

Rethinking

connections:

Young people

and social media

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

# Key findings

- While social media is often blamed for amplifying loneliness and unhappiness, young people tell us that these platforms can enable them to make **meaningful connections** with others.
- Almost 2 in 3 young people who search for mental health information on social media are looking for **connection with people who have experienced the same thing**.
- Young people want improvements made so that online spaces are safer and **more positive places** for them to make connections with others.



## Summary

Social media is often presented as cutting young people off from 'real-world' social connections, adding to their loneliness (American SPCC, 2023). But this doesn't match up with what young people themselves say. Our study finds that social media and community platforms (including video-sharing platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, as well as discussion forums like Reddit and Discord) can facilitate important and meaningful connections for young people and provide them with places where they feel heard, understood and supported.

## About the study

This research brief 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.

# Staying connected in tough times



**65%** of young people who search for mental health information on social media are looking for connection with people who have experienced the same thing.

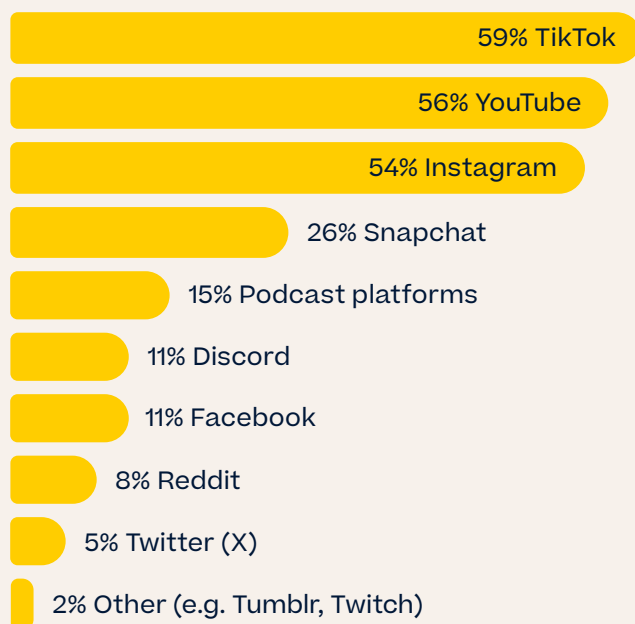


**38%** of young people who use social media when they are feeling worried, stressed or down are looking for connection with people with similar experiences and interests.



**28%** of young people who use social media when they are feeling worried, stressed or down are looking for connection with family and friends.

## Which platforms do young people use when worried, stressed or down?



'It's very nice having other people to relate to ... makes you not feel as alone.' (Female, 18, major city)

## What are young people's motivations for using social media and community platforms in tough times?

When feeling worried, stressed or down, 38 per cent of the young people surveyed told us they wanted to connect with people and/or communities who have **similar experiences and/or interests**, while 28 per cent said they were motivated by wanting to **connect with friends or family**. Young people who selected Discord, Snapchat and Facebook as their preferred platforms were more likely to be motivated by wanting to connect with others than were people who preferred platforms such as TikTok or YouTube, suggesting that some platforms are particularly helpful in developing those connections.

When asked about what they are looking for when accessing mental health information online, 70 per cent of participants said they were looking for information that made them feel like they were going to be okay. Nearly 7 in 10 (65%) said they were looking for connection with other people who had experienced the same thing. Young people with a probable serious mental illness were<sup>1</sup> particularly likely to use their preferred platform for the purpose of looking for connection (41%), compared with people with no probable serious mental illness (32%), suggesting that social media and community platforms play an important role in facilitating connection for more vulnerable young people.

'I like the relatability side of people posting what they go through so I feel less alone. It's all well and good to give advice and tips and say "you're not alone", but hearing stories of people that have struggled with depression and lived to talk about it would kinda prove that maybe I can do that too.' (Female, 18, major city)

<sup>1</sup> Measured using the Kessler Screening Scale for Psychological Distress (K6)

# Venting, sharing and community: What connection means to young people

Just over half (54%) of young people in this study who reported seeking connection online said they **receive support for their mental health** on social media platforms. Study participants told us they use social media and community platforms to connect with others in a range of ways, from finding spaces to vent about their frustrations, to hearing about the personal experiences of others. This is the case even on platforms that might often be thought of as for entertainment rather than community-building. The top three preferred social media platforms among young people who said they are looking for connection with others were the same as the participant sample more broadly: TikTok, Instagram and YouTube – despite the fact that TikTok and YouTube are video-sharing platforms, rather than platforms with the primary purpose of facilitating direct communication with others. Nevertheless, while some platforms are designed to foster communities, qualitative data revealed that young people use content-sharing platforms as ways to **connect with others they can relate to**.

‘TikTok is more personal, and I sometimes find myself relating personally to another person’s experience.’ (Female, 18, major city)

Viewing content from people with **lived experience** of mental illness makes young people feel connected to others who understand what they are going through. While, overall, study participants reported that they trusted content from mental health professionals over content from people with lived experience, 78 per cent of the young people who said that seeking connections online was a key motivation for them also said they prefer mental health content from people with real-life experience. Young people reported that viewing such content, even when posted by content creators with whom they had no direct personal relationship, made them **feel less alone**.



For some young people, social media and community platforms can provide safe spaces for them to share their thoughts freely and anonymously. Nearly 4 in 10 (38%) of the young people in this study reported that they are looking for a place to **vent or express themselves** when seeking mental health information on social media.

‘[I have found] groups/pages specifically for people with certain mental health conditions or diagnoses incredibly helpful. Not necessarily in giving me advice on how to treat myself, but to simply get validation that I am not the only one, that I am not an inherently bad, flawed or unlovable person because of my diagnoses. Of course, professionals do their best to deliver this message to me as well, but I have found hearing from others has been more impactful. Being neurodivergent, [I] often feel incredibly isolated and like an "other", so digital/social platforms have really helped me feel less alone in my experiences/struggles.’ (Female, 21, major city)

‘For me, using Reddit and Instagram allowed me to understand that what I was struggling with was OCD and not just general anxiety. Once I sought help, I got put on medication + found ways to manage my OCD and now I am 10x better. I figured this out through looking up my symptoms on Google and Reddit + following a writer on Instagram who described very similar experiences and had OCD.’ (Female, 19, major city)

# Online interactions can also be challenging

While enthusiastic about the benefits of connecting with others on social media, young people are not blind to the risks associated with social platforms. Nearly **4 in 10 (38%)** of survey participants say they are very or extremely concerned about the presence of bullies, trolls and other bad actors on social media. Open-text responses highlight some of the **harmful behaviours** seen online, and the frustration that some platforms don't do enough to prevent or remove such content, which potentially limits the value of platforms for supportive connection.

'I've seen a lot of people revealing their traumatic past, and people in the comments being completely rude and making fun/ jokes about said person. It's horrendous and disgraceful. It enrages me ... that nothing is done to these people who leave such comments and how digital platforms aren't enforcing consequences against these people.'  
(Female, 18, major city)

Some young people were also concerned about the potential for online communities to become unhelpful echo chambers for those experiencing mental health concerns or to trap them in spaces where they feel bad. As evident from the responses of young people, many are able to identify these risks for themselves and take steps to avoid them.

'They often allow for echo chambers to form where people's ideas are not challenged – and thus mentally unhealthy people may have their maladaptive ideas reinforced, while on the other hand people with negative attitudes to the mentally unwell can band together and form internet hate groups.'  
(Male, 19, rural area)

'There is an alarming [amount] of romanticisation of mental illnesses/suffering, throwing around buzzwords, confusing one thing for another, and self-diagnosis (not that it is entirely bad itself).'  
(Male, 20, major city)

## How can young people be supported to make healthy online connections?

Young people say they want **safe spaces** online where they can talk about their worries and mental health concerns, especially with others who are going through similar experiences. Study participants said they wanted to see platforms foster 'supportive communities that prioritise empathy, respect, and understanding' (Female, 20, regional area) and encourage 'respectful and supportive interactions, promote empathy and understanding, and provide opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and support' (Male, 22, major city).

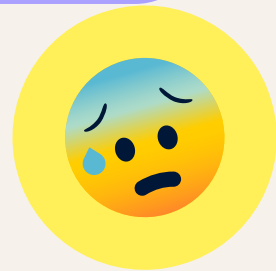
### Young people want ...

'... anonymous forums for people to share their experiences of different mental health conditions.'  
(Female, 18, regional area)

'... privacy and a space without judgement.'  
(Male, 25, major city)

'... connections with people experiencing similar situations.'  
(Female, 18, major city)

'... more moderated spaces for youth, and ... a decrease in cyberbullying, as it's gotten worse recently.'  
(Female, 19, major city)



# Conclusions

This study found that young people use social media in a variety of ways to make meaningful connections with others. In addition to using some platforms to connect directly with friends and family, they find that platforms geared more towards content sharing than direct communication can also foster a sense of community. Communities form around **shared interests**, and viewing content from people who have lived experience of mental health challenges can make young people **feel less alone** in what they are experiencing. Young people experiencing serious mental illness may often feel particularly isolated (Prizeman et al., 2023), and while such individuals may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of social media (Katz & El Asam, 2019), our study also shows that social media and community platforms play an important role in supporting them.

These findings are in agreement with previous studies demonstrating that the online world can be an important way for young people to connect with groups of like-minded individuals (Schneiders & Gilbert, 2024). Dahl et al. (2024) argue that some young people, especially those who struggle to find a sense of belonging in offline spaces, can benefit from social media use and find companionship with peers in online spaces. Our study has demonstrated that the meaning of **'community' in the online world** should be understood in a broad sense, even encompassing one-sided relationships with content creators with whom young people can develop a psychological bond that helps them to feel supported in their mental health journey (Lotun et al., 2022).

Social media platforms have become an embedded part of young people's lives. As such, responses from platforms and government that focus on supporting the development of safe, supportive and healthy online spaces for young people are essential. These should be co-designed with young people, and be accompanied by a range of other support measures. The young people in this study called for more safe spaces on digital platforms where they can discuss mental health concerns, highlighting the importance of the types of online communities that ReachOut provides. By listening to young people and considering their perspectives, we can work towards more inclusive and constructive solutions to the challenges and risks posed by social media.



## 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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