

What

are

you

worried

about?

Young people's
stress burden
and its impacts
on their wellbeing

REACHOUT

What Are You Worried About?: Young People's Stress Burden and Its Impacts on Their Wellbeing was written by Camilla Chaudhary, with assistance from Sophia Garlick Bock. The report is based on research undertaken by Bianca Kahl and Sophia Garlick Bock, assisted by Rebecca Christidis.

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We acknowledge the traditional owners of Country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present. We recognise connection to Country as integral to health and wellbeing.

We also acknowledge people with living and lived experience of mental ill-health and recovery, along with their carers, families and supporters. We value the courage of those who share their unique perspectives for the purpose of learning and growing together to achieve better outcomes for all. We recognise their vital contribution to the sector and to the development of ReachOut's services.



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Overview

The young people who shared their views for this research identified issues, ranging from the personal to the societal, that are overshadowing their formative years. The clear picture to emerge is that worry is shaping both young people's early adulthood and their future outlook, creating a horizon that for many feels uncertain at best and bleak at worst. Young people's well-founded insecurity about their near- and longer-term prospects contributes to a high stress burden that many are inadequately resourced to cope with. Approximately 40 per cent of 16–24-year-olds in Australia experienced mental health difficulties in 2020–21, the highest of any age group (ABS, 2022). The findings discussed here point to a concerning trend as young people progress into adulthood, with their worries becoming more complex and interrelated and less manageable.

Worries about the future, study and money were among the most prevalent issues for 16–25-year-olds, affecting over half of these young people. These three issues were ranked the most concerning issues by young people overall.

A compelling finding of our study was that young people are experiencing worry at levels that significantly erode their day-to-day wellbeing. **Over four in five¹ experienced significant impacts on their mental health and wellbeing, with reported changes ranging from disturbed sleep to poor concentration and mood.**

Worry is shaping both young people's early adulthood and their future outlook.

75% of young people were concerned about the future.

72% were stressed about school, study or exams.

62% felt down or anxious.

57% were concerned about loneliness.

52% were worried about finances or the cost of living.

For each of the three top-ranked issues – that is, the future, study and money – **young women** who participated in our study reported experiencing greater impacts compared to young men, with over 85 per cent of young women affected noticing a moderate to high impact on their wellbeing. Young women were also markedly more stressed than young men by a range of issues outside these top-tier concerns, including anxiety, body image, work, family conflict and their physical health. **Gender diverse² young people** consistently reported the most severe impacts of worry on their mental health and wellbeing.

Young people aged 22–25 appear to fare worse than their peers aged 16–21 in terms of their overall worry burden. Worry about a range of issues, including the cost of living, employment, the environment and homelessness, was more prevalent among this age group. **Stress about the future** was a leading concern for 51 per cent of 22–25-year-olds, while **financial stress** was a leading concern for 44 per cent of this age group, twice the rate among 16–18-year-olds.

¹ Of those identifying the future, study or finances as a top concern.

² 'Gender diverse' is used as a grouping term throughout this report. It includes gender diverse and non-binary young people, and those who used other terms to describe their gender.



How are young people coping?

Young people's response to stress is, broadly, a proactive one, evidenced by the very high proportion – 97 per cent – who had adapted their routines and lifestyles to alleviate the effects of worry on their wellbeing. Coping responses ranged from recreational and leisure pursuits to focused and specific wellbeing techniques. Increasing their exercise or physical activity as a strategy to help them cope with stress was reported by twice the number of young people (43%) as those who used alcohol or drugs (21%). Activities that built connection, whether with friends, family or community, stood out as one of the most effective and widespread coping responses reported among the young people we heard from.

What kind of support do young people need?

Young people look to a range of external supports to alleviate their high stress burden. Their most-needed supports were someone to talk to (69%), quality information (56%) and professional mental health support (48%). Young people's need for support becomes more acute with age. Those in their early twenties showed the most acute need for support – both informal and formal – to alleviate stress. Over two-fifths (43%) said they had needed professional mental health support a lot over the past year.³

³ Young people were asked about their levels of need for support, whether or not they had received the support.

What does this mean for young people?

Overall, there is a striking congruence between what young people worry about most and the real, global disruptions and challenges they have lived through as emerging adults. There is a threat that the cumulative effects of daily stress are translating into poor mental health and a loss of confidence about the future. Only one in six young people said they often felt optimistic about their futures.

Unarguably, young people in Australia are facing profound challenges in their transitional years. Pandemic-driven disruption has aggravated the pre-existing vulnerability of young people economically, while isolating many socially. Although worry and anxiety may be a rational response to such uncertainty, the levels and effects captured here suggest that stress is eroding young people's everyday wellbeing, often to debilitating effect.

However, while worry may have dimmed their outlook, young people's views and perspectives reveal their resilience and ability to reflect, pragmatically, on **what support they need** in order to navigate these difficult transitional years.

Stress is eroding young people's everyday wellbeing, often to debilitating effect.

Where to from here?

Young people's experiences of coping with stress suggest a high degree of responsiveness. But the research also shows that individual coping resources are inadequate on their own and don't serve those young people who are most in need, particularly as they move into independent adulthood.

Young people indicated that they hope for realistic, achievable developments to improve their current situations and support their future aspirations. They outlined initiatives that meet their most pressing concerns, from economic to mental health and wellbeing. A unifying factor in young people's responses was the call for enabling measures that increase their ability to carve out their independent, adult lives. Young people resoundingly voiced their need for:

- more accessible mental health support
- better mental health education for young people and their families, to reduce stigma and facilitate help-seeking
- financial aid and support to improve young people's stability during study and early work pathways
- stronger social connections, within both local community and digital spaces
- guidance or mentoring to support transitional years between education and early career steps.



Background to the research

Young people in Australia are confronting an unprecedented set of challenges in their early adult years. They have absorbed the shocks – social, educational and economic – of environmental disasters, a pandemic and an ongoing cost-of-living crisis.

The years between age 16 and 25 are a key period of change, in which young people typically experience several major life transitions as they embark on their independent lives (Wood et al., 2017). The finding that many young people in Australia aren't thriving during these years is neither new nor surprising. Rising rates of psychological distress among young people in Australia have been consistently evidenced in research, increasing from under a fifth (18%) in 2012 to almost a third (29%) in 2022 (Leung et al., 2022). Among the young people ReachOut surveyed, an estimated 42 per cent of respondents had a probable serious mental illness,⁴ amplifying this finding.

Young people are facing:

- longer, fractured pathways from school to work (RBA, 2018)
- a casualised workforce and low job security (de Fontenay et al., 2020)
- escalating cost of living and unaffordable housing
- disruption to education, social and working lives caused by COVID-19.

For many young people, a lack of individual resources and available support networks limits their ability to respond to and cope effectively with the challenges that confront them during these years, particularly for those experiencing poor mental health.

Against this backdrop, ReachOut conducted the study Understanding the Issues Impacting Young People's Mental Health to gain insight into what issues young people are experiencing and the impacts those issues are having on their wellbeing. The study builds upon existing research – for example, Mission Australia's Youth Survey (Leung et al., 2022) – that captures the concerns of young people and extends the focus to gain a deeper understanding of an often-overlooked aspect: how young people experience the effects of stress in their everyday lives.⁵

Methodology

This survey was conducted online, using Qualtrics, from August to September 2022. The survey was promoted through our social media, paid promotions, youth and mental health sector contacts, stakeholders and panels to ensure we heard from a diverse range of young people. The findings presented here are drawn from the thoughtful insights of 667 young people.

The survey asked about young people's lives over the past 12 months. This included the issues they were dealing with, the impacts of those issues, the supports they had and wanted, and how they were generally feeling day-to-day. The survey included both closed- and open-ended questions, informed by the existing evidence base.

The study was approved by Bellberry Limited Human Research Ethics Committee.

⁴Using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, a six-item self-report distress measure with a possible score of 24. Scores are interpreted using dichotomous scoring, with scores of 13–24 classified as indicating probable serious mental illness or serious psychological distress.

⁵A key difference between ReachOut's survey and Mission Australia's study (Leung et al., 2022) is that whereas the latter asked young people to identify issues (a) of concern to Australia, and (b) of concern to them personally, ReachOut focused solely on issues of personal concern.



Profile of sample

Almost half of the cohort was within the 16–18-year-old age bracket (49%), with 19–21-year-olds making up 24 per cent and 22–25-year-olds 27 per cent.⁶ Figures 1 to 7 summarise the sample profiles by gender, location, distribution across Australia, language spoken at home, work status, study status and K6 score.

Figure 1. Gender

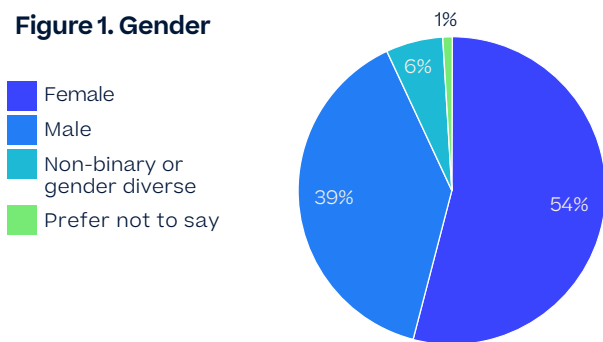


Figure 3. Distribution across Australia

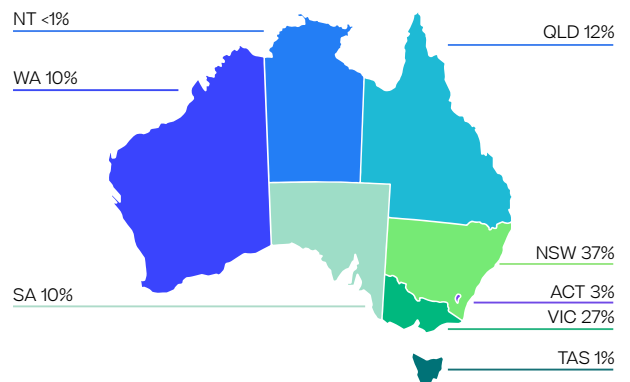
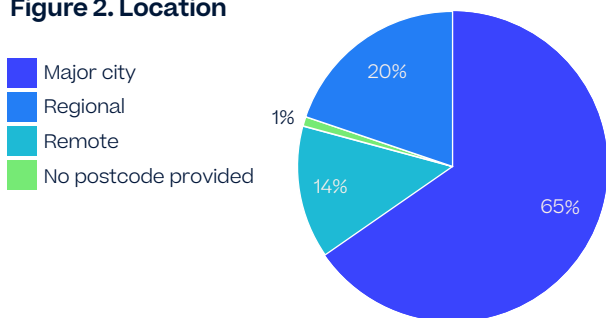


Figure 2. Location



5% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander



33% Sexuality and/or gender diverse

⁶ The data presented in this report has been rounded to the nearest whole number and may not equal 100 per cent.



Figure 4. Language spoken at home

English only	76%
English and another language	23%
Another language only	1%

Figure 6. Study status

■ Studying
■ Not studying

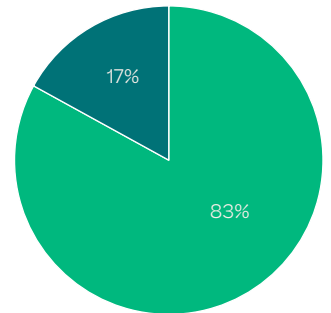


Figure 5. Work status

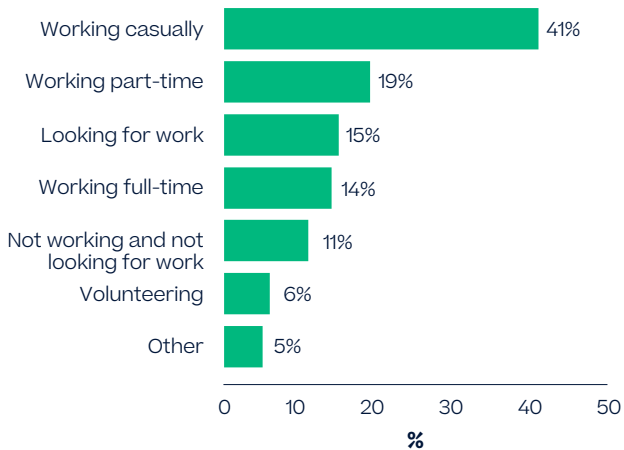
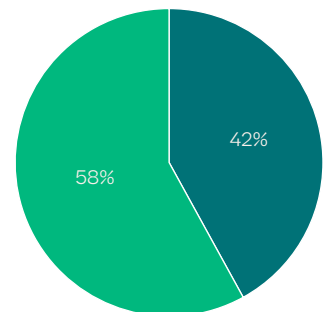


Figure 7. K6 score

■ No probable serious mental illness
■ Probable serious mental illness



Note: K6 score is a common measure of probable mental illness⁷

Based on K6 scores, 42 per cent of the study population experienced probable serious mental illness. This compares with a finding by the Australian Bureau of Statistics that almost 40 per cent of people aged 16–24 years had a 12-month mental disorder in 2020–21 (ABS, 2022).

⁷ The Kessler Psychological Distress scale.

Shifting times, shifting worries

How do young people's worries and support needs change at key stages in their lives?

Early adulthood is a period of significant change during which young people typically experience multiple transitions. During this time, they may embark on post-school education, enter the workforce, leave the family home and form new relationships. Alongside the growing autonomy and independence that accompanies this life stage, for many young people it is also a time of stress as they navigate uncertain adult pathways.

The three age groups that made up the sample of 16–25-year-olds in our study showed distinct profiles relating to:

- the issues that most concerned them (the percentage of people in that age group who identified that issue)
- the top supports they needed (the combined percentage who needed each type of support quite a bit and a lot)
- psychological distress level (the percentage of the age group meeting K6 criteria for probable serious mental illness).





16–18-year-olds

Most concerning issues:

- study stress (63%)
- future stress (43%)
- body image (23%)
- feeling down/anxious (22%)
- having enough money/my finances, or the cost of living (20%)

Top supports needed:

- someone to talk to (66%)
- access to information (49%)

44% of this age group met the K6 score for a probable mental illness.



19–21-year-olds

Most concerning issues:

- study stress (47%)
- future stress (38%)
- feeling down/anxious (31%)
- having enough money/my finances, or the cost of living (31%)
- feeling lonely (21%)

Top supports needed:

- someone to talk to (71%)
- access to information (57%)

40% of this age group met the K6 score for a probable mental illness.

22–25-year-olds

Most concerning issues:

- future stress (51%)
- having enough money/my finances, or the cost of living (44%)
- feeling down/anxious (31%)
- feeling lonely (22%)
- study/school/exam stress (22%).

Top supports needed:

- someone to talk to (72%)
- mental health professional (62%)

41% of this age group met the K6 score for a probable mental illness.

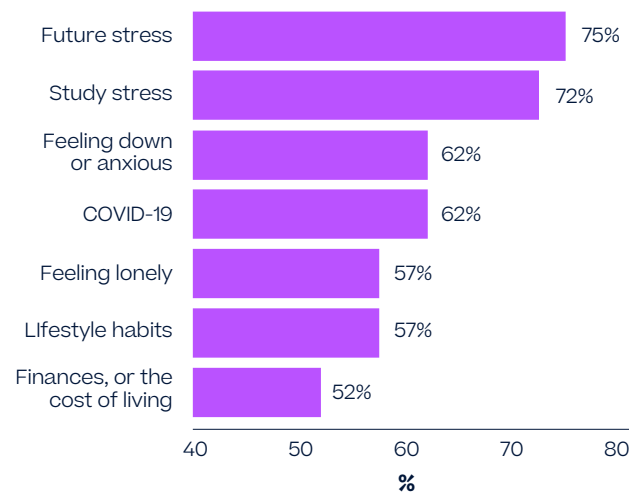


The worry landscape

Young people shoulder a high burden of worries and anxieties, ranging from the immediate and personal, such as exam stress, to the broader and societal, such as climate change and the future. Nearly three-quarters of those surveyed were concerned about the future (75%) or about study pressure (72%), while two-thirds reported that anxiety (62%) and COVID-19 (62%) were among the issues that concern them. More than half of the young people surveyed were struggling with loneliness (57%), lifestyle habits (57%) and financial worry (52%) (Figure 8).

Young people who were stressed about at least one of these issues considerably outnumbered those who were not. Frequently, young people described multiple, overlapping issues.

Figure 8. The main issues for young people



'I am kind of lost at the moment, so any hints from those who have experienced something similar in the past and the solutions they employed ... in terms of physical, mental and financial wellbeing would be greatly appreciated.'

Male, 22

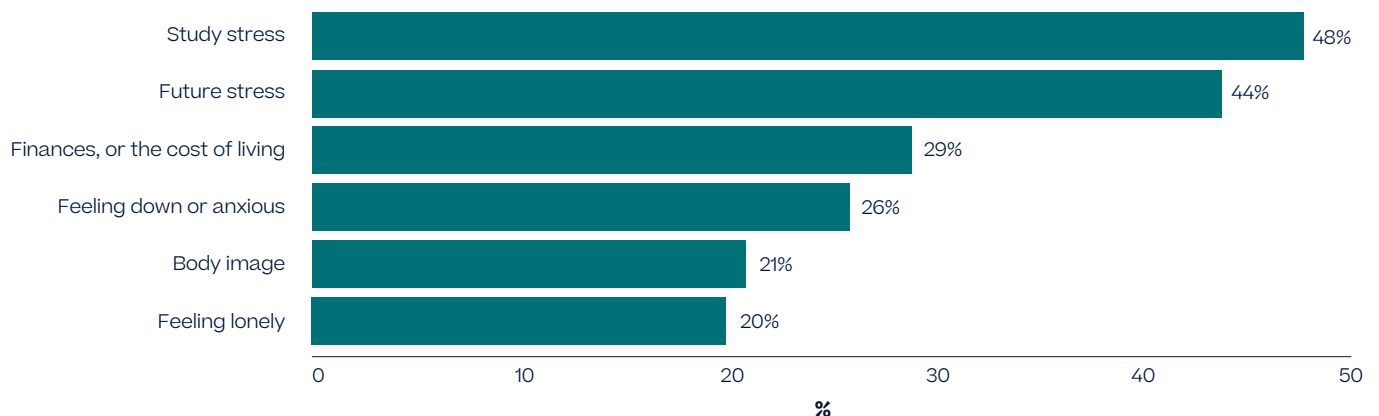




What are the issues of most concern to young people?

Young people were asked to select all issues of concern to them from a list of 35. They were then asked to choose up to five of the most concerning issues. Among the most concerning issues, study stress or worry about the future were the leading concerns, each identified by nearly half of all young people (48% and 44%, respectively). Cost-of-living stress and feeling down or anxious were among the top concerns for over one-quarter (29% and 26%, respectively) of those surveyed. For around one-fifth of young people, body image (21%) or feeling lonely (20%) were top concerns (Figure 9).

Figure 9. The most concerning issues for young people





How do issues vary by gender?

Among young people surveyed, all three top-ranked issues featured more prominently in young women's lives than in young men's. Close to half of female respondents (49%) named study stress or future stress as a top concern and over one-third named financial stress (35%). Study stress was most pronounced among gender diverse respondents, a top concern for 54 per cent. All three top-ranked issues were less prevalent among young males than among their female and gender diverse peers (Figure 10).

Among young women, nearly one-third (31%) named feeling down or anxious as a leading concern, compared to 28 per cent of gender diverse young people and one-fifth of young men (21%). Body image was a leading concern for over a quarter of young women (27%) and a fifth of gender diverse young people (19%), compared to 13 per cent of young men.

Young women overall were also markedly more stressed by a range of issues outside these top-tier concerns. Work (17%), family conflict (17%) and physical health (10%) were identified as top sources of stress by twice as many young women as young men.

Among gender diverse young people, worry about a number of issues was noticeably higher than for other groups. This included unemployment/finding work (19%), as well as two issues of acute concern – namely, self-harm (22%) and suicidal thoughts/behaviour (28%) (Figure 11).

Figure 10. Occurrence of the most concerning issues by gender

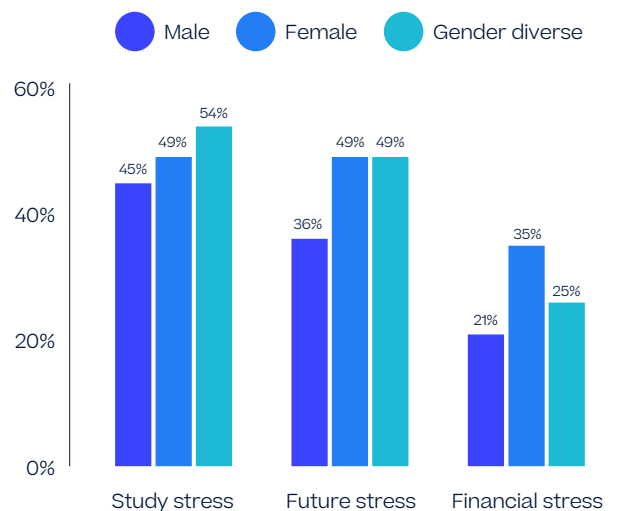
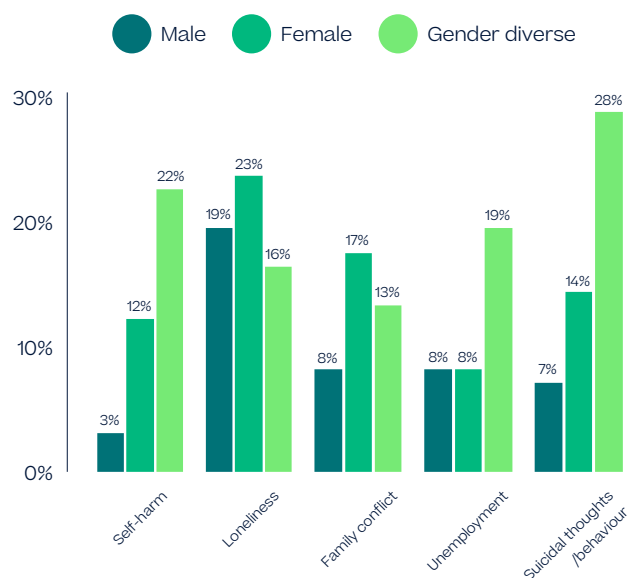


Figure 11. Selected issues experienced by gender





Key insights for sexuality and/or gender diverse young people

- Loneliness was a much more prevalent concern for young sexuality and/or gender diverse people, identified by 70 per cent of the cohort compared with 51 per cent of their peers.

- Over 50 per cent of sexuality and/or gender diverse young people experienced stress from questioning their sexuality or gender.

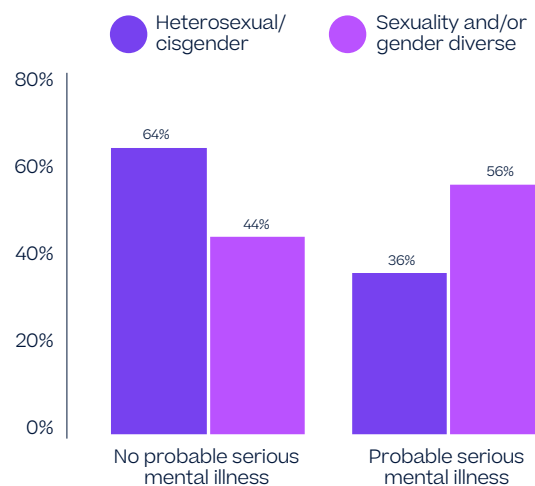
- Over one quarter (27%) of sexuality and/or gender diverse young people were concerned about experiencing discrimination because of their sexuality or gender.

- When asked about the types of support that might be helpful for them, roughly 50 per cent of sexuality and/or gender diverse young people wanted services that were specifically designed for their community.

'A[n] LGBTQI+ counselling space, where I can feel safe discussing things like being outed.'

Female, 16

Figure 12. Mental health status by sexuality/gender





How do issues vary by age group?

Young people's most pressing concerns broadly reflected their stages of early adulthood and the consequent demands upon them. The more immediate worries (e.g. study) that dominated among the younger cohort were overtaken among older age groups by less time-bound and often interlinked concerns – namely, the future and financial stress. Alongside their changing circumstances, 'feeling down or anxious' was a noticeably greater concern for older respondents than for 16–18-year-olds.

16–18-year-olds

Study stress peaked among 16–18-year-olds, ranked as a leading concern by two-thirds of this age group, perhaps related to high-stakes school exams and the high proportion of these young people who were studying (87%). Over two-fifths (43%) identified future stress as a leading concern. Body image featured higher among the concerns of younger participants, a leading concern for 23 per cent. Meanwhile, feeling down or anxious, and financial stress, were least prominent among the 16–18 age group, identified as main concerns by only around a fifth (22% and 20%, respectively).

16–18-year-olds told us:

'Big changes as I'm getting older. My siblings growing up, getting work, not seeing my family as much. Not feeling ready to grow up.'

Female, 17

'The way school is run ... it can be really stressful and I feel very little accomplishment from it.'

Female, 16





19–21-year-olds

The top concerns of those aged 19–21 shifted in parallel with their emerging adult pathways, a time when young people are likely to be transitioning between education and work, or combining the two. Study stress featured less prominently, though it was still a leading concern for nearly half (47%), while financial stress became a more pressing issue, identified by nearly a third (31%). Among this age group, ‘feeling down or anxious’ peaked, a top concern for 31 per cent.

19–21-year-olds told us:

‘I am at a point in time where I have no clue what would help. I am just stuck because I don’t know where to begin or how to help myself.’

Male, 20

‘I would have liked better guidance with how to live. Like all the everyday things that people just get on with [that] I’m not doing and should be doing.’

Female, 19

22–25-year-olds

Those aged 22–25 identified top concerns that reflected their growing independence as they navigated the intersecting worlds of work, personal finances and housing. Worry about the future was highest among 22–25-year-olds, a top concern for over half (51%). Cost-of-living stress was also highest among the upper age group, with 44 per cent of 22–25-year-olds naming this as a main concern, more than twice the level of the youngest people surveyed (20%). Nearly a third (31%) rated ‘feeling down’ among their top concerns. Study stress was ranked steadily lower as respondents moved into their twenties; among 22–25-year-olds, only a fifth (21%) named it as a top concern. While study stress declined with age, work-related stress became a more pressing worry, a top concern for a fifth (21%) of these young adults.

22–25-year-olds told us:

‘I could definitely do with some more money to help with struggling with debt. My family have cut me off as I have moved house away from them, so it’s been quite difficult ... I would like to have better friends who love and support me.’

Female, 22

‘Struggling with medical care access (financial, wait lists, discrimination and lack of diagnosis), not being able to access disability payments/NDIS.’

Gender diverse young person, 24

Issues of most concern and their impacts on young people

Table 1 summarises the issues of most concern to the young people surveyed, and their perceptions of the impacts of these concerns on their wellbeing. Figure 13 compares participants who identified issues with those who identified them as most concerning.

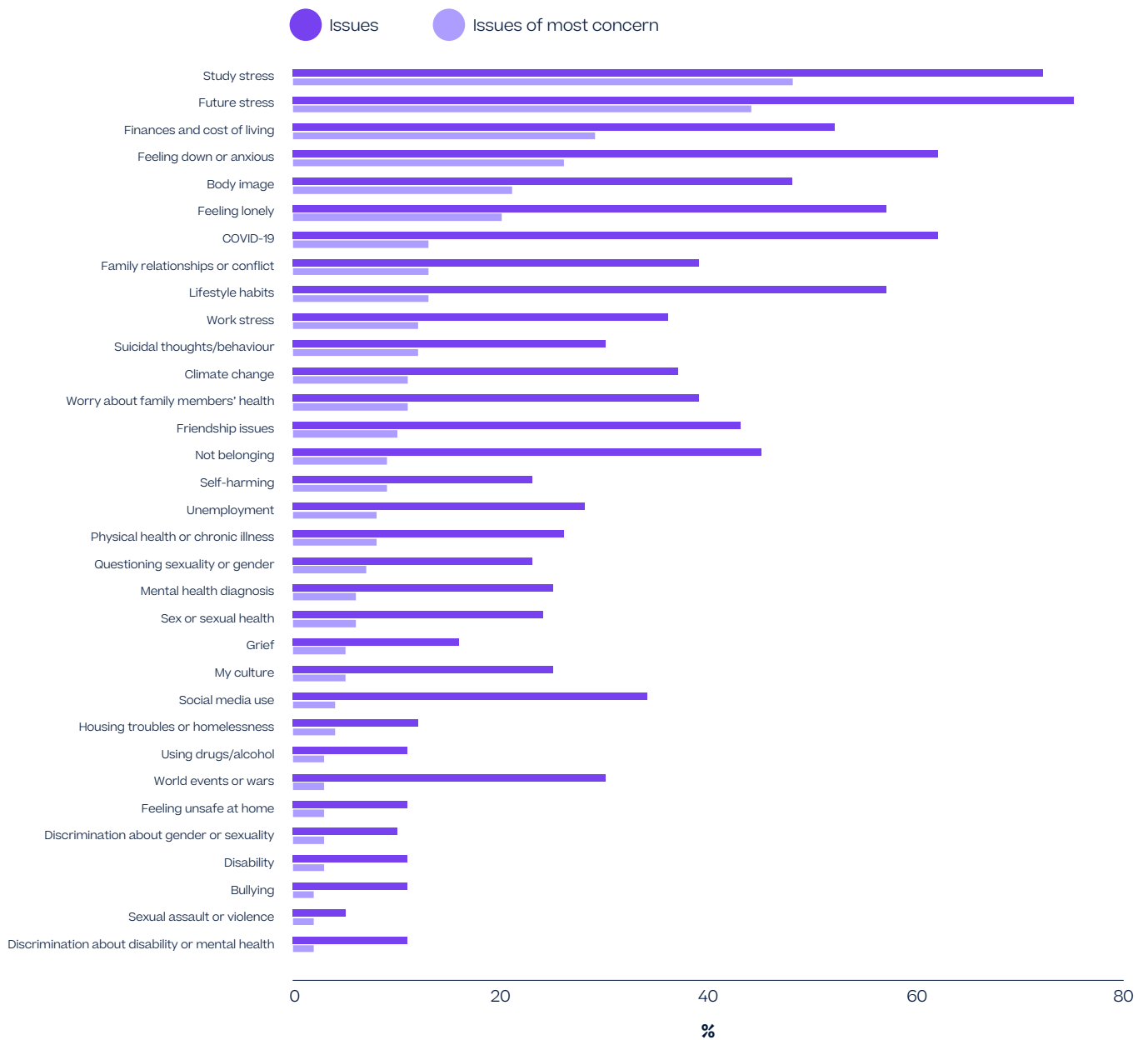


Table 1. Issues of most concern and their impacts on young people

Issue	Percentage naming as most concerning issue (%)	Percentage noticing moderate or major impact on wellbeing (%)
Study stress	48	90
Future stress	44	83
Finances and cost of living	29	86
Feeling down or anxious	26	93
Body image	21	91
Feeling lonely	20	82
COVID-19	13	75
Family relationships or conflict	13	96
Lifestyle habits	13	74
Work stress	12	86
Suicidal thoughts/behaviour	12	86
Climate change	11	61
Worry about family members' health	11	78
Friendship issues	10	90
Not belonging	9	85
Self-harming	9	93
Unemployment	8	82
Physical health or chronic illness	8	96
Questioning sexuality or gender	7	83
Mental health diagnosis	6	93
Sex or sexual health	6	89
Grief	5	90
My culture	5	80
Social media use	4	79
Housing troubles or homelessness	4	96
Using drugs/alcohol	3	83
World events or wars	3	55
Feeling unsafe at home	3	100
Discrimination about gender or sexuality	3	89
Disability	3	88
Bullying	2	87
Sexual assault or violence	2	92
Discrimination about disability or mental health	2	90



Figure 13. Participants who identified issues, compared to those identifying issues as being of most concern





Study stress, future stress and cost-of-living stress: An overview

Study stress

- **Just over seven in ten** (72%) young people were **concerned, worried or stressed** about school, study or exams.
- **Nearly all** (90%) young people who listed study stress as a top concern reported that it had a **moderate or major impact** on their mental health.
- For **almost half** (48%) of young people surveyed, study or exam stress was one of the most concerning issues they faced (Figure 14).
- The most commonly reported impact of study stress was **lacking motivation and not doing the things they enjoy** (75%).
- In the last 12 months, study stress also resulted in 42 per cent of young people **taking time off work or study**.
- Of the young people who listed study stress as a top concern, moderate and major impacts on mental health were reported by:
 - 90 per cent of students in Years 8–10
 - 94 per cent of students in Years 11 and 12
 - 85 per cent of tertiary students (TAFE, university and postgraduate).

‘Providing balance in study, work and relationships is difficult and I feel like I really struggle to do what I enjoy when I’m focusing a lot on study and work.’

Female, 19

Figure 14. How young people are feeling about their studies and exams

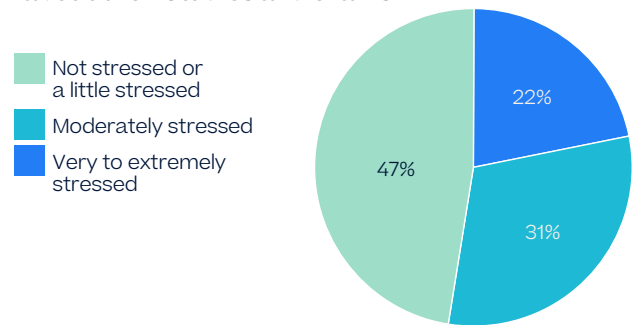
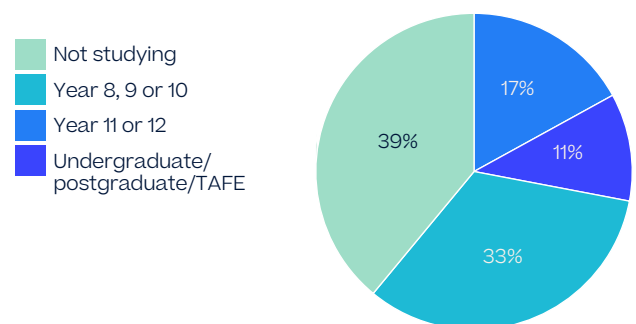


Figure 15. What young people are studying





Future stress

- **Stress about the future was the highest rated concern** among young people.
- **Three in four** young people reported that they were stressed about the future.
- The large majority (83%) of young people who listed stress about the future as a top concern reported that this stress had a **moderate or major impact** on their mental health.
- Only one in six young people reported that they often felt optimistic about the future.
- Young women and gender diverse people were much more likely than young men to have reported being stressed or concerned about the future.
- Stress about the future impacted young people's behaviour and mood. Among these young people:
 - 66 per cent noticed changes in their mood
 - 65 per cent had trouble sleeping
 - 59 per cent experienced lack of motivation
 - 54 per cent had trouble focusing.

'It's super hard to be excited about the future when getting through the present is hard.'

Female, 25

'The potential future being real bleak due to housing crisis', climate change and changing dynamics as a higher schooler transitioning to uni.'

Female, 19

Cost-of-living stress

- Over half (52%) of young people surveyed were worried about having enough money, their finances, or the cost of living.
- Over four-fifths (86%) of young people who identified the cost of living as a top concern reported that this had a moderate to major effect on their mental health.
- The proportion of young women (42%) who reported that cost-of-living stress was having a major impact on their wellbeing was almost twice that of young men (24%).
- A higher proportion of young people living in regional or remote Australia than in urban areas reported cost of living as a top concern, but the wellbeing impacts of cost of living remained similar throughout the country.
- The most common challenges young people experienced as a result of worrying about the cost of living included:
 - changes to mood (63%)
 - lack of motivation (57%)
 - trouble sleeping (52%).

'I feel like the rising cost of living, lack of affordable housing, and lack of wage growth makes it really difficult to live a good life and [to] have hope for the future – especially with all the events going in the world.'

Gender diverse young person, 24

The impact of stress on young people

The study sought to gain insight into how the worries young people identified impact upon their daily lives. To understand this, young people were first asked **how much** the main issues confronting them had affected their mental health and wellbeing. Second, they were asked **what kinds of impacts** they had noticed on their day-to-day wellbeing, from behavioural to emotional changes, as a result of their worries.

What impact does worry have on young people's mental health and wellbeing?

The worries and concerns that young people contend with have a considerable impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Across all three of the most concerning issues identified – study, the future and finances – the proportion of young people who reported noticing a moderate to high impact on their wellbeing far outweighed the proportion who noticed little or no impact. Almost all young people who identified study stress as a leading concern (90%) experienced significant impacts on their wellbeing.⁸

A consistent and concerning relationship also emerged between gender and those young people reporting major impacts of stress.



The worries and concerns that young people contend with have a considerable impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

⁸ Combined total of those answering *moderate* and *major* impact.





Across all three of the leading issues – study stress, future stress and financial stress – young women experienced higher levels of impact on their wellbeing overall than young men, while gender diverse respondents consistently reported the most severe impacts. Among gender diverse young people whose top concerns included **feeling down/anxious**, 100 per cent noticed major impacts on their wellbeing, compared with 59 per cent of females and 34 per cent of males. The impacts of **financial stress** were also felt disproportionately by gender diverse young people; 75 per cent of those affected noticed major impacts on wellbeing, compared with 42 per cent of females and 24 per cent of males. **Study stress** had a major impact on the wellbeing of 61 per cent of gender diverse young people (where it was a top concern), compared with 55 per cent of females and 31 per cent of males (Figures 16 and 17).

Some differences emerged between how younger and older age groups experienced the impact of individual issues on their mental health and wellbeing. Younger people, aged 16–18, who identified study stress as a leading concern were the most likely age group to notice significant impacts (94%). Among older respondents, 22–25 years, the self-reported impact of worry about the future reached its highest level (88%). Conversely, the 19–21-year-old age group reported a slightly lower overall impact on their mental health of both their stress about study (81%) and their stress about the future (75%) than their younger and older peers, though clearly these remain far beyond negligible levels for this cohort.

Figure 16. Impacts of study, future and financial stress across genders

Percentage reporting major impacts on mental health

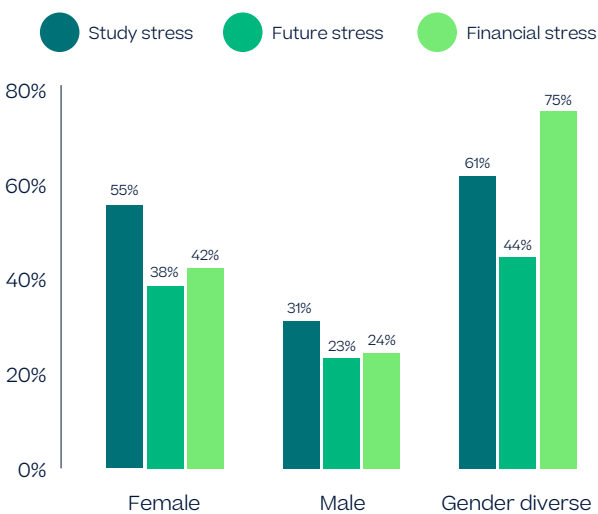


Figure 17. Impacts of worries on young people's mental health

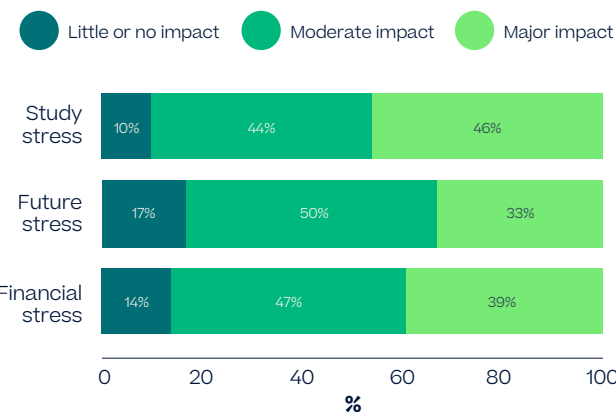
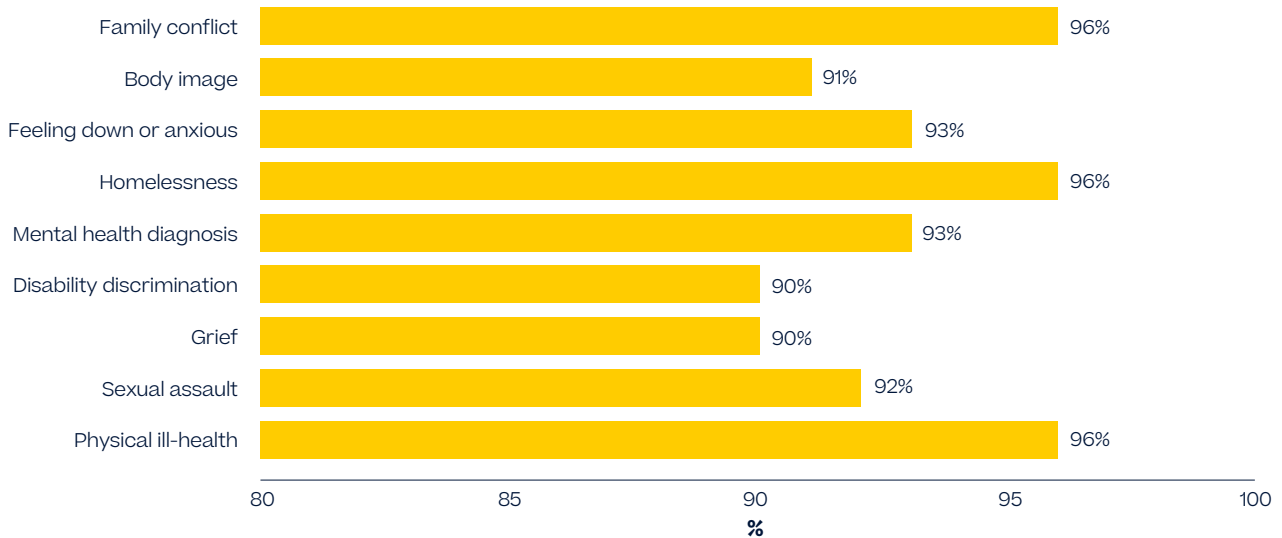


Figure 18. Issues with high impact on young people's mental health

Percentage reporting major impacts on mental health



A number of issues featured less commonly in young people's lives overall, yet created profound challenges for those who were struggling with them. For example, where young people faced family conflict, housing troubles or physical illness, the overwhelming majority (over 90%) reported a high impact on their wellbeing from their worry about these issues (Figure 18).⁹

Some issues were, by their nature, a source of acute stress for young people, with particularly severe consequences for their mental health and wellbeing. Two-thirds or more of those affected by racism (66%), housing troubles (67%) or loss and grief (70%) experienced major impacts on their wellbeing as a result. Major impacts were even more pronounced among young people who were feeling unsafe at home (73%), experiencing sexual assault (77%) or living with disability (82%).





How do young people's worries affect their day-to-day wellbeing?

Young people were asked whether their main worries or concerns had caused changes in their day-to-day behaviours and mood. Eight measures, ranging from sleep to appetite to concentration, were included.¹⁰ The majority of young people reported experiencing some change in their habits as a result of the worries that confronted them, most commonly **sleep and mood changes**. The overall picture to emerge was one where young people's physical and emotional wellbeing was undermined by worry on a daily basis, further eroding their resilience to stress.

While this study didn't aim to demonstrate the link between specific worries and their effects, what it offered was insight into how worry affects the quality of young people's lives. Specifically, it shed light, from young people's perspective, on how worry influences their capacity to function day-to-day across a range of indicators of behavioural and psychological wellbeing. Some behavioural and psychological changes, including disrupted sleep and mood changes, occurred at higher rates among young people affected by particular issues.

'I just feel really tired and broken and so far away from everyone. Most days I'm convinced that people only put up with me because I'm alright at helping them study ... I just feel like I make people's lives worse.'

Male, 19

Disrupted sleep was most frequently reported by young people whose top concerns were:

- bullying (87%)
- feeling down or anxious (76%)
- work stress (76%)
- a mental health diagnosis (76%)
- study stress (73%)
- housing trouble (67%)
- loneliness (67%).

Changes to appetite were highest among those young people whose top concerns included:

- bullying (80%)
- drug or alcohol use (74%)
- body image (69%)
- a mental health diagnosis (68%)
- feeling unsafe at home (68%)
- sexual assault (62%)
- feeling down or anxious (57%).

Mood changes were most commonly experienced by young people whose top concerns included:

- bullying (87%)
- feeling down or anxious (82%)
- loneliness (75%)
- housing issues (75%)
- study stress (71%)
- future stress (66%)
- financial stress (63%).

¹⁰ Respondents were asked to indicate which, if any, of the changes they had experienced.



Regardless of the issues they identified, young people commonly reported **multiple behavioural and mood changes**. The existence of such co-occurring conditions (e.g. affecting sleep and mood) may have detrimental implications for the long-term wellbeing of the young people affected (Asarnow & Mirchandaney, 2021).

The widespread disruption to sleep, in particular, among those surveyed resonates with recent findings pointing to symptoms of sleep disorders among 66 per cent of Australian teenagers, with serious impacts on their mental wellbeing and increased rates of depression and anxiety (Bartel et al., 2018). Among the young people ReachOut surveyed, an estimated 42 per cent met the criteria for probable serious mental illness.¹¹ Although the relationship between disrupted sleep and mental ill-health cannot be deduced from these findings, and may be bidirectional, the prevalence among this age group remains deeply troubling.

Some issues, unsurprisingly, were linked to higher levels of disturbance – in particular, anxiety and study stress. A majority of young people affected by these concerns experienced disruptions across a range of behavioural and emotional indicators (see 'Study stress, future stress and cost-of-living stress: An overview', p20). Notably, those experiencing anxiety reported the most severe disturbances, noticing changes to their mood (82%), motivation (80%), sleep patterns (76%) and ability to focus (73%).

'My stress ... leaves me [too] fatigued to do even daily tasks, let alone deal with the big issues. And with fatigue comes low motivation to even do things that could help me cope. I rarely go out these days, which contributes to the loneliness.'

Female, 22

¹¹ Using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale.

Coping with stress

How have young people met the challenges they face?

Among the young people surveyed, the vast majority – nearly 97 per cent – had modified or adapted their daily habits to help them cope with the stresses they identified. The coping mechanisms young people reported using ranged from recreational and leisure pursuits to specific and more focused wellbeing techniques. The period young people were asked about covered COVID-19 lockdowns. While restrictions varied across states/territories, in general they limited the respondents' options, especially for in-person, social activities.

A high proportion of young people surveyed had taken steps to cope with stress by devoting time to something they associated with feeling better – for example, exercising or spending time with friends or family. Spending more time on entertainment, including watching TV and listening to music, or on digital and social media, were leading choices for counteracting stress.

Habits or activities specifically intended to promote wellbeing or relaxation featured prominently – for example, taking study breaks, using relaxation techniques or taking prescribed medication.

The following coping strategies were most commonly cited by participants (see also Figure 19).¹²

Leisure/spare-time activities:

- doing things I enjoy (44%)
- spending time with family (42%)
- shopping (38%)
- volunteering (10%).


Digital/entertainment:

- watching TV/listening to music (61%)
- spending time on digital/social media (57%)
- gaming (28%).


Wellbeing/health measures:

- exercising (43%)
- taking study breaks (38%)
- using relaxation techniques (22%)
- taking prescribed medication (22%)
- eating healthily (20%).

A surprisingly small proportion of young people – around one in five – had used alcohol or drugs to help them cope with stress.

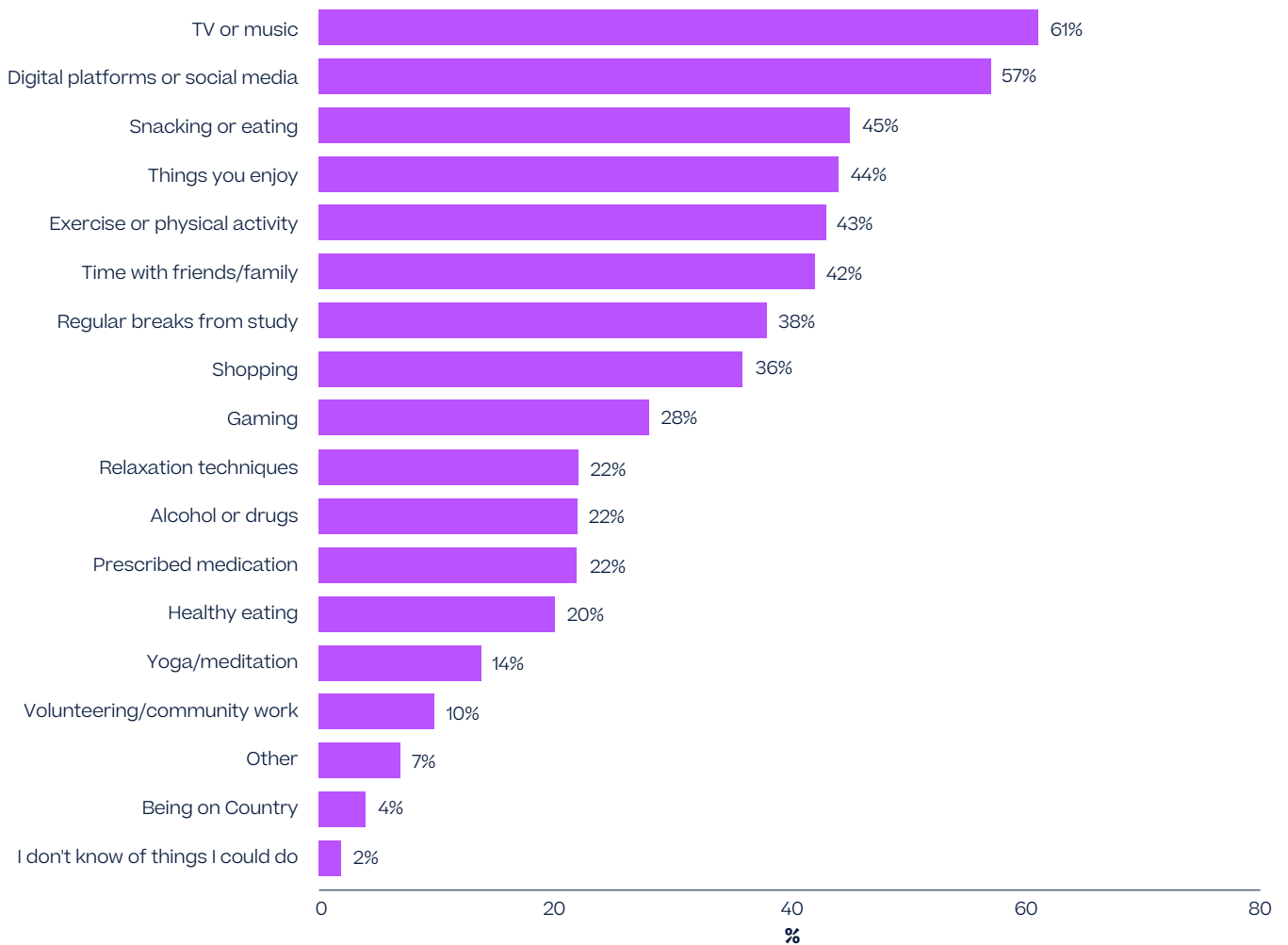


A high proportion of young people surveyed had taken steps to cope with stress.



¹² Grouped from survey responses.

Figure 19. Coping mechanisms used in the last 12 months



When asked to name the main thing that helped them to cope with anxiety, young people often enlarged on their responses discussed above, using open text fields. They reported that they had dedicated time and attention to wellbeing, whether through focusing on exercise and relaxation techniques or by taking prescribed medication. Spending more time on leisure activities also recurred as the most effective coping response among young people, with activities including music, gaming, reading and watching television.

Seeking connection stood out among the coping responses young people described and was widespread across the age groups surveyed. Young people described the support of friends, family or the local community as instrumental to their ability to cope with difficult times.

'Music and writing poetry.'

Non-binary young person, 16

'Attending local youth hub after school and being social.'

Female, 16

'New friendships and getting closer with those who support me.'

Male, 16



In some circumstances, young people found engaging with professional mental health services the most effective measure for helping them to cope with their situations.

'My school counsellor and school psychologist.'

Male, 16

'[I have] gone to therapy/seen a psychologist. Why is this not an option? Normalise seeking treatment.'

Female, 24

Self-directed strategies, including journaling, time management and problem solving, were the most valuable coping mechanisms some young people had tried, better enabling them to rationalise and address the issues they faced.

'Writing down my worries and then identifying steps I can take to alleviate them. (If none, try to be ok that it's out of my control).'

Female, 19

'Organise my day to get the stuff I need to do done so I'm less stressed.'

Female, 21

Faith was the main source of support for some young people, typically described as a personal rather than a social practice (e.g. attending a place of worship).

'Prayer and setting achievable goals.'

Female, 19

In some instances, young people described using avoidance strategies, such as distracting themselves, whether through work or recreation, although these weren't necessarily seen as solutions.

'Diving into work and keeping focused on tasks.'

Female, 24

'I haven't found something that helped me cope, only to ignore the problem (overeating, watching YouTube, etc).'

Female, 17

A candid response offered by some young people was that nothing they had tried was effective.

'Nothing has helped. I'm still struggling to deal with everything.'

Female, 19

More exceptionally, we heard from young people who had sought stress relief by self-harming.

What support do young people need?

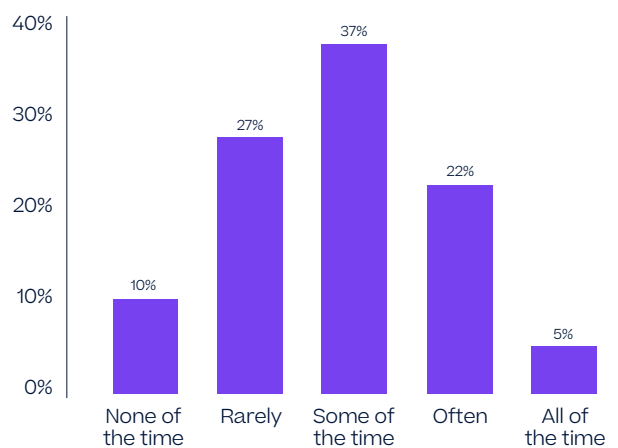
A compelling majority of young people surveyed indicated they had needed some level of support to deal with their stresses over the past year (whether these needs were fulfilled or not). The survey asked both what type of support young people had needed and how much they had needed it. Three main components made up the support young people looked to in response to their worries, primarily:

- direct connection – person-to-person support, including informal and formal sources
- information – sources of advice and knowledge about support options
- financial support to facilitate access to professional help.

Young people reported that having a trusted listener was the **key support** they needed to help them cope with their worries. Almost 70 per cent said they had needed the support of a trusted listener quite a bit or a lot over the past year. However, the study also found that one-third of young people (33%) reported that they rarely, or never, felt close to other people. This suggests that for many, this important need for listening support may be unmet (Figure 20).

Figure 20. How closely connected young people feel to others

Self-rating of sense of connection to others across the past month



For over half of the young people surveyed, **access to information** (56%) or **knowledge of support options** (50%) were key pillars of the support they needed. Just under half (48%) had needed access to professional mental health support, while connection with other young people was a key need for 46 per cent. Almost four in ten young people (38%) said they needed financial support to enable them to get the help they needed.

There was a clear upward trend in the levels of high support needs (i.e. those young people who said they needed support a lot) as age increased. Those aged 22–25 years reported needing all types of support a lot, compared with younger age groups.

Notably, the upper cohort reported considerably higher levels of need than the younger cohort when it came to help-seeking knowledge (31%), access to a mental health professional (43%) and financial support to enable them to access help (32%).

The increased levels of need for support reported by the older cohort surveyed may well reflect the life stage these young people were navigating. The search for fulfilling or secure work, the difficulty in finding affordable housing and feeling inadequately supported were recurrent challenges among 22–25-year-olds. One respondent outlined a need for support that targets this range of issues.

It is also possible that a greater awareness of support options and of help-seeking experience among the older age group drives their increasing requirement for professional mental health services.

‘Support that doesn’t just come in the form of mental health specialists but people who are able to provide education and assistance with issues to do with cost of living.’

Male, 23



What would help now?

Young people aged 22–25 told us:

‘Better recognition of stress and stress-inducing work in the workplace.’

Female, 24

‘A mentor. A coach.’

Male, 24

‘Access to cash flow. A fitting job for both myself and the employer. I want to be a pilot, so I need to save for this career progression.’

Female, 23

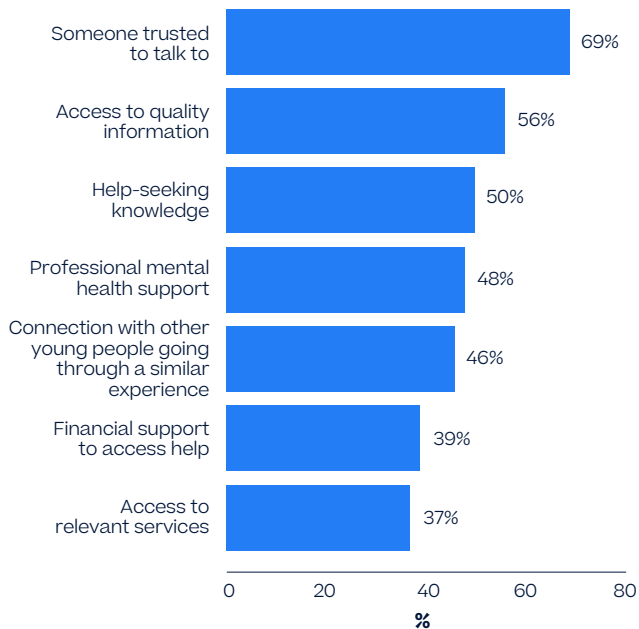
‘Working less to focus more on community and country. Cost of living has prevented this, particularly because of the costs of renting close to my networks, but it is the number one thing that could improve my life.’

Female, 25

Figure 21 summarises the support needs cited by study participants.

Figure 21. Support needs of young people

Percentage needing support type quite a bit and a lot.



Access to professional mental health support

Respondents aged 22–25 reported the highest need for professional mental health support (62%) of all age groups; however, this age cohort had lower levels of probable mental illness than the sample as a whole (41% based on K6 criteria). Conversely, the youngest age group, 16–18-year-olds, had the lowest proportion of all groups reporting that they had needed access to professional mental health support (40%), and yet had a greater proportion evidencing high levels of psychological distress (44% based on K6 scores). The apparent paradox observed among 16–18-year-olds may be partially obscuring the real needs of this younger cohort. Previous research points to the reticence of younger adolescents to seek formal mental health support, beyond family and friends, even when they are experiencing mental health difficulties (Lawrence et al., 2015). Common barriers to seeking professional help among adolescents with serious mental disorders include stigma, low mental health literacy, parent ‘gatekeeping’, financial difficulties, and availability of services (Aguirre Velasco et al., 2020; Lawrence et al., 2015; Radez et al., 2021). The greater readiness to seek formal help among older respondents in this study may reflect shifting attitudes and decreasing stigma surrounding mental health, as well as increased resources and independence. This is explored further in the next section.





The ‘one thing’ that would help

We asked young people to name the **one thing that could help them**. Most young people outlined realistic, achievable changes they hoped for in their current situations, with only a small minority describing more far-fetched scenarios (e.g. financial windfalls). Overall, young people articulated ways that their lives could be improved that aligned to the issues that worry them. These perspectives on ‘the one thing that could help’ ranged from stronger social connections or financial relief, to reduced stress levels (including study stress) and better general wellbeing. What was common to many young people’s responses across categories was the emphasis on enabling measures that increased their agency to improve their own situations.

Stronger social relationships emerged as a key theme in young people’s wish lists. They looked for opportunities to spend time with family and loved ones, for better or more meaningful peer relationships, and for someone to talk to, echoing the need for such support voiced by young people discussed previously.

‘Being able to have a trusted friend that would understand my struggles and that I can speak to honestly and openly.’

Female, 18

‘A more involved social group. Spending more time with them, having more meaningful connections, etc.’

Female, 17

Money was a significant wish among those surveyed. Young people described their hope of finding better-paying jobs, reducing their financial stress and improving their financial security. While a higher income would, of course, address the immediate cost-of-living problem that many young people face, they also saw money as playing a more instrumental role in helping them to carve out their adult lives, allowing them to study, gain independence and move out of the family home, to access professional mental health services, or simply to participate in social activities.

‘A lot of my problems revolve around financial stress. I can’t stop working to focus on studying because I have living expenses, and I can’t stop studying because it’s important for my career. So either way it’s a catch 22.’

Non-binary young person, 25

‘A second job would resolve a lot of pressure I feel from family, financially, with regards to stress about the future, and give me a better sense of routine.’

Gender diverse young person, 19

‘Financial aid, a basic income to provide for me while I’m studying & unable to work full-time yet having to pay for most items personally.’

Female, 16

Access to **mental health services** also featured widely in response to this ‘one wish’ question. However, the difficulty of finding a mental health professional was often cited as a key barrier to access. Financial barriers were also regularly cited and, in some cases, adult attitudes.

‘If psychological help was more accessible ... My clinic has a doctor shortage. Then when you actually get the mental health plan you have to find someone who doesn’t have a long wait to get in and find someone with the lowest gap fee possible. [There are] too many barriers to getting help.’

Female, 23

‘If adults were more empathetic with the youth, particularly with their mental health.’

Male, 16

Improved health and wellbeing recurred in young people’s desired improvements to their current situations. They wished for more opportunity to exercise or relax, for better self-organising skills or for better sleep, often to strengthen their coping abilities. Young people sometimes made explicit connections between activities requiring personal initiative and their overall wellbeing. For example, exercise was typically described as an instrumental means to achieving better wellbeing, while gaining motivation or confidence was regarded as an attribute required for a fulfilling study or working career.

‘Going to the gym more often to clear my mind.’

Male, 19

‘Having better time management skills, and more motivation in the workplace and at home.’

Female, 16

‘Training to improve my body and overall physical and mental health.’

Male, 17

Stress reduction, frequently relating to the demands of study or work, was a resounding desire voiced by young people as the solution to their current challenges. Young people’s responses evidenced a sense of the overwhelming accumulation of pressures – sometimes expressed as a wish for immediate relief.

‘A bloody break. I need a break from university as soon as possible.’

Female, 19

‘Take a break from everything and everyone. Just be alone.’

Non-binary young person, 23

‘Tips for coping, steps to take that are not overwhelming (in response to concerns about global issues – i.e. conflict, poverty, climate— what can I actually do that will make a difference).’

Female, 25



Guidance and mentoring were specified by young people who were struggling with their future direction. Among these young people, there was sometimes a discernible lack of support targeted to their stage of life – that is, decision-making, embarking on future pathways in study or work.

'Advice about how to be a proper adult after finishing uni and getting a full-time job – e.g. should I be saving up for a house deposit or just renting permanently? How much should I spend on a car? Etc.'

Male, 23

'Someone to guide me in the next stage of my life and direct me where I should go, as well as someone just [to chat with] about mental health.'

Female, 17

Although most young people foresaw possible solutions to their problems, in some instances a sense of futility left them feeling demoralised, with lower confidence in measures that might improve their future situation.

'I am at a point in time where I have no clue what would help. I am just stuck because I don't know where to begin or how to help myself.'

Male, 20

'I really do try and make everyone around me happy, but I always seem to fail. I don't have parents who teach me things and provide much for me. I'm currently looking for another job, so hopefully I can move out soon and get my car working.'

Female, 17

Some young people expressed that they were too overwhelmed to feel much optimism about their future situations. This sense of hopelessness sometimes arose from the multiple, overlapping problems young people were facing unsupported.

'Bullying and family violence has impacted my wellbeing and made me more depressed and anxious ... Even tho I've been working on recovering myself with medication and therapy it still feels like every time I take a step forward life makes me take 10 steps back.'

Female, 22

'Nothing is accessible. Waiting lists are years long. Any legitimate help has ... \$100 per visit GAP fees ... The hospital can't even deal with mental illness issues. I have been abandoned by the system repeatedly.'

Female, 24



Discussion

The findings of the study highlight both the scope of worries confronting young people growing up in Australia and the ongoing erosion of their wellbeing as a result of their stress burden.

The views young people shared outline a scenario where not only is their day-to-day wellbeing under threat, but also their resilience and future aspirations. Young people are forging their adult pathways in the wake of a global pandemic, environmental disasters, an escalating cost-of-living crisis, and at a time where the world of work is rapidly transforming, making secure, meaningful employment an elusive goal for many.

The close alignment between global challenges and the issues that most concern young people – the future, study and the cost of living – is striking. This congruence suggests that young people are not only closely attuned to the world they inhabit; they are fearful about their future place in it. Over one-third (36%) said they are rarely or never optimistic about the future.

The high incidence of behavioural and emotional disturbances young people reported as a direct result of their worries is of particular concern. Evidence has pointed to a link between disturbed sleep in adolescents and higher levels of depression, anxiety, anger, inattention, and drug and alcohol use (Roberts & Duong, 2014).

In their twenties, a time of emerging independence, young people were more burdened and less equipped to cope with their worries, nearly half saying they had needed (not necessarily received) mental health support to cope over the past year. Alongside their most prevalent concerns, stress about work and housing were emerging as worries among this age group, pointing to the need for age-targeted support options that meet young people at their life stage.

The findings presented here also draw attention to concerning disparities by gender. Among young women, the prevalence of all the top concerns was greater than for young men, alongside a wide range of other issues: feeling down or anxious, body image, work, family conflict. These findings are consistent with the well-documented reality that women are disproportionately impacted by mental disorders across their lifetimes (ABS, 2022). They also help to illuminate the breadth of factors that may underlie psychological distress. Among gender diverse young people, in addition to a higher prevalence of study and future stress, two issues of acute concern – namely, self-harm (22%) and suicidal thoughts/behaviour (28%) – were also starkly evident.



Among young people's most prominent concerns are issues of pressing concern for the broader population – for example, the cost of living, the future, stress itself – though it may be that 16–25-year-olds are most susceptible to the impact of these issues. And while the issues discussed here are reported as discrete worries, the reality of young people's lives is that their worries frequently overlap and influence one another. For example, insecure work exacerbates the problem of unaffordable housing and increases the overall stress burden for a young person.

It is too early to say how the high levels of psychological distress among the young people ReachOut surveyed may translate into outcomes in their adult lives in terms of their health and wellbeing, their education or their work pathways. A small, but concerning, minority who participated in this research already felt too demoralised to envisage a brighter future. However, the worsening mental health of young people in Australia has been well documented (ABS, 2022; Burns et al., 2020). It is also established that 75 per cent of lifetime mental disorders show onset by the age of 25 (McGorry, 2014), underlining the urgent need for better support within the critical window of adolescence to early adulthood.

The findings of this research add to existing knowledge, providing a more nuanced understanding of how young people experience stress in their daily lives. Our study has brought to light the often-corrosive effects on their wellbeing of poor sleep, mood disturbance and concentration at a crucial, formative stage of their early adulthood. Young people respond to stress using what is readily available to them: they seek the support of friends and family, distraction in the digital world, exercise or volunteering – and for some, these are adequate strategies. However, those who are less well buffered – for example, young people with lower income, less social capital, weaker family support, poorer physical and mental health, or insecure housing – are less equipped to cope and more vulnerable to the range of wellbeing impacts discussed here.



Young people respond to stress using what is readily available to them.

Where to from here?

The young people who shared their views and experiences for this study hope for realistic, achievable developments that will improve their current lives and support their future aspirations. Their hopes are, overwhelmingly, aligned to the issues that worry them: economic hardship, study pressures and future uncertainty. Young people's hopes are, of course, diverse, yet they share common ground. Their hopes can be seen as enabling measures that strengthen young people's ability to carve out their adult lives and look to the future with greater confidence. Specifically, young people voiced their need for the following supports:

- **More accessible, affordable mental health support, including both professional and non-professional options:**

'Easier, quicker and cheaper access to mental health professionals, and more understanding doctors.'

Female, 17

'Being able to talk to someone about these sensitive issues – ideally someone trained. But I also appreciate talking to someone with life experience.'

Male, 17

- **Mental health education for young people and those who care for them, particularly in the context of school and study.**

'Education for people around me to better understand how to help me.'

Female, 18

'More acceptance and support around day-to-day problems people with mental health disorders face – e.g. a quiet place in school if you're having/feel like you're about to have a panic attack.'

Gender diverse young person, 16

- **Financial aid and greater stability, to allow young people to plan and pursue their study and/or work pathways.**

'A stable job with stable income that allows me to continue studying. That's my best solution, I believe.'

Male, 20

'Having the Youth Allowance rate raised to be at the very least at the poverty line so I could stop worrying about how I'll afford both rent and groceries.'

Female, 18

'Raising minimum wage, coming down hard on companies that abuse their power in incorrect pay/work times and making better laws to suit young people's needs when it comes to employment.'

Female, 24

- **Stronger social connections within both local community and digital spaces.**

'A more involved social group. Spending more time with them, having more meaningful connections, etc.'

Female, 17

'More community groups, esp. aimed at youth who aren't teenagers.'

Female, 22

'An online support group where you can talk to people about similar issues.'

Female, 22

- **Guidance or mentoring to support young people's transitional years and early career steps.**

'Access to good-quality services that promote finding good work or career opportunities, with insight into what the workplace is really like.'

Gender diverse young person, 24

'Guidance about planning for the future from people that understand my experiences and concerns.'

Female, 21

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