

Motivated to feel better:

How young people
use social media to
cope with tough times

Snapshot from ReachOut's research:
*Harnessing the feed: Social media for
mental health information and support*

Key findings



- When **searching for mental health information** online, including on social and community platforms, young people are looking for **practical advice on how to cope with challenges (72%)** and **information that makes them feel they're going to be okay (71%)**.

- Young people view the entertainment and distraction provided by social and community platforms as something that can **help them to cope with tough times**, particularly in the short term.

- When feeling stressed, many young people use social media in ways that **promote long-term wellbeing** – for example, to find the information they need to handle a problem they're experiencing.

- **Age and platform preferences** impact on whether social and community platforms are used in ways that promote or inhibit long-term wellbeing.

- Young people are **aware** that the design features of different social platforms **influence the type of support** they might expect to gain from them.

Summary

This brief explores research conducted by ReachOut to better understand the way young people use social media (e.g. TikTok and Instagram) and community platforms (e.g. Discord and Reddit) when seeking mental health information and support. Our findings suggest that young people are motivated to use these platforms to **gain reassurance** and to **access practical advice** on how to cope with challenges. Notably, many young people also **use social platforms to cope with stress in ways that promote long-term wellbeing** – for example, to find information about how to manage a problem they are experiencing. Young people view the entertainment and distraction provided by social platforms as something that may help them to cope with tough times, yet they are often aware this is not a long-term solution. **Age and platform preference influenced whether young people used social media in a helpful way when feeling stressed.** Finally, young people show a keen awareness of the different ways platforms are designed and of how this influences the type of support they are likely to gain from them.

About the study

This research brief is part of a series that summarises some key findings from ReachOut's report *Harnessing the feed: Social media for mental health information and support*. The multiphase, mixed-methods study in which qualitative data from 22 young people informed the design of a national survey of 2056 young people aged 16–25 was conducted in November 2023.

Social media as a source of support

Social media has become increasingly influential in young people's lives, particularly in recent years. Research published by ReachOut, exploring what parents and carers worry about, found that 59 per cent were concerned about young people's use of social media (ReachOut Australia, 2004). However, young people did not share the same level of concern as their adult counterparts, with only 34 per cent of them identifying social media as an issue of concern in a parallel study (ReachOut Australia, 2023). Importantly, in that same study, 57 per cent of young people said they spent time on digital platforms to cope with other issues that concerned them, such as study stress. This suggests that to examine only the negative impacts of social media would overlook the possibilities for support these platforms may offer young people.



Searching for reassurance and practical advice

The top 3 things young people are looking for when searching online for mental health content are:

- **practical advice** on how to cope with challenges (72%)
- **information** that makes them feel they're **going to be okay** (71%)
- information about specific **mental health conditions** (69%)

3 in 4 young people **report searching for mental health information** on social media and community platforms

TikTok (31%), **YouTube** (26%) and **Instagram** (15%) are the **top 3 preferred platforms** to search for mental health information



Young people are **using social media as a key support** when seeking practical advice on how to cope with challenges in their lives and to gain reassurance about the future. When searching for mental health content online, young people reported that **they use social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and Instagram as much as Google**. They sometimes described how even apparently passive engagement could offer immediate relief from stress.

'Being able to read or watch about people in my situation sometimes reassures me. [B]eing able to gain more information about how I'm feeling just enables me to be calmer.'

(Male, 21, rural area)

Notably, young people in **rural and remote** areas were **turning to social platforms at higher rates (54%)** than those in major cities (**47%**), suggesting that these young people are more reliant on readily available digital resources to support their mental health.

We also found that young people aged 22–25 years tended to search for mental health information on social media more frequently than young people aged 16–18 years.

Entertainment and distraction helps in the short term

Young people gave **3 main reasons for using social media** when feeling worried, stressed or down.

77% for entertainment

72% to fill or pass the time

66% to distract from things that worry them

Young people in this study described using social media for **entertainment** and **distraction** as ways to **feel better during stressful times**. Thematic analysis of open-ended questions suggested that young people believe social media helps them to relax and distracts them from overthinking. This includes accessing mental health content, as well as content that young people simply enjoyed or were interested in.

'When I'm overthinking, I tend to go to TikTok or YouTube to watch content which helps me to calm down.'

(Female, 24, major city)

'I feel like having social medias like TikTok [and] Instagram are pretty good distractions from overthinking or something that's making you stressed out.'

(Male, 18, major city)

'My experience has been good as I see the contents I'm interested in and it's a good way to not dwell on negative aspects of life.'

(Female, 17, regional area)



However, young people were also aware that social media's ability to entertain and distract is beneficial mainly in the short term, and is not a long-term solution.

'It can be calming and be a short-term solution ... before a long-term solution can be found.'

(Male, 18, regional area)

'I think it's a good place to get a start on advice and help ...'

(Male, 25, regional area)



Age and platform preferences influence coping strategies

Our research suggests that the different motivations young people have for using social media when feeling stressed broadly align with **3 established coping strategies**. Young people who prefer particular platforms tend to use:

1 Problem-focused coping

When feeling stressed, those who preferred to use **Reddit, ChatGPT and YouTube** were more likely to report **problem-focused coping** than users of other platforms.

- An average of **48%** of these platform users reported being motivated to **look for information to solve problems**.

2 Social-support seeking

When feeling stressed, those who preferred to use **Discord, Snapchat and Facebook** were more likely to report **social-support seeking** than users of other platforms.

- An average of **74%** of these platform users reported being motivated to **connect with friends or family**.

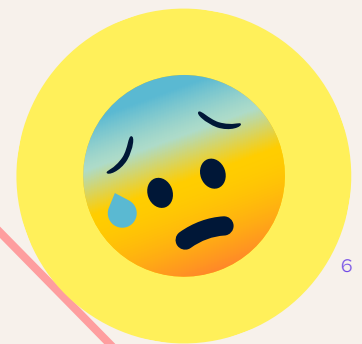
3 Avoidant coping

When feeling stressed, those who preferred to use **TikTok and podcast platforms** were more likely to report **avoidant coping** than users of other platforms.

- An average of **76%** of these platform users reported being motivated to **distract themselves from things that are worrying them**.



Some experts have found that **not all coping strategies are equally useful**. Young people who use *problem-focused coping* (e.g. directly confronting problems to find a solution) and *social support seeking strategies* (e.g. seeking other people's support with problems) typically have *better* mental health outcomes in the long term (Richardson et al., 2020). *Avoidant coping* (e.g. distracting oneself from problems) has *poorer* long-term mental health outcomes when relied upon too heavily, but short-term use of avoidant coping may be helpful in the early stages of stress or where a young person is experiencing stress that they can't do anything to change (e.g. stress associated with financial disadvantage; Modecki et al., 2022).





We also found that young people's **age and platform preference were associated with different motivations for using social media**, which suggested different coping strategies were evident.

Young people aged 16–18 years were more likely than older users (22–25 years) to report using platforms for entertainment or distraction. These motivations are associated in the literature with 'avoidant coping' (Modecki et al., 2022). This highlights that **younger users may benefit from support to develop more effective, problem-focused coping habits** to support their wellbeing when using social platforms.

Young people show a keen awareness of the different ways platforms are designed and how this influences the **type of support** they are likely to seek or gain from them. Raising the possibility that young people might actively seek out different platforms to meet their particular support needs.

'Some platforms are clearly not designed with this [finding out about mental health and wellbeing] in mind. Others like YouTube, Reddit and Discord have a community that is sometimes very helpful and kind[;] it's always a risk but most of the time worth it in my experience. Also YouTube does have links to websites... on some videos.'

(Male, 19, regional area)

'Google has been pretty accurate for me in terms of finding out information, but TikTok is more personal, and I sometimes find myself relating personally to another person's experience.'

(Female, 18, major city)

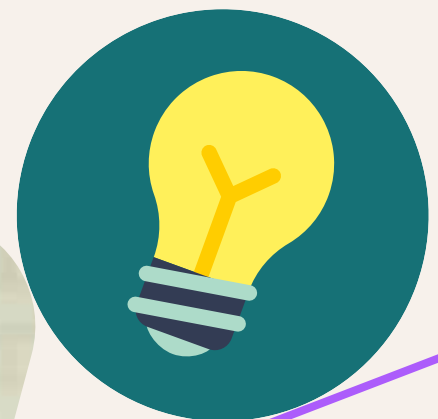
Conclusions

Overall, our research suggests that **many young people are using social media to cope with stress** in ways that are likely to have a positive impact on their wellbeing. Our findings warrant pause for reflection, especially given that attention has predominantly focused on the negative impact of social media use. This research highlights some of the ways young people use social media to cope with stress: by **connecting socially, discovering practical information** and **gaining short-term relief** from everyday challenges.

Our findings also highlight a **relationship between the platform a young person prefers to use** while feeling stressed and the **quality of the coping strategy** they tend to use to feel better. The range of motivations young people have for using social media in tough times speaks to the need for a more nuanced understanding of how they use social media to cope. For a young person who uses social media in a problem-focused way (e.g. to find the information they need to handle a problem), social media use may help them to *maintain* their wellbeing in

the face of stress. However, if a young person is frequently or exclusively using social media to engage in avoidant coping (e.g. ignoring a problem by looking at unrelated content), this may contribute to or be indicative of *poorer wellbeing* (Richardson et al., 2020). **It is possible that different platforms may lead young people towards more – or less – effective coping strategies.** Young people show an awareness about how the design features of different digital platforms influence the type of support they are likely to seek or gain from that platform.

Young people also identify **entertainment and distraction** as something they find helpful when feeling stressed. While research suggests that ‘less is more’ when it comes to these strategies, from the point of view of young people, **some use of these strategies might also be better than none** (Modecki et al., 2022). Looking to the future, our findings tell us that there is something to be gained from **empowering young people with the tools and guidance they need to use digital platforms effectively** to help cope with tough times.





How ReachOut can help

[ReachOut](#) is a leading online mental health service supporting young people during tough times. We help young people feel better about today and the future, no matter what challenge they're facing. ReachOut provides a safe online place where young people can openly express themselves, explore what's happening in their lives, connect with people who understand their situation, and find the resources to help them manage their challenges now and in the future. ReachOut has been designed specifically for – and with – young people. Resources are available on topics such as [cyberbullying](#), [body image](#) and [managing a young person's technology use](#), including [A Parent's Guide to Instagram](#).



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ReachOut Australia would like to thank the 2056 young people who participated in this research.

Acknowledgement of Country

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.

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