



Preventing suicide:

**THE VOICE OF CHILDREN
AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

Insights Part 2

**Young people's
experience: What
helps and what doesn't**



KidsHelpline is a service of **yourtown**



yourtown

BACKGROUND

Between October 2015 and February 2016, **yourtown** invited children and young people who had lived experience of thinking about, planning or attempting suicide to share their experiences of seeking and getting support. The results of this consultation have been published in five papers, which are available on the **yourtown** website:

- Insights Part 1: Seeking and getting help.
- Insights Part 2: Young people's experience – What helps and what doesn't.
- Insights Part 3: Messages for parents and carers.
- Insights Part 4: Implications for policy and practice.
- Background, method and description of respondents.

This is Insights Part 2: Young people's experience: What helps and what doesn't. These papers have been written for a general audience. We also hope to publish one or more academic papers in the future.

Thank you to all the young people who took the time to share their thoughts with us. Your insights were invaluable and are being shared with experts and decision-makers around Australia.

Some people may find the content of these papers distressing. If you start to feel distressed while reading, or you have been thinking about suicide, please talk to someone you trust or call a helpline.

- **Kids Helpline – for ages 5-25 to talk about anything at all**
24/7 phone counselling on 1800 55 1800 or WebChat between 8am and midnight at kidshelpline.com.au
- **Lifeline – all ages, for support in a personal crisis**
24/7 phone counselling on 13 11 14 or web chat between 7pm and 4am at lifeline.org.au
- **Suicide Call Back Service – for 15 years and over, support when you or someone you know is feeling suicidal**
24/7 phone counselling on 1300 659 467 or see suicidecallbackservice.org.au

Where to find more information:

- **Young people:** kidshelpline.com.au, ReachOut.com and Youthbeyondblue.com have some great resources and information for young people who are going through tough times or feeling suicidal, and for young people concerned about a friend.
- **Adults:** You can read 'Suicide – The Facts' at kidshelpline.com.au. beyondblue.org.au provide lots of information about anxiety, depression and suicide at any age. If you are a concerned

If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call 000 for an ambulance.

parent, they have a family guide to youth suicide prevention. ReachOut.com also has a parent site with information to help parents support their teenagers.

Conversationsmatter.com.au has tips for safe suicide discussions and other resources for both the general public and professionals.

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WHERE DID YOUNG PEOPLE GET HELP?

We provided young people with a list of possible sources of support and asked whether they sought help from this source, and if so, how helpful they were. As shown in Table 1, the most common sources of support were friends and parents. Many young people had seen a face-to-face counsellor or psychologist, and almost as many had used telephone counselling.¹

Young people with more severe suicidality were more likely to have received some kind of help. In particular, they were more likely to have received professional support from a GP, a counsellor/psychologist, or a psychiatrist, and were more likely to have been in hospital.

Table 1. Number (%) of young people who received help from each source of support. (n=192)

	N (%) who got help from this person
Friend	117 (60.9)
Parent	116 (60.4)
Psychologist/counsellor	115 (59.9)
Telephone counselling	102 (53.1)
GP	100 (52.1)
Online	95 (49.5)
School	93 (48.4)
Psychiatrist	84 (43.8)
Headspace	75 (39.1)
Hospital	70 (36.5)
Other family member	70 (36.5)

¹ This may not reflect the level of use of tele-web services by the broader population of young people experiencing thoughts of suicide. The survey was accessible from the Kids Helpline website, meaning that our sample over-represents users of that website, and probably users of Kids Helpline counselling.

WHICH SOURCES OF SUPPORT DID YOUNG PEOPLE FIND MOST HELPFUL?

Table 2 presents each source of support in order from most to least helpful. Psychologists and counsellors were the most helpful source of support, and parents and family members were the least helpful sources of support. The results highlight the need to raise awareness and understanding of mental health problems and suicide in the community.

Table 2. Number (% of those who used that source) of young people who found each source of support not at all helpful, fairly helpful or very helpful. (n=192)

	Not helpful at all	Fairly Helpful	Very helpful
Telephone counselling ²	15 (14.7)	34 (33.3)	53 (52.0)
Psychologist/counsellor	20 (17.4)	44 (38.3)	51 (44.3)
Friend	16 (13.7)	53 (45.3)	48 (41.0)
headspace	21 (28.0)	25 (33.3)	29 (38.7)
School	25 (26.9)	34 (36.6)	34 (36.6)
Online	18 (18.9)	43 (45.3)	34 (35.8)
Hospital	29 (41.4)	20 (28.6)	21 (30.0)
Psychiatrist	27 (32.1)	33 (39.3)	24 (28.6)
GP	32 (32.0)	43 (43.0)	25 (25.0)
Parent	51 (44.0)	40 (34.5)	25 (21.6)
Other family member	33 (47.1)	27 (38.6)	10 (14.3)

² We note that our sample may be biased because it probably over-represents users of Kids Helpline.

When young people accessed a mental health professional such as a counsellor or psychologist, they usually found that person to be helpful.

“My psychologist has been amazing. I think it helps that she is a bit younger (30s) and she’s very non-judgemental.”

“The trust and rapport I have built with my counsellors has helped me to talk openly and honestly about what is going on and trust what they have to say. My counsellors have really helped me not to give up when I have really felt like the only thing that would be best is to end my life. I’m so grateful to my counsellors.”

As the following stories show, non-mental health professionals such as teachers and GPs can also be extremely useful sources of support.

“When I made the decision to see my school counsellor, she was very patient and let me have a good cry and then slowly asked questions that I felt needed to be asked and no one had ever asked me before. e.g. How long have you been sad or angry? What triggers a bad mood? Are you eating/sleeping? What can I do to help? The last question was probably the best thing anyone had ever asked me. She wasn’t looking at me like another case but as someone who just needs a little help and a hug.”

“I’d just been beaten up pretty bad by a family member. I went to get my injuries checked out by a new GP I had never seen before. She made me feel comfortable enough to tell her what really happened. She treated my injuries and then opened up a discussion about mental health and made another appointment with me to talk about creating a mental health care plan. It was such a positive experience

to come out of such a negative one. The first GP I ever told about the family violence I have/was experiencing at the time didn’t bring up mental health so I felt like I couldn’t bring it up either.”

However, young people described many unhelpful experiences with education and medical professionals, suggesting a need for more awareness and understanding of mental health and suicide among these groups.

School staff were reported to be helpful more often than not, but more than a quarter of young people found them ‘not at all helpful’.

“Certain staff at my school were extremely unhelpful and told me to ‘suck it up’ and come back to school full time instantly (I was missing a lot of school due to severe anxiety/depression).”

“The [school] counsellor just told me it was puberty and made me read a book about puberty which made me feel like my problems weren’t real.”


The helpfulness of support from medical professionals, including hospitals, psychiatrists and GPs, varied. For example, while 25% of young people described a GP as ‘very helpful’, 32% described a GP as ‘not at all helpful.’

“I met with a psychiatrist who told me I wasn’t very self aware because I couldn’t answer some of his questions. He made me feel dumb and very anxious.”

“One time a doctor told me that my life is fine and that he had gone through harder stuff and I should just be happier.”

“Various staff members (in an adolescent psychiatric ward) were also inappropriate – one told me that I’d never be able to be a teacher because I have scars.”

School staff, medical professionals and community members need training to help them respond to suicidal young people effectively.



Good friends can help young people feel valued and wanted but peers may need support to understand and know what to say.

Close friends were an important source of emotional support for many young people. Good friends were described as listening without judging, showing that they care, and helping the young person to feel valued and wanted.

“Being able to talk to friends about how I feel made me feel like I wasn’t alone and their support helped me through the tough times.”

“Talking to a friend, I felt that they cared and wanted to be there for me. Being able to share with others and have them let me know they were there for me and wanted me around, it made me feel valued and wanted.”

“Friends were really supportive during this time. Although I never told them that I had thought about taking my life, they could see something was up, and were always asking if I was ok and just letting me know that they were there, which was really helpful.”

The broader peer group was often less understanding, both in their general attitude to suicide and their response to an individual. A small number of responses described malicious behaviour by peers, but many unhelpful experiences suggested that peers simply lack understanding of suicidality, are uncomfortable with the situation, and don’t know how to respond appropriately.

“When your friends are around you and they are talking about it. They will start asking questions like ‘Why did you do it?’ ‘Did it hurt?’ ‘What did it feel like?’. Those questions made me feel unsafe and depressed.”

“Had my friend screenshot messages of me talking about my self-harm and sending them to my enemy and getting them spread around my school and losing all my friends because they thought I was an attention seeker.”

“Some people started to tell me I was better off dead and all those types of phrases.”

“Sometimes when talking to ‘friends’, the type of friends that are around but not really there, sometimes they don’t understand, sometimes they will leave you.”

THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF PARENTS AND CARERS

Our data showed that parents and carers are a very important source of support for children, adolescents and young adults. As noted previously, 60% of respondents who had received help had sought it from a parent or carer. When young people wrote responses to open-ended questions, they wrote about parents more often than any other person.

Concerningly, 44% of young people found their parent 'not at all helpful' and only 22% found their parent 'very helpful'. Findings from analysis of open-ended questions were consistent with this. Descriptions of helpful experiences rarely featured parents, but descriptions of unhelpful experiences were often about interactions with parents. When we counted the number of references to parents that described either a helpful or unhelpful experience, we found that more than 80% described unhelpful experiences.

Many descriptions of parents' responses to disclosure of mental health problems or a request for help highlighted a lack of understanding of suicide and mental health problems and a tendency to either not believe the young person or to trivialise their feelings.

For this reason, we have dedicated a separate paper to young people's experience with and advice for parents and carers – "Insights Part 3: Messages for parents and carers."

YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCE: WHAT HELPS?

Two key forms of support were consistently described as making a real difference and setting young people on a road to recovery:

1. Professional counselling and psychological therapy
2. Caring relationships with others.

There was some overlap between the roles of these supports, with many young people writing about the importance of their relationship with a counsellor or psychologist as much as about the 'treatment' provided. Hobbies, interests and music were also described as helpful by some respondents.

Professional counselling and psychological therapy

Counselling and psychological therapy was described as beneficial because it provided a safe space for the young person to share their thoughts and feelings, and because young people gained self-awareness and learnt strategies to manage their emotions and stay safe. This applied to face-to-face, telephone and online counselling services.

"It has taught me that whatever I am feeling is okay, that my feelings are there for a reason and I don't need to be sorry for them. Having the space to just say whatever is on my mind or what I am feeling, to be able to just get it out. It enabled me to learn patterns and learn my strengths, and to use those in the times that I need them the most to help keep me safe."

Young people told us that quality professional counselling made a real difference.

"Finding a counsellor that I connected with and actually having a place to go where I feel safe. Having access to online support literally saved my life."

"Having someone to talk to and a 'rational' voice to help me work things through when things have gotten really overwhelming and hard to think clearly ... The strength based and client-centred approach my counsellors have used has really helped me to hold onto hope, believe in myself a little more and find myself and strengths."

"I started seeing a Psychologist, and she was helping me deal with my feelings and I was also doing ongoing workshops at [organisation] and they were helping me get out of my comfort zone. That combination was the best thing that ever could have happened to me."

"Calling [service] a lot was the best thing I ever did to overcome suicide - the counsellor made me think about practical ways of feeling safe which is not something I thought of on my own. These calmed me down and forced me to think of different things instead of the constant loop of suicide ... Explaining my story really helped clarify my feelings for myself and took a terrific weight off my shoulders and had an immediate effect of reducing my suicidal behaviour ... Finally through the counsellor's support and the relationship I began to experience different parts of life and learn and practice new skills."

Caring relationships with others

Feeling suicidal can be an extremely isolating experience, and many young people felt completely alone.

"Sometimes when you're feeling so down and alone it can feel like there's no way out and you're stuck with all these suicidal thoughts and plans."

"Although I have friends and was living with my family at the time, I felt alone."

"Despite having friends and people around me, I would often feel alone, hopeless and worthless."

"My mum noticed I lost my appetite so having someone looking out for me helped because I was sick of being alone."

"...my worker was a god send. Even when I didn't say anything because I was so scared she stayed and didn't give up on me."



Consequently, supportive relationships with trusted others were extremely important. Even in professional relationships, feeling that the counsellor genuinely cared and was not simply doing his/her job was just as important to young people as the content of counselling or therapy.

"The conversation [with a counsellor] felt exactly like one I would have had with my Grandad before he passed away which were always so important to my development as a young person. One hours conversation went quickly, however I will never forget the life changing and potentially saving conversation. I have used it whenever I doubted how many people truly care for me as I can never say he didn't go above and beyond his duty to support me."

"The fact that she [counsellor] has always been there for me whenever I called was very powerful. It demonstrated to me that I am important and that the person that I was talking to cares about me."

"One face to face counsellor I had always used to call to check up on me the next day. That made me feel important and valuable but my current counsellors don't do that and it's okay because I know they are busy with clients but it's nice to feel remembered."

We know that people who are suicidal often believe they are a burden, and that others would be better off without them. Consistent with this, young people told us that it was important to feel wanted, valued and cared for.

"What helped and saved me was someone deeming me as worthy and important."

"Being able to share with others and have them let me know they were there for me and wanted me around, it made me feel valued and wanted."

"I feel that when I was most depressed and suicidal, what I really wanted was someone that I feel really cares about me. I was constantly looking for evidence that people actually and genuinely care about me/genuinely want to be there for me."

"Something else that had helped me was that I had a teacher at school who I really loved and respected and without focusing

me, he just let me know he cared and wanted to see me make the right decisions."

"I think that the support of my friends really helped me because they were always there for me and I can tell them mostly anything and having them as friends made me realise that I shouldn't leave this world yet I should stay put because I have people who care about me and love me for who I am."

For a small number of young people pets helped them feel needed.

"I take a step back and see that there are good things in life. Like my dogs. They're always happy to see me."

"There's also my dog. I always think of her and how I couldn't leave her."

"I have a cat, a rescue. She came to me because she was in a really bad place ... Sometimes when my head has me confused and I'm going dark places I think of her. I like to joke that's she's my guardian angel. I saved her once. She returns the favour day by day."



"I was constantly looking for evidence that people actually and genuinely care about me..."

Often, young people simply wanted someone to listen patiently and without judging.

"My friends support has been good. They let me rant to them whenever I feel bad."

"People listening and being patient with me and not expecting me to feel better straight away."

"I just go on to web counselling and say I am feeling down and because I don't know them and I don't worry about them judging me I can say what I feel and I leave feeling so much better."

"Getting the support from people that I trusted and that I knew had my best interest at heart. They cared and showed me they would be there for me when things got tough. They listened even though they heard the same thing over and over again."

For some, connecting with others who had similar experiences was useful.

"I think finding an online community of people similar to me really helped. I felt like there were people I could trust."

"Since I have been at uni, I have found a group of friends who also struggle with various mental health issues. We try not to drag each other down but we have a pact and plan in place for if anyone feels that self harm or suicide is on their minds. It's comforting to know that they will help me get help if needed."

Hobbies and interests

A number of young people described hobbies as a useful way to distract themselves from negative thoughts and/or to relax.

"Music helps me relax and helps push away negative thoughts."

"Music is my anchor on bad days I blast songs in my car and sing along like I am famous and everyone loves me."

"My passion for dance has helped me. When I feel upset, I put all my emotions into dance."

"Skateboarding gave me an escape and to express myself in the way I wanted to and I could be alone. Skateboarding saved my life."


"Keeping myself busy. Not with stressful things like school work, but rather leisurely things like creating music playlists or taking photographs."

For some young people music played an important role that went beyond diversion, to providing a sense of belonging and connection to others.

"Music. I know the music isn't directly to me but when other people told me I was fat, ugly and worthless my bands said otherwise."

"The only thing that has really helped is music. It makes me feel like I have a place to belong."

"To be honest music has helped me as I feel like it speaks to me on another level and I can relate to it ... bands make me feel like I have someone that is connecting with me and sharing their experience."



"I didn't need a diagnosis or structured therapy I just needed/need someone to tell me I'm not alone and listen."

YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCE: WHAT DOESN'T HELP?

It is important to note that for each negative experience described in the following section, we are only able to report the perspective of the young person. It is likely that the other person involved in each interaction would have a different perspective, and both perspectives may be equally valid.

Also, the fact that we received numerous descriptions of negative experiences does not indicate that most young people

have negative experiences. It may be that young people who have had negative experiences were more motivated to participate in our consultation than others.

Nevertheless, we believe that understanding and accepting young people's perspectives and their interpretations of their interactions with others is crucial to engaging them and providing effective support.

Young people described numerous experiences of seeking support that not only provided no benefit, but intensified their negative thoughts and feelings. A number of themes were evident in these experiences, including feelings being trivialised and not taken seriously, disbelief, and a lack of knowledge and understanding about mental health problems and suicide. For example, young people were told that it was just a phase, that they should just 'be happy', or simply to 'get over it.' These comments often came from family and friends, but school staff, medical professionals and emergency services were also mentioned.

Trivialising young people's feelings

The most common theme appearing in descriptions of unhelpful experiences was the young person's feelings being trivialised and not taken seriously.

"I was told by that teacher that she knew I wasn't gonna harm myself.

This made me feel like I needed to prove to her but I wasn't going to. It makes me upset till this day."

"After building up the courage to reach out to my mum to tell her I was feeling suicidal and that I really needed help, all she said was 'Try not to worry so much.'"

"My friends said yeah I think I'm depressed too, then went on to say some random things that happen to anyone, depressed or not. That did not help at all because she just passed it off like yeah, it's just nothing."

"My mum told me it was just a phase which made me feel like she didn't care when she really did and just didn't know the full story."

"When I said I wanted to die, I didn't want to be here, I was told to get over it and that everyone has bad days."

This sometimes appeared to be a function of age, with both parents and professionals responses suggesting a belief that a child or early adolescent could not be truly suicidal.

"A lot of people don't understand how it feels, and that it's not something you can just 'get over'."

"My dad tries to talk to me and it's really not helpful because I want to speak and tell him how I feel. He tries to tell me to stop being stupid or silly because to him it's just a teen thing."

"I saw a psychologist, the first one ever and she blamed my mood swings on my period????"

Disbelief

Young people also described instances of people simply not believing them, and accusing them of being an 'attention-seeker'.

"Hospital nurse told me I was faking it!"

"When people questioned if it was real/ said that it would go away or when they compared it to something trivial. It would make me think that I was wrong and a liar and then I'd feel worse."

"I have been to two medical professionals regarding anxiety. The first insisted there was nothing wrong with me, basically scolded me, and sent me off. The second, to seem like they actually had a clue how to deal with me, sent me off with a prescription for reflux tablets."

"When I tried to tell someone close to me they thought it was a joke. They didn't take me seriously and didn't help me."

"When I first reached out to my 'best friend' for help, he saw the cuts on my arm and said 'I don't believe you cut yourself, I think it's just red paint and you are after attention'."

"Having a family that was supportive and listened to me instead of telling me I'm attention seeking or lying [would have helped]."

"When I first told my mum I was depressed she said I was too young and that I was being stupid."

"One of my friends finally gained the courage to talk to her mother about how she was feeling. It was really brave but her mother just said that it wasn't true and that she was fine. Her mother didn't even want to say the word depression."

Judgemental attitudes

A small number of young people described overtly judgemental attitudes.

"After spending a week the first time in hospital with amphetamine withdrawals I had to go back to my GP and get a referral to a psychologist, unfortunately the second day I was out I used again because I was suicidal and using was keeping me sane and I was honest to this GP who then judged me rudely and asked me what I expected her to do and that I was stupid. It made me feel worse and of course want to use more."

"Many times it has been emergency department doctors/ ambulance officers making comments about how suicidal people are wasting the time of medical personnel and are simply attention seeking/manipulative."

I have been called a waste of time and a waste of a hospital bed. I have been called a burden on the health system."

"I was treated badly by the nurses because my wounds were self inflicted, and they admitted to me that they were supposed to call the mental health team and have them do a skype session to assess me. But that they couldn't be bothered."

"When I went to my so called best friend for help she made me feel so much worse. All she said was that I was being an attention seeker and I need to grow up and deal with my problems. I thought I could trust her with my biggest secret and she just made me feel like my mental illness was my fault."



Lack of knowledge and understanding of suicide

Descriptions of experiences that demonstrated a lack of understanding of mental illness and suicidality were common. In particular, young people encountered beliefs that there should be an identifiable reason for suicidal thoughts (e.g., negative life events), and that overcoming depression or suicidality is a simple matter of deciding to 'get over it'.

"The 'but you have so much to live for' or 'people have it worse than you' speeches have negative impacts."

"Telling me to stop being sad, or that I can't feel sad because my life is 'okay'."

"If attempting to console someone who is suicidal, understand that that person's feelings are not rational. So do not attempt to 'talk sense into them' or to argue their feelings away based on logic. It will not work because those feelings do not arise out of a logical framework."

"I had a counsellor from a 'suicidal talk service' recently tell me to 'just don't think like that' when I was really distressed and just wanted to end my life."

Difficulty accessing services

Difficulty accessing professional services was mentioned as a problem by a small number of young people. Our survey questions were very broad, meaning that young people were free to write about whichever issues were most important to them or uppermost in their minds. These issues were people, relationships and stigma. It is important to note that this does not imply that providing easy access to appropriate services is not an important issue.

Difficulties with service access included waiting times for face-to-face services, cost of services, and a lack of services in the local area.

"Easier access to professional help – less waiting times and better Medicare subsidies so treatment is more affordable."

"Definitely easier access to professional help would have helped immensely – it still would. Services like headspace are there but kind of inaccessible from where I am."

"Professional services probably would have helped but we don't have many places where we live we have expensive GPs and school counsellors but not much else that I know of."

"It took a long time to be able to seek 'professional services' – about three months and that was during a time in my life where I really need help but all the services either 'couldn't cater for me because they didn't access that area' or were full!!!! NEED MORE SERVICES!!"

A couple of young people referred to long waiting times in online and telephone counselling queues as a problem.

Young people's responses also highlighted a need to overcome barriers that arise from a lack of parental support. Accessing services often requires parents to provide children and adolescents with their Medicare card, transport, and the financial resources to

meet gap payments. As described previously, parents do not always accept the seriousness of a young person's need, and hence do not assist them to access professional services. In some situations, parents own challenging circumstances meant they were unable to support their child.

A small number of young people specifically referred to this issue.

"Family actually being there for me and supporting me rather than discouraging me from accessing support."

"I saw a psychologist for a while until my dad was furious with me for it and said I could not do it anymore."

"Also I think it'd be cool for some programs where people with depression could go to for free, because I have no money and my parents don't do nothing so it'd be cool to go out and do something to help yourself instead of staying in your room on netflix all day."

PARTICIPANTS' MESSAGES FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Young people told us they don't expect family and friends to have all the answers, just to listen without judging, show that they care, and help them get professional support – even when they say they don't want help.

"If a friend tells you they are depressed or suicidal (or you see their self-harm scars) and you do not know what to say, don't say anything, instead just listen. You are not expected to have the answer, just to be a friend."

"Friends: don't leave your friend, they need you ... if they say go away say 'no I'm your friend I don't care if you don't want me here I'm your friend I don't leave friends behind'"

"Look out for your friends – ask if they are okay, and mean it, and listen! There is more to life than school!!!!!! Care for each other, and show your love!"

"If you don't know what to say, that's alright, be honest and let them know that, but also let them know that you are still happy to listen to what's going on for them. Offering to help them call [service] or another service and sitting with them for support (if they want you to) whilst they make that call, or going with them to [service] or another face-to-face support centre. Reassuring them that it's going to be ok."

"To friends and family members, I would say that the best thing you can ever offer to a young person that wants to give up is unconditional love, support, encouragement, constant

reminder of their talents and abilities, thinking highly of them would give them hope and most importantly, be genuine and non-judgemental."

"And to the parents and friends I'd wanna say please be patient, I know it can be frustrating to see us like this when there is seemingly no reason ... But we can't help it either so please keep supporting us and trying your best. One day it'll all be worth it hopefully."

