Telling it like it is – Community Report

ReachOut by Inspire Foundation

This paper was prepared for the Mental Health Commission of NSW to support the development of the Strategic Plan for Mental Health in NSW 2014 – 2024

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Who are we?

The NSW Mental Health Commission works to make the NSW Mental Health System better. The Commission was set up in July 2012 because people who experience mental illness and their family and friends were not getting the right kind of help and support.

The NSW Government has asked us to write a draft Strategic Plan which reflects the experiences and hopes of the community, and this includes children and young people.

What’s this all about?

When it comes to improving mental health services for young people in NSW, who better to ask than young people themselves? In Australia, 1 in 4 people under the age of 25 deal with some kind of mental health condition. This could be you, a friend, or someone you know, which means it’s really important that there’s always help available, in the ways that will benefit you the most.

In October and November 2013, the Mental Health Commission of NSW (wanted to find out first-hand what young people were saying about changing mental health services. To do this, we got Reachout.com by Inspire Foundation to talk to young people from a range of different backgrounds. The conversations took place on online forums, live social media chats, and in face to face meetings. Those who contributed gave us some incredibly valuable insights.

We got to hear what young people were saying about mental health services – what’s working, what’s not working, and best of all it gave us some great new ideas on what needs to be done to help young people. We chatted to people from all over NSW, aged between 14 and 25, this included those who were doing it pretty tough, like:

- young carers
- same sex attracted and gender diverse young people
- young people from different cultures, languages, traditions, religions
- young people with disabilities
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people
- young people who’ve already had a mental illness

In our different conversations there was an even mix of:

- males and females
- young people who had/had not previously sought help for mental health problems
- young people from cities and regional/rural areas

What did we find?

A lot of insightful ideas came out of the meetings, but the two biggest issues that young people are talking about are:
Having Good Mental Health and Wellbeing

“Maybe some support for people that have family members or friends…I know that my parents didn’t know and it wasn’t until my late teens early 20s when lots of things went wrong – it just came out of the blue for them.”

Simply put, it feels good to feel good. It helps you think better, meet new people, and try out fun new things. However, sometimes feeling good is a hard thing to keep up. Young people told us that the things that helped them most with this were:

- having trustworthy friends and family who knew what to say and do
- feeling safe, secure and comfortable –financially, at home, and in relationships
- having purpose
- feeling fit and healthy
- being able to try new things
- getting involved in fun and relaxing activities

**Our ideas for a better mental health system:**

- Work on giving parents and other family members the best info on what to say and do for young people going through tough times
- Work with NSW Kids & Families on coming up with new and interesting ways to combine mental health with physical activity
- Work with NSW Sport and Recreation to give young people the chance to try fun new activities, especially in regional/remote places
- Work with NSW Trade and Investment (Arts NSW) to make sure there’s a strong focus on mental health in their future activities

**SEEKING HELP**

“You don’t want to seek out help because you might think they might laugh at you or something like that. They might disagree with you.”

Telling someone you’re having a tough time isn’t easy. An important part of having good mental health and wellbeing is knowing who to talk to, where to go, and what to do. We found that a lot of young people had trouble with seeking help due to:

- **Feeling judged:** They worried about what people might think of them, which is a common feeling. They also didn’t want to feel like a burden to friends and family.

- **Not knowing what to do:** Sometimes it can be overwhelming not knowing where to start. They didn’t really know who to talk to, what to read, or where to go to seek help, especially in rural areas.
Not knowing enough: They felt like they didn’t know much about how they were feeling or about mental health issues in general. Many had trouble knowing how to help friends who were going through tough times.

Our ideas for a better mental health system:

- Work with mental health services to create simple guides on how to seek help and figure out what might work best for you
- Work with groups in the community who can teach people (including teachers, parents etc.) more about important mental health issues
- Teach young people how to help out friends who are going through a tough time
- Keep supporting government and non-government organisations who are working on new ways to make seeking help easier

Getting the Right Kind of Help

“Just to go somewhere, talk to one person and for them to be able to straight away find someone who’s right for you and who can help you out and direct you to the right information”

Getting help is one thing. Getting help that really works is another. We found that the main problems young people came up against after seeking help were:

- Being taken seriously: They talked about being brushed off as typical teenagers, feeling like a burden to doctors, and wanting to be treated more personally when getting help. Learning self-help skills that they could use was also an important issue.

- Trust: Knowing that they could really trust the people around them to protect their privacy was crucial, including health professionals.

- Stability: They explained that switching from one professional to the next felt like going round in circles. They wanted stable care from one professional to the next. If not, then any other professionals who became involved should have all the info to make the switch easier. This includes the transition from teenage to adult care, which they described as being tough.

- Getting help wherever: Dropping everything just to go and get help can sometimes be a bit frustrating. Getting the kind of help that works for them was important, like on the phone and online, from home or even from somewhere like a park.

- School counselling: Most of the young people told us that school counselling wasn’t really working for them. They felt it wasn’t private enough, and that it led to feeling judged by other classmates.

Our ideas for a better mental health system:
Support health professionals to stick around longer. This means pushing for more training and better work conditions for them.

Support new, on-the-go ways of making help available to young people, like with mobile phones or on the internet.

Together with NSW Education and Communities, look into ways to help improve the school counselling experience for young people by exploring existing systems both in Australia and overseas.

**BLUE SKIES: THE BEST KIND OF SERVICE**

“To me it should be more like the Apple store...everything [is] there and you feel like you're being looked after from start to end and they're not beating you around the bush and you're not going around in circles”

If only life was one big Apple store; tech-savvy and always ready to help. Well, why can’t it be? We listened to what young people were saying when asked to imagine the best kind of service for getting the right kind of help. For them, most important was:

**Stability:** As mentioned before, having personal help from start to finish was really important. This means having the same professional all the way through, whether online or face to face. Or, if a young person has to change professionals, then the next professional should have all the relevant info before they get involved. This way, they won’t have to retell their stories again and again. Young people told us that it’s also important to feel like you are being taken seriously on every problem, big and small.

**Technology:** It can be hard to talk about what you’re really feeling face to face. With smart phones and the internet being such a big part of our lives now, the use of texting, emailing and social networking was suggested as a different form of seeking help. This way, young people could take their time, use the right words, and clearly explain what they’re going through.

**Our ideas for a better mental health system:**

Make sure young people have a major role in changing mental health services, especially those groups who are doing it tougher than others.

**So, what to make of all this?**

Firstly, we want to thank all the young people for their amazing contributions. From their discussions, it’s clear that help should be available no matter how big or small the problem is. Mental health is a big issue facing young people today. Having services that are easy to seek, stable, and most of all, effective, is really important. And it’s not only young people who need to know what to do and where to go, but it’s the people around them – carers,
family, friends and the community. Our job is to do all we can to achieve good mental health for young people in NSW, now and in the future.