years 10-12)
- None of the Above
- All of the Above

13. Please add any additional comments on this topic.

14. Do you think young people should do more to maintain good mental health?

- Yes
- No
- I am not sure

