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FACT SHEET

SOCIAL SUPPORT

AT A GLANCE

- Social support plays a vital role in mental health.
- Young people with smaller or lower-quality social networks are at higher risk of mental ill-health.
- Social support can be formal or informal, and facilitated through a range of activities.

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WHAT IS SOCIAL SUPPORT?

Social support is defined as "the provision of psychological and material resources by a social network, which may include family, friends, community members, or others".(1-2)

Social support can include:

- **Emotional support** – Feeling cared for, understood, and valued through love, trust, and empathy.
- **Instrumental support** – Practical help like money, food, transport, or other tangible assistance.
- **Informational support** – Useful advice or guidance during stressful times.
- **Appraisal/esteem/affirmational support** – Encouragement that helps someone feel confident and capable.
- **Companionate support/companionship/ "strong-tie" support** – Having close friends or a trusted companion.
- **Source of strength support** – Support that helps people cope with stress and grow stronger.

- **Relational catalyst support** – Encouragement to explore, grow, and take on new opportunities.
- **Reciprocal support/social reciprocity** – A two-way exchange where people both give and receive support.

These kinds of supports can be provided through informal helping relationships, or through formal supports such as programs and services that target specific needs.

WHY IS SOCIAL SUPPORT IMPORTANT?

Social connection is widely recognised to be a fundamental human need and has been linked to higher wellbeing, safety, resilience, prosperity and longer lifespan.(3) Social support buffers against the effects of negative experiences and stress, and enhances the effects of positive experiences. Social support helps people thrive through effective coping, and through providing engagement in more opportunities for full participation in life.

WHY IS SOCIAL SUPPORT IMPORTANT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?

Adolescence and early adulthood are the peak time for onset of mental ill-health, but also an important stage for brain development and social interaction that forms the foundation for lifelong wellbeing and socioeconomic productivity.(4) The onset of mental ill-health during adolescence and early adulthood frequently affects the attainment of important developmental milestones such as completing education, entering the workforce, developing social and romantic relationships and establishing autonomy over finances, housing and lifestyle. It can be very difficult to recover from these disruptions, even if symptomatic recovery occurs.(5)

"When I experienced mental ill-health, my grades started slipping and I really struggled to maintain friendships and employment. This meant I wasn't able to save money for a really long time and I feel like as a result, I missed out on a lot of the teenage experiences."

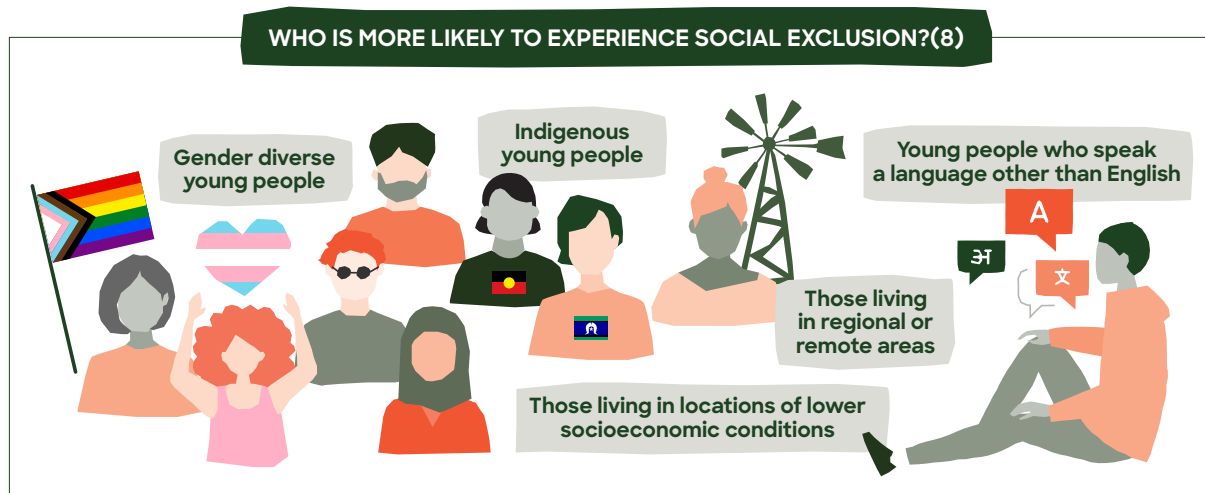**YOUNG PERSON, 22**

SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN AUSTRALIA.

Social exclusion is an important social determinant of mental health. When people experience impairment or difficulties related to their social functioning, their employment, education, finances, housing and neighbourhood circumstances, it can lead to increased challenges in accessing care, and together leads to negative consequences for a person's mental health.(5) Inversely, Social inclusion refers to the sense of connectedness in relationships and having the opportunity for active participation across social and occupational domains.(5)

In Australia, approximately 25% of the population experience social exclusion, with people living with mental ill-health disproportionally affected.(6-7) A 2023 study of 18,800 young people in Australia aged 15–19 found that about 60% faced social exclusion in at least one area of relational, financial, housing or edu-employment. Meanwhile, 25% experienced exclusion across multiple domains.(8) There were strong relationships between social exclusion and indicators of poor mental health and wellbeing, however these relationships were weaker when the individual reported being able to turn to others in times of need.(8)

"Social support is particularly important for adolescents and young adults as they navigate into adulthood, as naturally this period of development is where young people tend to move away from wanting support from the primary family unit and rely more heavily on friends and other social supports."

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH CLINICIAN

WHO IS MORE LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE SOCIAL EXCLUSION?(8)

Gender diverse young people

Indigenous young people

Young people who speak a language other than English

Those living in regional or remote areas

Those living in locations of lower socioeconomic conditions

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?

There are many ways that individuals, programs or services can support young people to become more socially connected and supported.

ACCESSING SUPPORT

Young people who experience social exclusion in any domain are more likely to report needing support for their mental health. However, social exclusion may influence not only the way young people access support, but also whether they seek support.(9) Many young people will seek help from health professionals; however, a large proportion will go to family (55%) and friends (46%).(9) Key barriers to accessing support include stigma, confidentiality concerns, cost and a lack of service knowledge.(9) Young people expressed a greater preference for face-to-face support (almost 60%), when compared with online or phone support (less than 20%).(9)

Interventions targeting social support may include formal support as well as informal helping relationships. Examples include self-help programs, peer support groups, social and community groups such as religious groups, and natural (or authentic) supports such as family, friends, and online communities. However, regardless of the type of support, it is important to remember the huge impact that social support has on mental health outcomes.

"I think it's really important to remember social support doesn't always have to be just traditional therapy sessions. Outside of therapy, finding online communities of people who have similar interests to me had and still have a hugely positive impact on my mental health."

YOUNG PERSON, 22

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE

Clinicians should provide warm referral and/or a period of joint care or support when referring to other programs or services. This might even mean practical support to engage, such as providing transport or attending the first session together.

Professionals should advocate for the needs of the young people they are working with and routinely ask about difficulties in areas such as housing, social engagement, education, work or finances, as difficulties in these areas can limit access to social support.

Opportunities for social engagement, such as group programs or community-based services are important. Services like these need to be effectively promoted to young people.

Young people may need to access financial aid and material support, and benefit from practical help to look for and apply for these.

Young people can be supported to link with additional support and resources that promote educational opportunities, including student support services, and employment supports.

Remember that young people face barriers to accessing social support in a range of ways, but social support can be an important buffer against the effects of mental ill-health.

Click here for more information about social support interventions.

RELATED RESOURCES

- **Social exclusion and the mental health of young people: Insights from the 2022 Mission Australia   Survey.**
- **Young people and loneliness.**

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