



Being there:
YOUNG PEOPLE
supporting their
friends through
tough times

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Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands across Australia where this research was conducted, and recognise their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to elders past and present. We also extend that respect to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who took part in this study.

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About us

This research was conducted by a multidisciplinary team made up of academics, industry professionals working in mental health programs, and clinicians, with the intention of delivering a robust, accessible and practical report that would have significant applications.

Young and Resilient Research Centre is an Australian-based, international research centre at Western Sydney University that unites young people with researchers, practitioners, innovators and policy-makers to explore the role of technology in children's and young people's lives and how it can be used to improve individual and community resilience across generations.

www.westernsydney.edu.au/young-andresilient

batyr is a preventative mental health charity, created and driven by young people, for young people. Through sharing lived experience stories and peer-to-peer education, batyr is keeping young people from reaching the point of crisis and changing lives.

www.batyr.com.au

Erin Dolan and Associates is a proven provider of compassionate, evidence based and clinical psychological services in Gippsland for consumers across the developmental life span. As an organisation it delivers therapeutic services, clinical supervision, research and consultation to both government and non government organisations.

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Executive Summary



Young people’s lives are characterised by uncertainty and inequalities. In these contexts they experience tough times, which includes mental ill-health.

Research shows us that young people often go to their friends when struggling or going through tough times.

There is emerging research examining informal support amongst friends, however, more needs to be done to understand the experiences of young people undertaking this support role. This is the focus of this report.

This research undertook a national survey with 169 young people who support friends from across Australia, as well as five focus groups with 34 young people aged 16 – 25 from Melbourne and Sydney who support friends. We sought to better understand the experiences of friends who support friends through tough times.

Our findings show:

3.5hrs

The amount of time per week young people spend supporting friends, totalling 182 hours per year.

94%

of young people said they have helped a friend through mental ill-health.

When providing support

69.2%

Received the most support from their peers and friends

– Young people report medium and high capabilities for helping others (based on the Natural Helper Scale).

– They also report feeling responsible and overwhelmed at times.

52.1%

Receive support from parental/guardian.

– Young people surveyed said friends provide critical support to young people (76%), followed by mental health professionals (57.3%) and then parents/guardians (41.3%).



Young people provide personalised support to friends, and tailor this support to meet their friends' needs, the context, and the tough times they are experiencing. Young people:

- Identify if their friends are going through a tough time by looking out for changes in behaviour and mood across online and offline spaces.
- Are strategic and careful in the way that they initiate conversations with their friends for the best possible outcome.
- Provide implicit support simply by 'being there' and spending time with their friends, including being on 'standby' if they need to provide more direct support.
- Create spaces for their friends to be vulnerable and use listening as a core component of providing support.
- Recognise that the cultural background of their friends is an important factor when determining how to provide the best support.
- Actively seek information that could help their friends or themselves as supporters when they need to.
- Support their friends with resources beyond emotional support such as financial support and housing.
- Play a central role in recognising and responding to friends who need extra help, including facilitating professional help-seeking.
- Can at times take on too much responsibility for their friends, however they noted the importance of learning how to look after themselves and create healthy boundaries.

It is critical we recognise and build on this expertise and provide acceptable support to young people.

Findings were presented to 14 organisations over 14 consultations within the sector. The following list of recommendations came out of these discussions and were guided by what were deemed 'acceptable supports' by young people in this study:

- 1. Embrace youth-led approaches to solve youth challenges** recognising the limits of adult-led and top-down approaches.
- 2. Prioritise peer-based services** that tap into formal and informal support structures.
- 3. Enhance the capabilities of all young people to nurture strong friendships with healthy boundaries**, which includes knowing shared responsibility and when to involve outside help, and the availability of such help.
- 4. Enhance the capabilities of parents and carers on how to cultivate supportive and respectful spaces that encourage openness in young people.**
- 5. Develop services that acknowledge and include friends in the support process.**
- 6. Address the social determinants that lead to tough times**, including but not limited to poverty, discrimination, racism and homo/bi/trans-phobia and cissexism.
- 7. Acknowledge, foster and (where useful) create public and online spaces where young people feel comfortable supporting each other.**
- 8. Fund and support critical future research** to better understand specific experiences (e.g. new migrants) and the experiences of those without friends.



Young people told us

Tough times are when “circumstances in your life are dragging/weighing you down”, where you feel like you are “surviving but not living”, your “brain is under strain”, life is “testing your resilience”, and you feel like “giving up” and “life feels like a chore”.

Tough times can be “struggling socially, emotionally, financially, or physically”, where “relationships are hard” and you “feel alone or unseen”.

Tough times leave you feeling “lonely”, “sad”, “depressed”, “stressed”, “anxious”, “overwhelmed”, “uncomfortable” and “empty”.

Tough times “can be acute or chronic” and are “challenging” times when you “need the support of others”.¹

Supporting young people through tough times:

An overview

In a fast-changing and complex world, young people face significant challenges that can impact their wellbeing. External forces such as economic inequality and climate change, as well as adverse experiences like family violence, homelessness and discrimination, mean many young people have direct and indirect experiences of tough times. These ‘intersecting crises’ (Ang, 2021; Moore et al., 2021) both create tough times and exacerbate existing tough times for young people. The definition above describes ‘tough times’ for the young people in this study based on descriptions from participants. It illustrates the ways young people talk about the varied ways tough times impact emotional wellbeing and mental health outcomes.

Young people and mental health

Too many young people experience mental health difficulties and distress across Australia, with higher rates than any other age group (ABS, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, two in five (39.6%) young people aged 16 – 24 experienced a mental disorder in the previous year, at a time when psychological distress was exacerbated (Biddle et al., 2020; Patton, 2021; Zhao et al., 2022). For 15 – 19 year olds in particular, distress has been increasing (Hall et al., 2019), as has depression in adolescents and young adults over the last decade (Black Dog Institute, 2022). The rise in difficulties experienced necessitates a focus on the types of care and support young people are able to access. Much work to date has focused on pathways into formal care. However, in a context where professional services are often resource-stretched, particularly since COVID-19 (Vostanis & Bell, 2020; AIHW, 2021), and young people report informal support networks in help-seeking and provision, we emphasise that there is a need to shift our attention to examine the informal help-provision young people are accessing and providing to each other, to better understand the care young people need.

Help-seeking

Help-seeking involves using informal supports (i.e. friends or family) and/or formal supports, such as engaging those in professional roles (Barker, Olukoya, & Aggleton, 2005), to seek assistance for mental ill-health. This process of help-seeking has been identified as an effective coping mechanism and strategy across a wide variety of individual challenges, including mental health risks. According to Rickwood and Thomas (2012), seeking support during a tough time is defined as “an adaptive coping process that is the attempt to obtain external assistance to deal with mental health concerns” (p.180), which includes both formal (for example, counselling services, health services) and informal sources of help such as friends, family, and colleagues. Similarly, others (Cauce et al., 2002; Rickwood et al., 2012) have indicated the role of both informal supports

(e.g. family and friends) and formal supports (e.g. psychologists, counsellors, and GPs) when help-seeking.

To date, much of the literature has focused on formal support pathways, including responding to barriers to accessing mental health services, such as concerns of stigma and trust in professional support (Gulliver et al., 2010). Marginalised young people, such as sexuality and gender diverse and Indigenous young people (Black Dog, 2022), as well as migrants and refugees (Byrow et al, 2020) and those in rural areas (Boyd et al, 2007; Dolan et al. 2020) have been reported to experience greater barriers when accessing care. Barriers can lead to low rates of help-seeking from professional sources and prevents disclosures around suicidal ideation (McGillivray et al., 2022).

Formal help-seeking pathways also include formalised peer support programs (Hardy et al., 2019). Such formalised peer-based models have shown benefits for the supported and the supporter (Coleman et al., 2017; Simmons et al., 2020). Online, peer-based youth initiatives, such as those led by ReachOut.com and batyr, have been shown to decrease stigma, increase help-seeking (Collin et al., 2011; Hanckel et al., 2021a; Kauer, 2014) and reduce symptoms of mental illness (Kahl et al., 2020). Formalised peer support programs also offer young people supervision and assistance to ensure safety within their support role (Gillard et al, 2014; Simmons et al, 2018, 2020). While such formalised mechanisms have been shown to be important, there has been less focus on informal peer support provision for mental health.

Informal peer support

Friendships and peers provide critical psychological and emotional support roles as young people transition from dependence to independence (Boyd et al., 2007). Young help-seekers report peers and friends as important and often the most likely avenue when they reach out for help (Michelmores & Hindley, 2012; Hall et al., 2019; Forbes-Mewett, 2019; Pretorius et al., 2019; Dolan, 2021). This includes going to friends and peers

for help regarding suicide ideation and/or self-harm as well (Biddle et al., 2004; Nada Raja et al., 2003; Nixon et al., 2008; Rossow & Wichstrom, 2010). The process of identifying and seeking support for mental health issues from friends has been shown to be related to varied characteristics, which include gender (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Lynch et al., 2018), age (Iorfino et al., 2017), as well as contextual experiences and cultural practices (Biddle et al., 2007).

We also know the services available often do not meet young people’s needs. Not only is this likely to be generational, whereby young people either lack or reject older generation role models and instead turn to their peers for recognition, normality and insight – a point made much earlier by Erikson (1956) – but it is also likely to be related to the services available, which are often adult-led interventions (e.g.: Third and Moody, 2021). Furthermore, turning to peers is often exacerbated by the positioning and/or framing of formalised programs and young people more generally, which frame young people as ‘at-risk’ and in need of formalised pathways to support rather than offering space to co-create programs, which acknowledge the expertise young people bring to program design (Third et al., 2021).

There is emerging research on young people providing informal peer support to their friends. We know, for instance, that young people do take on help-provision roles to support friends (Curtis, 2010; Dolan et al., 2020; Dolan, 2021; Worrell et al., 2021, 2022). Informal support occurs face-to-face as well as in online spaces (Hanckel & Morris, 2014; Gibson & Trnka, 2020; Byron, 2020).

Previous work has raised concerns about young people providing this support. These include concerns raised around burnout, the limited training they receive (Worrell et al., 2022) and taking on unmanageable levels of responsibility that can impact their own mental health (Dolan et al., 2020). Researchers have also noted concerns that young people are often less likely to tell an adult or encourage a peer to seek professional help, which is often due to concerns about breaching confidentiality and/or perceiving that their friend’s tough time is not their story to tell (Curtis, 2010; Michelmores & Hindley, 2012).

More broadly, this sits against a backdrop of young people often positioned as ‘at-risk’ and passive recipients of ‘expert care’. This is in contrast to them being considered for their own expertise in help-

seeking pathways, who have critical expertise to add and, as these studies suggest, are active participants in caring for their friends. **To this end, we wanted to better understand the expert roles that young people take on in providing care to friends.**

Critically, however, more work is required to understand what these young supporters do and what they need for the future: what resources young supporters use and have access to, what constrains this support and what they might need to enable the support they provide to their friends and peers. Simply put – how do we carefully make sense of the work young people are doing and support those young people who are helping their friends. How do we better learn from and resource young people’s care practices?

More research is needed to understand the role played by the key people in young people’s lives, such as friends, classmates, and colleagues, who often play an important role not only as help providers but also as gatekeepers to mental health services. It is these friendships and the capabilities and capacities of friends to provide support across contexts that is the focus of this report.

Research questions

We sought to better understand and explore experiences of peer support during tough times.

To do this, we had three guiding research questions:

1. Are young people supporting their friends through tough times?
2. What are the ways young people provide this support?
3. What acceptable resources do young people need in place to enable this support

Methods

This study was conducted from March to July, 2022. We took a mixed methods approach, undertaking five focus groups with 34 young people, as well as a national survey (n=169) with young people in Australia aged 16–25 years old. This research took place following COVID isolation measures in Australia.

National survey

The national survey was open to all young people (16–25 years) across Australia from 17 May to 5 June, 2022. **The survey asked young people what a tough time was and how they were supporting each other during tough times.** The survey took approximately 10–15 mins to complete and was piloted with 14 young people prior to launch.

The survey was hosted on Qualtrics. We recruited participants using a recruitment poster (see bottom of page 10) distributed via Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter and sent it out to youth services and organisations to disseminate the recruitment

information to their networks. Participants were asked to participate if they were between 16–25 and had experience supporting friend(s) in the past. In total, 290 young people completed the survey, and once cleaned to remove non-completed responses, we had 169 valid responses. Demographic data (detailed in the tables below) included a range of young people with diverse gender and sexuality characteristics across most states and territories in Australia. Out of the 169 participants, this included women (n=87) and men (n=25), of which 5 identified as transmen, as well as 16 people who identified as non-binary and/or gender fluid. Of the sample, approximately half identified as heterosexual (n=60) compared to those with non-heterosexual identities (n=64). The young people who participated reported varied ethnicities. Completing a ‘tick all that apply’ question most people reported being Australian (n=96), European (n=18), Asian (n=16) and/or South Asian (n=9). Young people included 16–18 year olds (n=78), 19–21 year olds (n=33), as well as young people aged 22–25 (n=58). Of the sample, 44 reported a disability and/or chronic health condition.

The survey included mostly discrete variables, one measure – the ‘Natural Helper Scale’, developed by Stahl and Hill (2008) – and eight open text responses, where we asked young people to define a tough time, to explain times when providing support had been easy and/or difficult when they accessed support themselves, and what would be considered acceptable support.



Survey recruitment poster

Location	Freq
Australian Capital Territory	4
New South Wales	59
Queensland	15
South Australia	8
Tasmania	4
Victoria	27
Western Australia	6
Gender	Freq
Female	87
Male	25
Non-Binary/Gender Fluid	16
Prefer not to say	1
Sexuality	Freq
Heterosexual	60
Homosexual	18
Bisexual	24
Pansexual	5
Queer	13
Asexual	4
Prefer not to say	4
Age	Freq
16-18	78
19-21	33
22+	58

Focus groups

We also undertook **five focus groups with 34 young people from across Western Sydney (n=17) and South and Eastern Melbourne (n=15)**. These areas were chosen because of their urban diversity. We shared a recruitment poster through service provider mailing lists and Facebook groups, with a link connecting young people to information about the study and a screening questionnaire to express interest in participation. The focus groups included diverse young people from each location, with diverse ethnicities, including South and South-East Asian, European, Indigenous and White Australian respondents (see Appendix One for a detailed overview).

Focus group participation involved a pre-group activity: watching two service provider videos providing guidance for informal support between young people and their friends. Each participant was asked to reflect on whether or not the information provided in each video aligned with their experiences. This was discussed at the beginning of focus groups, which followed a semi-structured schedule. All focus groups were conducted online, and following a discussion about the videos, we asked questions about their support provision, how it was enacted, as well as how responsible participants felt for others. We also used an iterative rapid prototyping model (see Hanckel and Chandra, 2021) to ask about un/acceptable support(s) for young informal supporters. The iterative rapid prototyping model involved presenting acceptable support ideas from one focus group to the next and so on to confirm if the proposed resource was felt as sufficient for the young people in the study. The final focus group was run at the end of the study to validate themes from the survey and prior focus groups.

Mixed methods research – what exactly is it?

- Mixed methods research involves research that uses multiple methods to understand and explore a social phenomenon.
- Mixed methods research commonly includes both qualitative (in this instance, focus groups) and quantitative datasets (in this instance, survey data).
- Mixed methods allow researchers to explore findings from one method (such as a survey) more in-depth by using another method (such as a focus group).
- The use of multiple sources of data enables the breadth and depth to the research that would not be accessible by just one method. Taken together, the data from the methods provide a ‘fuller picture’, allowing us to ‘validate’ the findings and enhance the credibility of research findings.

(Creswell & Clarke, 2011; Green & Thorogood, 2018)

Supporting friends through tough times

A SNAPSHOT

Young people said they spend on average **3.5 hours a week** supporting their friends. That's **182 hours a year**.

Young people agreed that friends provide critical support to young people (76%), followed by **mental health professionals (57.3%)** and then **parents/guardians (41.3%)**.

55.8% of young people agreed or strongly agreed that they **play an important role** in supporting their friends.

Yeah, I think it's easier and less confrontational talking to friends rather than family or a professional (Mackenzie)

94% of young people surveyed said they had helped a friend **through mental ill-health**. Of those who support their friend through mental ill health, **50.4%** of young people agreed or strongly agreed that supporting their friend had a **positive impact on their friendship**.

On the **Natural Helper Scale**, which measures how capable young people felt to help their friends, young people reported **medium (45%)** and **high (43.8%)** scores, indicating they felt capable to support friends.

When providing support, young people who were supporters received support from others too. They reported **receiving the most support** from their **peers and friends (69.2%)**, followed by **parental/guardian support (52.1%)**.

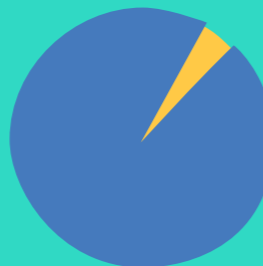
I ride for my friends all day, any day

(Alex)



55.8%

of young people agreed or strongly agreed that they play an important role in supporting their friends.



94%

of young people surveyed said they had helped a friend through mental ill-health.



Personalised support among

FRIENDS

Young people are providing each other with **personalised support**, tailoring their responses based on individual needs, situations and contexts.

When asked how they support their friends, young people consistently responded that 'it depends'. Young people are providing their friends with personalised support. **Personalised support considers the varied nature of friendships, their friends' differing needs, the context and the situation to provide a tailored approach to support**. As Brian suggests, support "depends on the person", and as Ruth elaborates, "it really depends on the friend, how close you are and the way they prefer to communicate".

Importantly young people emphasised **there is not one way to support a friend; personalised support is tailored support**:

I feel like it's sort of a case-by-case basis because I think it depends on the type of stress [tough time] and also how close you are to the person (Shalani)

I think it just depends on the person and sort of like their approach to certain things [...] it also just depends on the context (Malis)

Rather than a generalised model of support, personalised support responds to each friend, their context and their situation. It is determined, as Shalani said above, on 'a case-by-case basis'. It is also ongoing and involves more than just one encounter.

Giving support, it's not a formulaic thing

(Ari)

Young people described learning how to best support their friends: "[B]ecause some of these situations are very specific and, you know, you just kind of have to learn as you go [to support] the specific to the individual, the specific[s] to the situation," said Padma. Others had to learn through circumstances that were sometimes very difficult, how not to take on too much responsibility and ensure they themselves were supported as well. We discuss this in further detail later.

In the following sections, we outline how young people are giving this personalised support, which happens both proactively and reactively to ensure they support their friends through tough times:

- Noticing something is wrong
- Starting a conversation
- Providing the right support
- Determining whether a friend needs external support
- Managing self-care and feelings of responsibility.

I feel like sometimes you want to do everything to help your friend. But ultimately, (...) you need to think about what the friend needs over, like what you actually want to do to help them if that makes sense. So like, whether that is just being there for them or providing support or like directing them to the support that they needed, or if it's just like taking a step back and understanding that maybe they need a bit of space or like maybe time with family kind of thing.

(Shalani)



Noticing **SOMETHING** is wrong

Young people identify if their friends are going through a tough time by looking out for changes in behaviour and mood across online and offline spaces.

You know when they're just not talking as much or they're not really, you know, interacting with anyone (...) you kind of say 'Okay, something's wrong here'

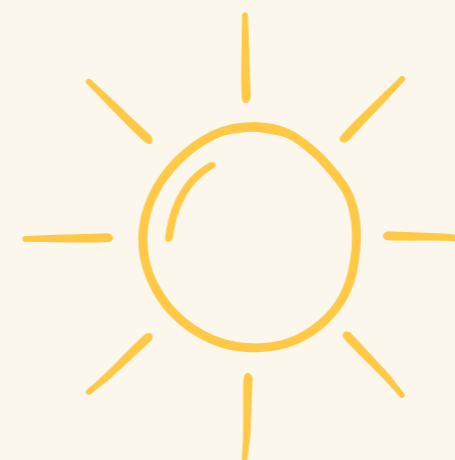
(Lara)

To identify if and when a friend needs support, young people spoke about how they would often **identify inconsistencies and/or changes in a friend's routine, behaviour and/or mood**. This would often signal they might be going through a tough time. For instance, this could be "something like them not being as talkative as usual or maybe um like sitting in the back of the classroom and [...] sending really short, you know, messages like just straight up, 'yes', 'no' messages kind of thing," explained Josh. This varies depending on the friend. "Like one of my friends, if you're listening to music and not talkative then something's wrong [...] It's a good way of knowing where, how they feel," said Brian.

Such inconsistencies in friends' patterns were noted across online and offline settings, where young people would be interacting with their friends, often on a daily basis. Lara, for instance, indicated how she notices such patterns in her friends' moods via social media interactions:

Normally, I can tell when my friends have had like a tough week, especially over social media, because you can tell by how much they're active and when you're like, for example, with Snapchat, you send each other photos back and forth, and you can just kind of tell like from those photos (Lara)

In this way, young people are noticing friend's changes and moods. This is often a major catalyst for providing support.



Starting a CONVERSATION



Young people are strategic and careful in the way they initiate conversations with their friends for the best possible outcome.

It's actually sitting there with them and having the conversation with them, letting them know that you actually care and understand the problem with them

(Oscar)

[A]fter asking the initial question whether they're OK, I then proceed to talk about more unrelated topics. So this allows them to basically open up at their own pace if they want to open up, rather than trying to kind of force it out of them (Gary)

In having these conversations, young people emphasised it was **asking more than just 'Are you okay?'** Ash, for instance, said explicitly that it requires asking more than "that kind of empty question of [...] Are you OK?". When asking, expressing genuine care is important; as Ash continued, it requires "being a lot more specific and directing questions with a bit more intent". Ruth illustrates this below:

The way that I like to check-in with how people are feeling is reinventing the way [...] you [ask] 'how are you going? Good. How are you?' Instead of, you know, doing that, it's like if someone gives you like the blanket, like, 'I'm good, how are you?' I'm like, 'No, actually, how are you going? Like, what's been going on? How [are] you feeling today?' You know? 'Tell me what you've been up to.' I find that's a really good way to sort of break through and get people to open up. (Ruth)

Again this was dependent on the friend, but **friends emphasised they would try and ask questions to ensure they could best support their friends.** As Brian indicated: "[S]ome of them [my friends] are very open, but some will give you the very one-word answers but you try and get more out of them".

There was an acknowledgement across the focus groups that such **check-ins were heightened during COVID-19 isolation measures** with 'COVID check-ins' to see how their friends were going, which they felt increased in digital forms during isolation measures. Mai, for example, suggested, "I'm very sure that the way people check-in with one another has definitely changed. So since COVID, like we couldn't really go outside most of the time, and the only forms of

checking in is either through a text or a call". Karen noted that "a lot of my friends have check-in fatigue. It's like, particularly in lockdowns, you would be like 'oh how are you doing now?' But 'still the same, we're still in lockdown'."

Letting your friends know you are available also served the purpose of **letting your friend know you are available in the future** if they were not yet ready to speak about a tough time they were going through. "[I]f they brush you off, they still kind of remember you as a person willing to listen to them when they are ready to open up," noted Kylie. Sometimes this meant explicitly setting a date in the future to have a conversation. Padma, for instance, indicated that if her friends are not available, she will "ask them, 'OK, is it OK if I check-in with you in about two weeks to see how you're going?', and if they say yes or they say no? 'Actually, can I talk to you in a month?' Then I just kind of like, follow that." In these cases, we see a type of friendship contract of support emerge, where young people negotiate with their friends what is deemed acceptable for them in terms of support behaviour and the boundaries in the support relationship.

Though **being available was also at times a cause for concern.** Some young people expressed concern that they were not available, because mobiles were turned off or out of reception. As one survey respondent said, they were not able to provide support "because I was on vacation [...] I don't get reception" (17, Male). In such contexts they indicated they would often flag their availability to friends.

At other times **follow-up would be strategic** when they could find some time for a private one-on-one conversation, which can be away from a broader friendship group or others potentially listening in, which they emphasised was critical when providing this support: "we'll find some time later in the day or like away from a group to have a chat or like then maybe I'll follow up in the next couple of days online to check back in," shared Karen. Or "like when you're walking back to class, you say, 'hey, I noticed you weren't really talking that much, you seem kinda sad, you OK? Everything alright?' said Lara.

At other times young people discussed how **the busy-ness of life could prevent an immediate conversation from happening**, which would have

to be actively postponed until later. At times this can create some anxieties of not being available for a friend. As one young person indicated "My friends often reach out for support at night time, this is difficult for me due to fatigue, and can increase my own existing anxieties" (24, Female, NSW). **The anxiety of not being there can lead to guilt and increase feelings of responsibility, also an urgency to be there in the near future.** At the same time though, they emphasise the work they do to make sure their friend is supported, sometimes this means short messages of support until a later more in-depth catch-up can take place, which can include connecting them to an online resource or suggesting other support at times "to make sure they got the help they needed that I couldn't provide" (24, Female, NSW). For some, trust between friends enabled open conversations about their availability to talk or not, or when may be a more suitable time.

At other times they spoke about **making time and being available when their friends would actively approach them** to seek their support. Ruth, for instance, indicated, "I can think of instances where a mate of mine will come up to me and say they want to talk through something, or you can tell they want to talk through something. So we'll have that conversation."

After a conversation, you might actively follow-up with how they are going. Shalani explained what this looked like in practice after a friend told her they started seeing a therapist:

"So maybe just like give them a call a couple of times a week or however much they need. And just like follow up, I guess, because if they've obviously felt comfortable enough to tell you that they've started seeing someone [a therapist]...Yeah, just just follow up on them making sure that they're improving, I guess." (Shalani)

But check-ins such as this must be done carefully: "Maybe check-in later, but not be like constantly hassling them to [respond], you know," indicated Ruth.

Providing the right support: Ensuring a friend is not alone

Young people understand the importance of being there for their friend, and developed creative measures to ensure their friend did not feel alone.

“It’s what we have each other for. Supporting someone doesn’t mean you have to save them or fix their problems. More often than not it’s just a matter of holding space for them and making sure they know they’re not alone.” (24 Female NSW)



83.7%

of young people reported feeling compassion most of the time or always during.

A key component of providing a friend with support was to ensure that friends were being given the space and the support they needed.

For young people who provide informal support, this means:

- Being there and on ‘standby’
- Creating space for vulnerability, advice and hope
- Culture matters
- Providing (or finding) the right information
- Providing more than emotional support (at times)
- Dealing with barriers to providing support.

Being there and on ‘standby’

Young people provide implicit support simply by ‘being there’ and spending time with their friends, including being on ‘standby’ if they need to provide more direct support.

[I] think that it’s really important to sort of be on standby [...] So to just sort of be there for your friend and just listen to them if [...] they need it (Malis) Being there and ‘on stand-by’ meant **being present when a friend was going through a tough time.**

Being available and present did not always require having a conversation; rather, spending time with friends was support in and of itself, and being on standby was one part of it. Being together enabled conversations to

happen when and where their friend felt comfortable, which was important. Geeta, for instance, spoke about being there for her friend who was about to go through surgery. For Geeta, being available meant “just spending quality time with her and not necessarily sitting there and talking about the surgery, asking questions, how does she feel and this. I think in her case, it’ll be, she’ll just appreciate having a friend to spend time with and having a distraction”. Though she was ready to talk to her about it if required: if “she’s happy to talk about [it] – I am as well while respecting those boundaries. But I realise that for some people [...] it might be hard to talk about these things”. To ensure she was prepared Geeta had researched the specific surgery online before catching up with her friend in case it surfaced

during the conversation. It was common for young people to seek resources online that provided more information about the tough time their friend was going through so they could provide better support for them.

If they were not able to be immediately there, they would **find creative strategies to provide support**, as Michelle’s experience illustrates. For instance, Michelle spoke about how when her friend had let her know she had “been having a rough week”, she was too busy to “organise a phone call or organise a catch up” so they instead sent via text “words of encouragement throughout the week. Things like ‘I’m thinking of you’, ‘I hope you’re OK’, ‘let me know if I can do anything this week’, whether it’s her stuff with her medical health at the moment is having issues of, it’ll be like ‘look if you have any appointments next week, remember to call me if you would like me to come along’ and just those healthy reminders.”

General check-ins were often framed as light-hearted but were also intentionally about checking in with a friend’s well-being. Young people explained this often took the form of a series of text/audio messages, gifs, links to videos and emojis. For some young people, they spoke about a whole series of texts back and forth using gifs and in-jokes, where the points of support, fun and friendship come together. This was about being present – even if this was virtual – and reminding someone you are there. Listening and (sometimes) providing advice

Young people create spaces for their friends to be vulnerable and use listening as a critical behaviour when providing support.

One aspect of supporting friends was to ‘validate how they feel’ (Ruth) to “remind them their issues are valid and heard” (Ari). As Celine articulated, “to just like, listen and be non-judgmental [...] just being able to listen and allow them to speak about how they’re feeling”.

Often it was about **creating a space for being vulnerable** rather than a space for offering solutions:

“You don’t have to have the answers for them, but just listening and letting them know that you are there for them helps.” (18, Female, NSW)

Others contrasted **listening as a particular practice**, even though sometimes they wanted to provide a specific solution to a friend’s problem:

It’s like they sometimes they don’t need a solution to the problem, they just want to be able to be vulnerable and to sort of have that emotional support (Malis)

[I] find like just listening to be the most helpful and... challenging is like sometimes I tend to, like have a problem-solving kind of mindset when it comes to like talking through like issues with my friends and I once had a friend pull me up on it. So, I guess probably just listening, and you know, being there for them is the most crucial thing (Jenna)

Mixed preferences for providing support online and/or offline

44.2% agree or strongly agree that social media helps them support their friends, while 40.8% agreed or strongly agreed social media makes it harder to support friends.

Some felt it was easier to discuss tough times online. As one young person said “Online easiest - less confrontation and easier for friends to connect openly” (17, Male, QLD). Online spaces could also provide opportunities to consider their friends’ needs and take “time to think & process what to say” (Female, NSW). Others used voice-messaging, rather than texting, which for some felt like a “more intimate conversation rather than text but it still allows that flexibility in between schedules” (Michelle), which social media and technology more generally allowed.

However others felt it was more difficult to have a conversation in online settings. This was often to do with the felt personal connection in offline spaces, and an importance placed on being able to physically see their friend’s reactions, feelings and judge their needs. For some they found it

frustrating that online conversations of support happened at the same time as other events, which made the support role more difficult: “If someone needs support I like to sit and be with them. Going back and forth over messenger [it] seems that one person forgets or gets busy so I never know where I stand” (24, Female, NSW).

In practice though they spoke about how support often moved between and across online and offline spaces. As Shalani said, “A bit of both [online and offline spaces], sometimes calls too”. For Omar, conversations often started on the train or at school “and then they go online and start talking” afterwards. Conversely others spoke about how online discussions would lead to planned offline discussions as well at a later date. Karl indicated this was also dependent on the “geographical area, like [if you are providing support from a] different city or town, you can do that online”.

Like, sometimes people don't want solutions at all [...] sometimes they just want a friend there to speak that with them and just to let them know everything's going to be OK,' Kylie pointed out. Being reassuring came up as a consistent theme: young people sought to not only listen but also provide hopeful narratives to their friends, ensuring "they understand that things are going to be fine and things are going to get better" (Rajiv), whereby they provide "moral support and encouragement to my friend (Joseph).

Feedback or solutions were offered some of the time, but again it was dependent on the friend and situation. For instance, Geeta provided solutions when she knew a friend would be "willing to take on feedback and of any kind". Karen, reflecting on some of their friends, noted that "they're fairly knowledgeable in what what ails them, but less so about what to do about it" and indicated it can sometimes be useful to share "the free resources that you can access [with them]". **Sometimes it is the act of being there together and imagining future planning together, as Audrey indicated: "I help them through it by listening, and we can brainstorm ideas together."** Similarly, Ruth indicated she will ask her friend about the next steps that her friend was taking to help themselves, asking: "can we set a goal together or have accountability". Some found it easier to provide guidance when they could draw on their own lived experiences: "I can [...] say what worked for me in the past, whereas if it's something completely different, but I want to be there for them, [I] just like try to hear them out," said Shalani. This is a role-modelling of vulnerability and provides an opportunity for young people to share experiences of what worked for them.

Culture matters

Young people recognise the cultural background of their friends is an important factor when determining how to provide the best support.

Another component of giving support was recognising that culture matters in these interactions. Specifically, young people spoke about how they consider friends' cultural needs to determine the types of support given, as Shalani explained:

[T]hinking about cultural values as well because I feel like sometimes depending on the culture of the friend or like the values that they've been brought up with that can sort of determine what they need as well to, like, help with things

By this, they often meant they **took into account the complex histories of mental health and how it might be understood culturally differently by friends and their families.** This influences, for

instance, the way Gary provides support. Gary, in discussing supporting friends, emphasised he has an 'Asian background' and refers to the 'older generation' who he indicates doesn't understand mental health. In doing so he indicates that his support is mediated by this understanding: "I don't really bring the families into the picture. It's rather it's just me and them. So it's just basically cut out the awkwardness of having them talk to their parents as much as possible". Omar indicated this difficulty noting friends from differing and varied cultures approach mental health differently, which he said is "somewhat related to, I guess, the way they're raised up [...] what they hear from their parents and friends (Omar). Padma further emphasised it is about tailoring to different friends' and family's cultural needs, recognising the importance of understanding where friends are coming from when you support them:

Yeah, I think just it's really important, I think, especially cause a lot of my friends, mainly those from like Southeast Asian and Asian backgrounds, some of the topics are not easy to discuss with family and so friends become like their safe spaces or their places of refuge to kind of discuss, you know, things about mental health or whatever else. So I think even if your friend is of the same culture or not, it's really important to understand where they're coming from in terms of like stigma as family dynamics, um their approaches to life. Because it's, for example, if they're having an issue with a family member, it's not easy as just telling them, 'Oh, go talk to them and sort it out'. Sometimes you have to be there to emotionally support them through it and maybe find another solution

Identifying relevant needs and solutions as Padma suggests is critical. However, **young people were careful not to generalise based on culture,** rather culture was positioned as one part of personalised support that had to be considered when supporting friends. As Celine explained:

[L]ike you don't have to understand everything about their culture but just be understanding of those things that you might do differently than that, [then] they will. Or like understanding that within culture can be diverse and within families as well there may be different layers to do with that

For these young people, supporting friends is about **recognising diversity and acknowledging support** sometimes requires additional work if someone comes from a different cultural background than them:

I think sometimes it helps when you and your friend are of the same cultural background as well because, you know, you can kind of understand where they're

coming from. But if you're not, then it takes a little bit more understanding and empathy to get there (Padma)

Providing (and finding) relevant information and additional support

Young people actively seek information that could help their friends or themselves as supporters when they need to.

When young people did not have lived experience to draw on that was related to a friend's tough time, they spoke about **actively seeking out information to better understand what their friend was going through.** As Shalani indicated:

Like, it's more so for things that I personally haven't experienced and I don't want to say something that's going to negatively affect their experience. So I sort of just like, look up things sort of like what things to say or things not to say and make it like [...] specific to the friend or the situation

In this situation, it was usual to seek this information via a search engine, as Padma explained:

The amount of times I have gone on Google to just be like, 'how to support a friend whose pet has just died' or something like that. Like, I just Google everything because I don't know what else to do

Though this information was sought out, sometimes it was not available or not easily found. Malis for instance, spoke about one particular type of tough time:

I was wondering, in terms of family violence if we find ourselves in a situation where we need to support someone who's like a friend experiencing family violence ... I just find it difficult to find resources that can tell you like practical tips and things about how to do that

However, young people did not only find information from online sources. Friends would also seek out other friends to get their perspectives and shared expertise, though this would be undertaken very carefully, so as not to breach the trust of a friend. Ash, for instance, when supporting their friend

...wouldn't say who the person is. I would probably say, 'what would you do if someone came up to you and then were your friend, and they said this [about a tough time], like, what would you do about that? Or what would your approach be?' But I wouldn't say like, yeah, [their name] just in case that person didn't want other people to know

These findings show how sources of support – both online and offline – are important for helping them make decisions about how best to support their friend.

Providing more than emotional support

Young people support their friends with resources beyond emotional support, such as financial support and housing.

Often, the support provided was emotional support, but young people also spoke about how the provision of support also involved sharing or providing additional material resources, which included: housing support, "I assisted a friend to pay house rent because the father lost his work and life was so hard for them" (Joseph); direct financial support, 'cash support' (Rajiv), "when she lost her mum I support financially and emotional" (Sally), or a resource they could not easily access, such as an Uber or taxi to get home when a tough time or threat was an immediate concern:

[My friend] had issues in a past relationship where there was violence involved, and I got a message at 2am that said 'I'm leaving my girlfriend's house like, I'm going to go home'. And then it was it was more about like, 'OK, I've been drinking. I can't come get you, but like I'll jump in an Uber, what do you need? Send me the Uber drivers thing' like it was...It went straight into like helping mode rather than sort of just like 'Oh, that like well your partner shouldn't have done that'. It was like, 'Okay, let's get you out of harm's way. And then when you're ready, we can talk about what happened and what you need and what we can do in the future' and things like that (Karen)

Dealing with barriers to providing support

One concern expressed by young people was the **fear of not saying the right thing or putting the friendship at risk by expressing concern.** In such cases, they chose not to seek support from a friend. As young people explained, there was a "fear of judgement" (21, Male, NSW) from friends, and a "fear that I'll make the situation worse, or make them feel bad" (19, Female, NSW). Making them worse, or having no impact and putting the friendship in jeopardy was a concern that was expressed, as this young person explained - they didn't support a friend due to "Being afraid that I won't have an impact on their well-being and that I am possibly being annoying" (17, Female, VIC).

Determining whether a friend needs external SUPPORT

Young people play a central role in recognising and responding to friends who need extra help, including facilitating professional help-seeking.

“It is important to encourage them to seek professional support beyond me and other friends/family, if it seemed they needed more serious support”

(24, Female, NSW)

Most young people indicated **there is a threshold in their capacity to support and/or level of knowledge and expertise**, at which time they believed they needed to refer a friend to help-provision resources or triage a friend to professional support or adult guidance. “There’s a certain amount you can do as a friend, as an individual, but there’s a point where a professional needs to intervene,” said Celine. Often if the tough time went beyond a young person’s expertise or capacity then they would see this as a reason to seek further support. “[I]f I think they’re struggling with something that I don’t think I’ll be able to assist with, or it’s beyond my level of control,” said Mai. This point about it being within one’s control or seen as ‘beyond control’ was important, as Karl explained:

[M]ostly if the person is having some kind of personal issues like emotion depression and the rest of it can easily be, you know, settled between

the friend and the person involved, whereas if it goes beyond control, probably can make a professional like a teacher, a counsellor or someone that can provide professional help

Additionally, **if it felt outside a young person’s expertise, they might seek additional support**. Shalani for instance shared: “obviously, if I can help that [friend with their tough time then] I would. But like if I feel like it’s out of my area of expertise or something, I would probably think it’s better for them to like go elsewhere”. Joel similarly said “I would go out of my way to do anything I could for them; Where I could not [help them] I would be heavy on helping them seeking professional help.”

As suggested by these quotes seeking further support occurred when it was seen as beyond their capabilities, which also required an assessment of the symptoms and degree to which their friends were coping:

When that friend has exhibited signs of extremely dangerous mental health related behaviour [...] I know I do not have the proper qualifications to help them, I refer them to professional help and try to step back in helping them (16, Non-binary, NSW)

Nothing has ever stopped me, I always help my friends. The only exception is when I can tell it’s really serious and we need professionals to get involved so I try not to get too attached so the person will accept professional support (16, Female, TAS)

Triaging to a professional or adult can be conceptualised across a spectrum, from providing a friend with professional resources or contacts, to specifically reaching out to an adult or professional on their behalf. In Padma’s case, she “compiled a list of professionals in my friend’s area and sent it to them because I knew that they were hesitant to seek help”. Mai provides “just like some professional support [resources] or [I] give them some sort of information [with support resources]”. The goal here as Ari explained was “to try and direct them towards like professional help [...], but also let them know that you’re there to listen”. In such cases, young people spoke about providing these resources knowing the

decision whether or not to go seek this support was their friend’s responsibility: “It should come out as like the choice for themselves if like when they’re comfortable to seek out a therapist,” said Malis, and “like whether they go or not, like it’s, it’s their choice,” noted Mai.

In some cases, the **young people spoke about how they themselves would organise for their friends to see a professional**. Michelle for instance explained:

What I’ll normally do is instead of sending a link, I’ll be like ‘look just checking in. Have you got a psychologist booked in? It sounds like you may need to check in with [a psychologist]...’ [...] so usually I’ll be like ‘I think you need to check in with her next week, like do you have your appointment? Do you need help setting up your appointment with her?’ And even moreso sometimes if they’re feeling so down I have rung up for them and I’ve said ‘look my friends feeling a bit down. He’s booked in with this person can you book in for this day, he just didn’t really want to ring and do the phone call today so I’m ringing up for them’

For some they went with their friends to talk with the professional. As Oscar said “I really needed to go with her to introduce her to the professional [...] Then over time, she was now comfortable to actually seek the professional help herself”. Karl similarly recounted supporting a friend, and how after “we had interactions, especially on the phone or the chat we had to visit a professional [...] to talk more and help in the situation”. Ruth similarly said “it’s like, for example, ‘do you want me to go with you when you go to your GP to have your, ah, to talk about getting a mental health care plan?’”

An important point here is that such **referrals rely on service availability, access, and knowledge of the services**. At times young people did not know about service availability, which restricted such referrals from occurring. Gary, for instance, shared that knowledge of services was “something I feel I have to work on as well, but I understand that it’s sometimes a bit complicated, even for them [friend’s] to navigate as well.”

If they considered their friend was in danger then they would take immediate action, as Jay indicates below:

I was aware that if it got that bad, then I was not prioritising the friendship I was prioritising, you know, like any action that needed to be taken in order to help them, even if they would be unwilling, I guess, to take that action. So like, you know, letting people like other people who they might not have wanted to know, know and stuff like that.

However, this was not an easy decision, as evident in Lara’s comment below, as such decisions could breach the trust of a friend:

[T]his is going to make me sound like a terrible person. But I’ve had friends who have kind of confided in me about like issues and I’ve obviously not told their parents but I’ve said to their parents ‘oh yeah something’s up, you know, she’s really, something might not go well’ and they’ve then gone on to like seek therapists and things like that outside of school and outside of that, just with the family thing

At the same time they spoke about how they **avoided unnecessary engagements with adults, as they had been entrusted with the support of their friends, and often adults were seen as being not understanding of mental health more generally**. It is worth noting that often adults were not always engaged by young supporters as there were concerns that adults, particularly in school, would unnecessarily escalate the issue, or paradoxically not treat it as important enough, a point found in other research as well (e.g.: Hendry, 2020). **There were also concerns that adults more generally, across all cultures, did not appreciate and/or understand the mental health concerns and tough times young people face**. This young person’s answer to the question of why they don’t access support when helping their friends is illustrative of this:

Because no one understands our problems these days. Teachers do not give two shits about how we feel and parents don’t understand (16, Woman, Vic)

It is also notable that when friends start seeing a professional, this is not the end to friends’ support work. Informal support often continues but often it involves shifting to check-ins, to confirm things are going okay with a therapist and/or professional. Shalani explained, for instance, that she will

...just like give them a call a couple of times a week or however much they need. And just like follow-up, I guess, because if they’ve obviously felt comfortable enough to tell you that they’ve started seeing someone...Yeah, just just follow up on them making sure that they’re improving, I guess. Yeah.

Similarly Joyce said, you check in to see “like how it’s going with like their therapist, how their therapist helped them and if it does help them.”

In this way, support happens around (and sometimes with) a professional or adult, depending on the friend’s needs.

SUPPORTING

your friends, managing responsibility, and self care



Young people can at times take on too much responsibility for their friends, though many learn through support work how to look after themselves and to create healthy boundaries.

Ultimately you can help your friend, but then you've got to make sure that you're okay first to do that.

(Celine)

I learnt the hard way that finding the balance of supporting friends and them becoming dependent on you is hard. At first, I would always try to help in the ways they wanted, but most of the time I wasn't the one in the best position to help them. It hurt my mental health severely, as I thought I wasn't worth [it] to reach out for help and I needed to help my friends alone. I have now established healthy boundarys with all my friends in saying I will listen in and offer my advice but you can not depend on me emotionally for both of our sakes (16, Non-Binary Trans Man, NSW)

For some like this respondent, they encountered a past difficult experience where such boundaries were not clear, and it impacted their own well-being. Oscar provided a similar example, and spoke about how he realised he had to pull back "when I needed to pay some bills from the money I would have got from that appointment" that he missed when he provided support to his friend. "That was when I started stepping back. But I was happy that by then she was already comfortable with her therapist". In this way sharing with someone else had shared the load Oscar took on.

Shalani recounted a similar learning experience, as she felt the **burden of support and had to prioritise self-care:**

[I] sort of felt like honoured that people felt that they could open up to me [...] ultimately it just sort of became a burden to myself, and like I didn't sort of prioritise myself. And then that sort of had its own effects on like my personal life and studies and things like that. So then I sort of had to take a step back and then be like, 'What do I actually need for myself?' [...] it made me a better person too for them to talk [to]

It also meant being able to say no and not provide support to friends who are seeking help, and to instead **look after one's own well-being**. As Ash indicates:

I think another important thing is being able to say no to friends that are going through tough times, and I know that probably sounds counterintuitive. But when you're in a really bad head space yourself trying to help someone else, when you're already feeling like, in my experience, I've been to really low points and then all the friends have been like, I'm feeling like this and I'm like, 'look, I don't know what you want me to do. I'm not doing so well' and that kind of stuff

In such circumstances, it is about **prioritising self-care**. As Ari said: "it's nice to know or like have someone like trusting you so much [...] you definitely need to like [...] step back a little and, you know, give yourself some space just so it doesn't affect your mental health too much [as well]. It was about working out how much you could help and provide support, and recognising that "sometimes I don't have the time and/or energy to help" (18, Female, QLD).

However at the same time being a good friend and supporter is also considered critical, and **it is apparent that the lines between self-care and support are oftentimes difficult to distinguish clearly in these supporter roles:**

I have found it difficult when I was having a hard day and had to be their support person for the whole day. It's also difficult when you are out of the house (with family or other friends) and can tell they need you at that moment but you don't really have the time, but you make time anyway (16, Female, TAS)



54%

agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I feel responsible for helping my friends'.

An identified concern in the literature has been how young people manage their feelings of responsibility for their friends and self-care during the periods they support their friends (Dolan et al., 2020). Young people often spoke about learning how to manage providing support and responsibility over time – this was a process of learning:



A CASE STUDY

Meet Andrea

Andrea, a 17-year-old white Anglo-Australian is currently in year 11. She describes herself as the person in the group who is talkative and friendly, and someone that her friends know can provide some support if they ever need it. She recalls one of the distinct memories of supporting her best friend Kathleen in Year 9.

Kathleen was the same age with a Filipino background. Andrea could see Kathleen was acting a bit differently. She was not her talkative self, she sat quietly with her headphones in at lunch and was not posting her usual updates on their friendship group chat. Andrea was worried initially about saying anything because she feared she would say the wrong thing and they wouldn't be friends anymore. But Andrea decided to carefully ask how she was; she just wanted to be there for her.

Remembering that she likes music, she started talking about that with her, and then slowly asked how she was doing, carefully asking to emphasise that she saw something was up and she 'really' wanted to know how her friend was.

Kathleen disclosed that she had recently lost her grandmother, they were struggling with finances at home, and she just felt sad all the time and couldn't stop feeling sad. Andrea listened and reminded her that everything would be okay.

Andrea was not sure though about what to recommend. She knew a bit about mental health. She didn't know how Kathleen's family would react if she disclosed anything to them, so decided not to suggest she talk to her family. Andrea went in search of information online about how to help someone grieving about a grandmother and about feeling sad, she found some information and a few websites.

She sent Kathleen a couple of funny gifs and memes throughout the week to make her feel better, as well as a link in between to one of the mental health websites about talking to a professional – a resource she found about engaging culturally safe therapists. She decided it was up to Kathleen to make the next step and she would just routinely check in with her, which she did.

She still checks in with Kathleen as part of their friendship and believes it is important to provide support as a good friend.



WHAT WORKS

for young people when supporting friends

These are a list of tips we heard from young people. They're suggestions directly for young people on what you might want to consider when helping your friend. They're also useful for mental health professionals and educators to consider when supporting young people who are helping their friends. As we heard from young people there is not just one way to provide support, and these are a guide for things you might want to consider.

1 Take care of yourself first

If you want to be a good friend, you need to take care of yourself first. Supporting someone can be draining and take its toll on your mental health. And that isn't good for you or your friend. Check in with yourself and consider what you need, do the things that make you feel good, and make the time to recharge.

2 Show them you're someone who cares

Your friend may not need support right now, or they may not be ready to talk. But you can show them you're someone they can talk to by modelling support to others, being open about what you're going through, and letting them know you're there if they ever need help.

3 Casual check-ins

When you're worried about your friend but they aren't ready to talk or don't know how to, try adding a casual check-in when chatting. Do it in a place they feel comfortable or go for a walk so they don't need to make awkward eye contact, or lead into it off some other random chat. Remembering what is going on for them in their lives and asking specific questions can also help. You might just get them to open up.

4 Ask them what they need

When your friend is going through a tough time you can't know exactly how to help all the time. And that means you might end up doing the wrong thing, or not doing anything at all. Remember they will generally know what is best for them, so you can always just ask, 'What do you need from me right now?'

5 Be there for them in the future

Sometimes your friend might not be ready to talk just yet. If that happens you can always ask if you can check back in with them later. Or let them know you are available if they ever want to talk about it. This gives them time to process and work out what they feel and what they want to say as well.

6 Mostly listen and know when to give advice

Most of the time when a friend is going through a tough time they just need someone who can listen. When a friend does open up it can be tempting to just dive straight in and give advice and end up doing most of the talking. This can make them feel like you think their problem isn't a big deal and can stop them from reaching out to you again. The most important thing to do is to listen, be curious, ask questions and only give advice if they ask for it, or if it feels comfortable to do so. If it's the right timing, you might want to share with them your own experiences. You can always ask them if they want to hear about your experiences or advice.

7 Don't do it alone

It can sometimes feel like helping your friend is all on you, and you are alone. Taking on sole responsibility can be isolating, and if things don't improve it can start impacting your mental health too. It's important to share responsibility. Talk to someone about it who you trust, who isn't involved in the situation and who you know can keep it confidential, and encourage your friend to do the same.

8 Encourage them to get help from a supportive adult

Sometimes during tough times you might need help from a supportive adult – this could be parents, teachers, community members, coaches, religious leaders, friends, family members or a professional. This option is always available and it's never too early to reach out for support. Get to know what services are available and encourage your friend to access them.

9 Navigating the world of professional help

Sometimes there are barriers to accessing professional services, so it's good to check in with what services are available and if they meet your friend's needs – such as being aware of cultural needs, if it's LGBT+ friendly, or if there's a big waitlist. If your friend doesn't want you to do this, try to understand why, and work through what the barriers might be. If you're comfortable, sometimes helping them book an appointment with a counsellor, or attending their first

session with them will be the help they need to start that journey. It can take a few times reaching out for support to find the right fit at times, and that's okay. There are great avenues for support both in person and online, and reminding your friend to keep going can make a huge difference.

10 You can't fix everything, but you can be there

Sometimes just being there for your friends is all you can do. This might not mean always having big emotional chats, but could be as simple as doing things they enjoy, having fun, sending them memes, and distracting them from the tough times they are going through.



Resources suggested by young people:

ACCEPTABLE SUPPORTS

Key finding: Young people want acceptable supports to assist and enhance their capabilities. These should be relatable and connected to young people's experiences.

Young people **emphasised the importance of friends and peers, and how the critical role that peers play must be acknowledged.** "Normalise talking about it, encourage people to reach out to each other because some of the best support you are going to get is from your peers" (20, Female, QLD). Young people argue friends do play a critical role at all times, but particularly when professional systems are stretched and/or not available or accessible, as one young person indicated: there is a need to "realise that support from friends are natural and essential, and are there when the professionals are not" (24, Female, TAS). Indeed more professional resources could be made available, as one young person indicated to ease the burden placed on friends:

I think that it would be good if there were more resources available to support young people (i.e. more affordable psychotherapy and treatments) so that we don't have to be burdened with dealing with problems that we don't have the expertise to solve. (20, Female, Vic)

Young people emphasised that **more resources and strategies would be useful to learn to better communicate with friends about tough times.** As one young person said: "Give us advice and a hand with how to communicate effectively" (19, Female, NSW). This was about how to be better peer supporters to their friends, with specific advice and resources "on what to do to help as opposed to just telling us to send them to an adult" (16, Female, QLD). This includes "techniques for approaching the conversation of support" (17, Female, NSW), for "facilitat[ing] the development of skills to have supportive conversations with one another" (25, Male, NSW), and "to know the signs of mental ill-health and know where to direct the person in terms of professional help" (22, Cisgender Female, SA), or more broadly to ensure young people are aware of "what resources they have in the school and the wider community that they can utilise" (17, Female, NSW), even if such resources are limited at times. That is they want to enhance their existing capabilities and be better supporters of their friends.

They want **better resources and support for self-care** as well when helping others, specifically: to know "how they can manage their own mental health when helping others, as sometimes it can be tough on the person helping as well" (17, Female, NSW). As another young person indicated, I want "Education about support for yourself when helping others. There's no talk about that and it's so important and can cause depression, anxiety, grief etc" (16, Female, NSW). Similarly, another young person wanted providers to "teach methods on how to identify boundaries when supporting each other" (17, Female NSW).

They also indicated wanting a resource that **accommodates the varied ways they provide care to their friends.** Using the iterative rapid prototyping method, as explained in the methods, they came up with a tips sheet, what they referred to as a 'choose your own story' tool. While the actual presentation of such a resource was not developed in full, Shalani explains what this might look in practice:

I imagine like a choose your story kind of thing of like, what kind of person are you, like what what kind of person are you trying to support? What have they done so far? Or just like something like that. And then sort of that can help you with the conversation. Because in that way, obviously, it would make it a bit more personal, because then you can have different methods, [with] the different people

It is critical though that the acceptable supports and resources provided are something young people **co-develop and contribute to.** One young person emphasised the importance of relatable training, and the need for approaches that do not feel top-down:

Use language and terminology that teenagers and young people will relate to and understand and make sure the content and support is not condescending threatening or make them feel uncomfortable (18, Male, NSW)

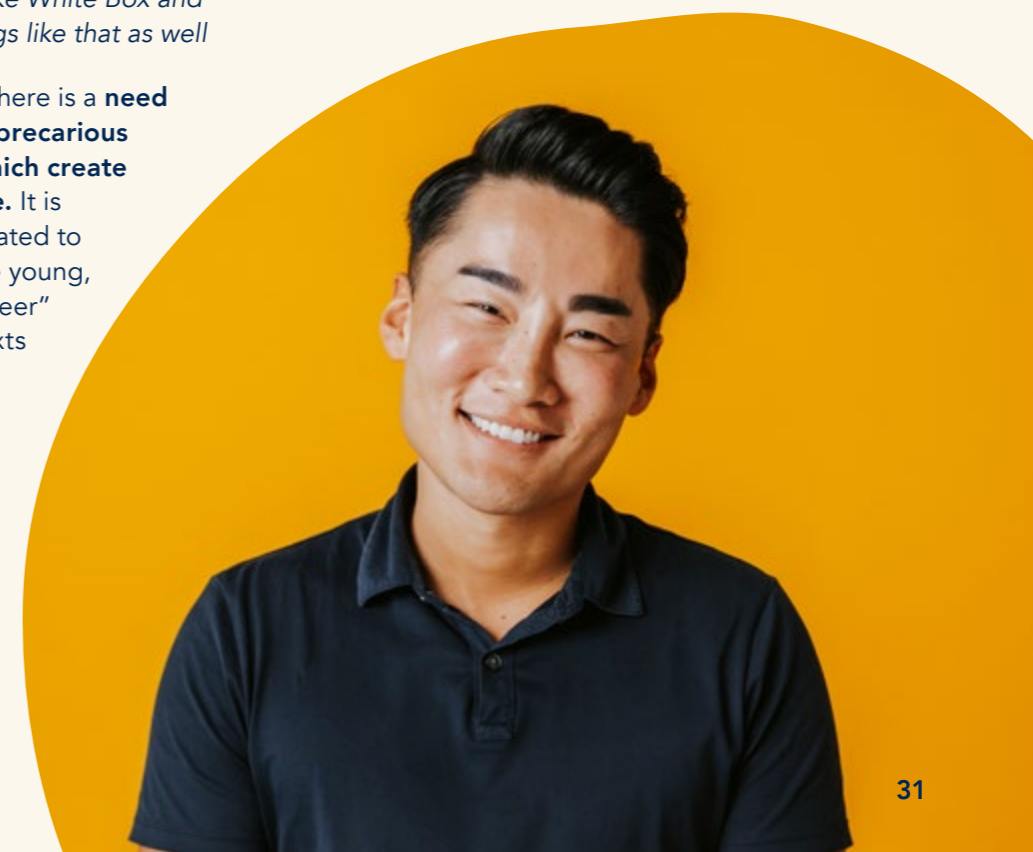
They also indicated they would benefit from **spaces being made available to enable conversations, or supporting the spaces available to have them.** School was often a location that was seen as constraining. One young person indicated: "They should allow time in and outside of school specifically for talking about issues" (16, Female, Vic). Lara recounted how school systems made it difficult to support her friend:

[A]t school your (sic) not allowed your phone for some things like that. But I have friends in other schools and there are certain apps you can get on your laptop, which kind of get past the blockers. And I have [them] with my friends in case of like emergencies [...] so they can text me even during school hours, if something happens, like [they] have a panic attack at school or something like that, they could text me and be like, 'Oh my God, this just happened'. And I can even give them support, even when my principal says we probably shouldn't, you know, be talking to people outside of school. But sometimes when you need it [...] there are like other kind of apps like White Box and Discord works at schools and things like that as well

More broadly they also emphasised there is a **need to acknowledge the uncertain and precarious conditions facing young people, which create contexts for tough times to emerge.** It is important as one young person indicated to "Acknowledge how difficult it is to be young, transition out of school and find a career" (25, Male, NSW), but also such contexts that create tough times need to be addressed as well. Karen explained:

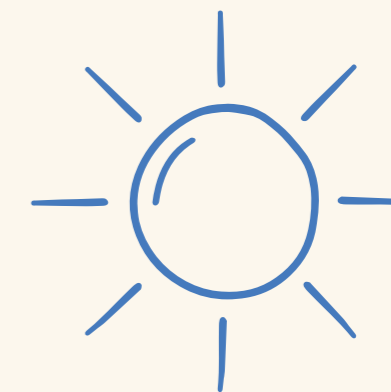
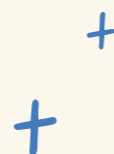
[S]o much of like the challenges I face, I think it's kind of a little bit like, it's almost systemic. Like I feel like we didn't have enough education about like queer spaces and queer relationships and things like that in school or like particularly relationships. It's like this lack of education about the the issues that my friends are sort of facing. So I guess and then like you, you seek out resources to learn. But I think like maybe I've gone back too far, but it's like just not, like not learning about these things early enough. So having these resources in school, perhaps or something like that or spaces to talk about it before they're going to happen

In part this means addressing the contexts that create and/or contribute to tough times and "Just lessen[ing] the stigma" (18, Transgender, VIC). Young people want to see these forms of support in place, to enhance their friends' wellbeing and the overall support they are able to provide their friends.



Recommendations

GENERAL



The findings of this report point to eight critical recommendations to support young people now and into the future, which require immediate action:

1 Recognise the expertise of young people as supporters and embrace youth-led approaches to solve youth challenges

Drawing on friendships, young people create their own means of getting through tough times, especially when 'adult' methods are not always successful or a first point of engagement. Develop acceptable solutions that tap into the knowledge, skills and expertise of young people to meet them where they are.

2 Build young people's capabilities: nurture strong friendships with healthy boundaries

Strong friendships are a critical protective factor for young people and a resource that is often ignored. Strengthening peer-based communities that create connections and the ability for young people to develop and nurture strong relationships can create support during tough times. Ensure access to resources led by young people: resources enabling them to maintain healthy boundaries in those friendships – including sharing responsibility, self-care and knowing when to involve outside help – is critical.

3 Build parents' and carers' capabilities: cultivate supportive and respectful spaces that encourage openness in young people

When young people are taking on too much responsibility for getting their friends through tough times, parents and other carers must play a key role in sharing this burden and supporting them into professional services where necessary. Training, resources and/or peer-support is needed for parents and carers on how to create spaces that encourage their young people to lean on them, as well as their friends. Parents and carers need to be supported to start conversations with young people about their experiences supporting their friends.

4 Develop services that acknowledge and include friends in the support process

Services such as primary health services, headspace and others should be ready to include friends in the care process. This may mean allowing friends to attend sessions, book sessions, and making sure they are also supported.

5 Create public and online spaces where young people feel comfortable supporting each other

Young people need spaces that enable them to do the important work of supporting each other. Creating and nurturing spaces for young people to support each other and do this work is critical. This should be considered in the contexts of public spaces, schools and higher education institutions, as well as in online spaces, and must be within the remit of technology companies, including Meta, TikTok and Twitter, who foster spaces where this support is taking place, and where young people are providing support to each other.

6 Prioritise peer-based services

Young people's connection to their peers lends itself to the potential of peer-based services implemented in safe ways that accommodate and support informal and formal forms of care. Carefully designed services with young people can get more young people into support that works for them, particularly young people who wouldn't access traditional mental health services. It can also address the shortfall in service provision in many parts of the country. We propose peer-based models, where young people have access to supervision or mentoring around the support role that train young people in support strategies. This could provide a service they could lean into for 'supervision' to help them in their support role. Such mentoring could be two-way, with learning and strategies shared amongst young people. The work

should be adequately compensated and include young people in its design and implementation.

7 Address the social determinants that lead to tough times

The social determinants that lead to young people going through tough times must be addressed. These root causes such as poverty, precarity, stigma and discrimination related to ethnicity/race and sexuality/gender, as well as education inequality and variations in digital literacy are often the foundation for tough times or exacerbate existing tough times. Mapping policy interventions that respond to these concerns, as well as identifying services that support young people around these domains, is critical to creating clearer pathways for them and to play a greater role in alleviating the drivers of tough times.

8 Fund and support critical future research

Future research must 1) further examine specific experiences of support provision from particular sub-populations (e.g. refugees, new migrants and sexuality and gender diverse young people); 2) better understand the experiences of those without friends in their lives who can provide the support discussed in this report, and 3) evaluate the complex contexts in which this support is enacted and identify the conditions that enable support and/or constrain support from being enacted and realised. Similarly interventions that seek to provide acceptable support should respond to calls in evaluation research (e.g.: Greenhalgh and Papoutsis, 2018; Hanckel et al., 2021b) to evaluate the contexts where interventions are deployed and how contexts impact on outcomes for young people.



Recommendations

CLINICAL

Recommendations for clinicians that can inform clinical practices have been developed from the findings of this report and consultations with clinicians:

1 Utilise the tips sheet ('What works for young people when supporting friends') provided in this report

The tips sheet developed in the report can be used to provide young people with things they need to know when supporting a friend.

2 Consider the whole person and their social context when providing care

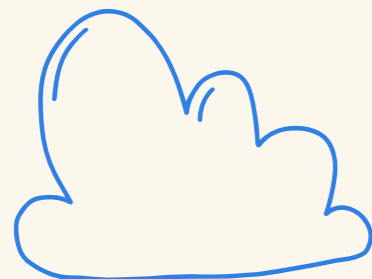
This means including the central role that friendships can play in a young person's care, as well as the impact being a supporter can have.

3 Key questions informed by report findings can be integrated into consultations with young people

Questions may include things such as: Are you supporting a friend? Is anyone else helping you support that person? How do we support you to get through it?

4 Consider offering young people ways of talking about informal support that won't make them feel as though they have 'betrayed' their friend

Remember that young people can be very protective of their friend's story and that confidentiality might be a barrier to open discussion. Some young people in this study spoke about using hypotheticals as a way to get advice without breaching trust.



5 Encourage young people not to take it on alone and to find someone they trust whom they can share with

Research by Dolan (2021) suggests that if young people take it on alone it can have significant negative impacts on their mental health. It's important to clarify the roles of responsibility (i.e. when is it something a friend can support with, and when should clinical support be sought out?).

6 Don't minimise the importance of friendship as a support role

Whether the young person is the one providing support or receiving it, friendship plays a critical role in support between young people and is a topic that can be explored in consultations with young people.

7 Working with young people on expanding support networks can be helpful

If a young person is relying heavily on a single friend for support, identifying others in the community who they might be able to lean on for support too can help expand support options and reduce the felt responsibility on an individual.

8 Provide the opportunity for a supporter to join sessions

If a young person is supporting a friend or receiving support, give permission for a friend who is understood as a supporter to join in on sessions.

9 Consider the support a friend attending sessions may require

Find ways to ensure their friend feels supported as well and has the necessary support in place.



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Appendix

Appendix A: Focus Group Participants

#	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Location
1	Celine	25	Female	Middle Eastern, Lebanese	Melbourne
2	Mai	23	Female	Vietnamese	Melbourne
3	Ruth	23	Female	Singaporean-Chinese Australian	Melbourne
4	Padma	25	Female	Tamil, South Asian	Melbourne
5	Gary	16	Male	Chinese	Melbourne
6	Malis	22	Female	Cambodian	Melbourne
7	Geeta	25	Female	Australian, Indian	Melbourne
8	Karen	25	Female	Anglo Australian	Melbourne
9	Michelle	23	Female	Italian	Melbourne
10	Brian	16	Male	French, German	Melbourne
11	Lara	16	Female	English	Melbourne
12	Josh	16	Male	Anglo	Melbourne
13	Audrey	22	Female	Chinese	Western Sydney
14	Kylie	19	Female	British	Western Sydney
15	Jenna	19	Female	Italian, Australian	Western Sydney
16	Ash	23	Nonbinary	Aboriginal, Indian	Western Sydney
17	Omar	17	Male	Pakistani	Western Sydney
18	Alex		Male		
19	Gabriella	21	Female	Anglo	Western Sydney
20	Ari	16	Non-binary/Gender Fluid	Chinese	Western Sydney
21	Mackenzie	18	Female	White Australian	Melbourne
22	Lance	20	Male	Black African	Western Sydney
23	Netta	19	Female	Samoan	Melbourne
24	Karl	24	Male	Australian	Western Sydney
25	Oscar	20	Male	Anglo	Western Sydney
26	Joel		Male		Western Sydney
27	Jay	17	Male	Italian	Melbourne
28	Sally	20	Female	Anglo	Western Sydney
29	Joyce	17	Woman	Asian	Western Sydney
30	Shalani	21	Female	Sri Lankan	Western Sydney
31	Priya	20	Woman	Indian	Western Sydney
32	Bastian	23	Male	Anglo	Western Sydney
33	Rajiv	23	Male	Indian	Western Sydney
34	Joseph		Male		

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Endnotes

1. This definition of tough times was developed from coding young people's answers to the second question in the survey: "In a few words, please describe what "tough times" means to you".
2. The study had ethics approval through Western Sydney University (Approval Number: H14744).
3. Best practices were used for collecting demographic data, asking young people to self-identify first in an open text box, we then asked them to code themselves into specific pre-set categories - those that best represented their identity, giving them some agency in the coding that takes place in relation to demographic information (see Vivienne et al., 2021).
4. Excluding the Northern Territory, which is a limitation of this study.
5. These eight questions do not include the open text demographic questions.
6. Two people did not disclose their location in focus groups.
7. For survey respondents we report age, gender and state/territory in Australia. Where these are not included by young people we have not reported them.
8. We note though that as Dolan's (2021) work indicates this is not possible for all young people, and some require intervention and/or support. However this was not apparent in the sample of participants in this study.
9. To protect the identity of respondents Andrea's (pseudonym) vignette is a representation that aligns with many of the stories we heard about how young people support their friends during tough times.

