

Pathways to wellbeing: A youth-led exploration of mental health in Aotearoa New Zealand

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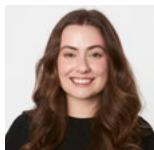
Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures is an independent, non-partisan, future-focused boundary organisation dedicated to tackling the complex, long-term challenges shaping Aotearoa New Zealand's future.

We provide high-quality, evidence-based insights to address critical national and global issues arising from rapid social, economic, technological, and environmental change.

Our name, Koi Tū, was gifted by Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei. Koi means "the sharp end of an arrow" and "to be bright and clever," while Tū means "to stand" and conveys resilience. Like our namesake, Koi Tū aims to get to the heart of the most pressing long-term issues.

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Executive summary

Young people in Aotearoa New Zealand, like their peers around the world, are experiencing declining mental health and wellbeing. Mental health is widely considered a critical issue to New Zealand society, drawing focus in successive elections, the media and from communities across the country. Yet our understanding of why mental health is declining has been limited to date, with limited exploration of how the changing social, cultural and political landscapes surrounding young people impact their wellbeing.

In this project, we worked with 176 young people from Auckland and Northland to explore what they think impacts youth mental health – for better and for worse – and how these issues can be addressed. We identified four key issues:

The world we live in, including significant anxiety and stress around the economy, existential threats like climate change, and day-to-day challenges coping in a world we see as polarised, unequal and unfair;

The pressures we experience, including feeling exhausted and overwhelmed by pressure to succeed academically, make families proud, build on intergenerational progress, and support our families financially and in other ways;

The connections we need, including our need for supportive connections with peers, friends, family and communities, and the impact of isolation on our wellbeing; and

Finding our path, the complex process of learning to navigate this world as young people figuring out who we are, what matters to us, and what it all means.

While many point to social media as the sole cause of increased rates of mental health challenges amongst young people, our research suggests that social media has complex interactions with these four factors. Social media works as an amplifier, on both negative and positive influences playing a role in mental health.

Through this work with young people, we have identified key targets for change. Addressing these with evidence-based and sustainable approaches is likely to have a profound impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing. Many of these targets can be addressed in schools, community groups and whānau, while others will require regional and national decision-making. It is essential that decision-makers prioritise developing long-term strategic policy and investment agendas to meaningfully and sustainably improve mental health for current and future generations of young people in New Zealand.

This report is the first in a two-part series, and should be read in conjunction with our report *Addressing youth mental distress in Aotearoa New Zealand*.

Key messages

- Young people in Aotearoa New Zealand are concerned about their mental health and wellbeing, and that of their peers and of younger generations.
- In collaborative, participatory workshops, young people identified four key issues: the world young people live in, the pressures they experience, the connections they need, and the challenges of navigating their path through this world.
- Understanding and addressing these four issues is essential to sustainably and meaningfully improving young people's mental health and wellbeing.
- We cannot address any one issue alone, and any tangible change will be reliant on strategic planning and cross-sector collaboration.

Introduction

Around the world, young people's mental health and subjective well-being is declining. We see this trend in high and low income countries, beginning even before the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ As we have previously written, sustainably improving mental health and in turn lifelong outcomes for young people is essential. Not only is supporting young people's mental health a moral necessity in any country, it must also be a public health priority. Our mental health when we are young impacts our lifelong health and wellbeing, including our adult mental health, quality of life, social functioning, and education and workforce outcomes, among other things. Mental health is related to economic outcomes, productivity and spend in the healthcare sector. Understanding what is contributing to declining mental health is essential. Though intervention and treatment approaches for young people experiencing major mental health challenges are important, no mental health system anywhere in the world is successfully and sustainably responding to the rapidly increasing population in need of support. We cannot hope to create a system capable of meeting the growing need without a focus on prevention. This means improving our understanding of why mental health is declining, addressing the issues at the source, and building on existing opportunities for positive change.

We have previously written on a number of factors including those acting much earlier in life that influence young people's mental health and the development of mental health challenges over the lifespan.² We identified that while researchers have a strong grasp on what influences mental health, we do not have a strong understanding of evolving social determinants of youth mental health – that is, what's changing in the world around us and how this impacts young people. Issues like rapidly changing social conditions, social media, overwhelming pressure, productivity culture, social messaging around mental health, and existential threats like climate change and COVID-19 have all drawn attention as potential influences.³⁻⁹ However, we lack rich understanding of which issues matter most to young people in Aotearoa New Zealand and how these issues interact with each other for young people in Aotearoa New Zealand. This lack of understanding limits our capacity to respond to and improve the lives of youth.

To improve our understanding of how the world around us affects youth mental health, it is critical that we talk to young people as experts who hold enormously valuable insights into their experiences. This is essential to identifying the issues that matter to them – as is taking actions that will actually address their most important problems. We have previously reviewed literature from Aotearoa New Zealand that explored young people's perspectives on what influences their mental health.¹⁰ In that review, we identified some core issues: a perception of the future as bleak, racism and discrimination, social media and digital technology, and intergenerational (dis)connection. That review also identified the need for a broader look at how young people see social determinants as impacting their mental health. Youth cultures, and the world more broadly, are changing rapidly. We identified a need for critical, nuanced understanding of key systemic determinants seen through the eyes of diverse populations of young people. In this project, we sought to address this need by exploring young people's perspectives on the social determinants of mental health, both positive and negative, in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

Our approach

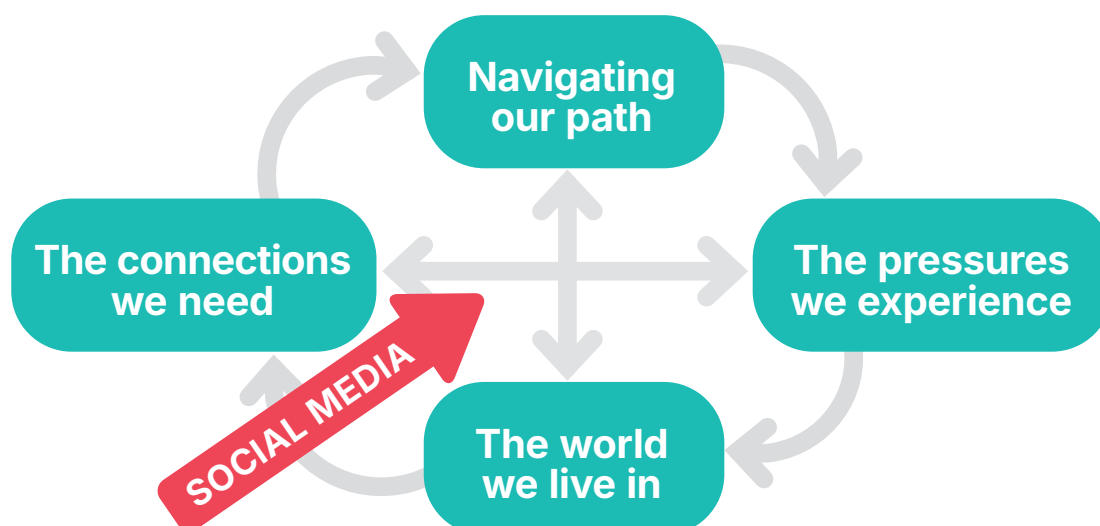
We worked with schools, organisations and iwi across Auckland and Northland to conduct 19 workshops between February and September 2023. A total of 176 young people (16–25-years-old, average age 17.6) participated – see our table below for details on who participated. These workshops were designed with the Kōi Tū Rangatahi Advisory Group to be fun, engaging and thought-provoking, encouraging young people to think deeply about how they understand mental health and what they see as helping and harming. More details on our methodology, ethics approval and analytic approach are available in our peer-reviewed publication.¹¹

About our participants

Ethnicity*	
New Zealand European/ Pākehā	69
Māori (indigenous people of New Zealand)	53
Pacific Islander	48
Asian	23
MELAA (Middle Eastern/Latin American/African)	7
Other	3
* Many participants identified with multiple ethnicities, so these numbers do not add to 176.	
Gender	
Male	71
Female	96
Gender Diverse/Gender Queer/Non-binary	9
LGBTQIA+ Identity	
	37
Lived experience with mental health challenges	
	135
Lived experience of supporting mental health challenges	
	143
School and work	
Engaged in school or university	146
Engaged in work	85
Neither engaged in education or work	6

What did we find?

We identified four key areas impacting young people's mental health. All the young people we spoke to talked about multiple issues – none thought mental health challenges were a consequence of one cause only. All four issues we discuss below are 'amplified' by social media. This means social media impacts mental health by accelerating and amplifying existing social challenges, pressures, stressors and social connections, and by interacting with the process of identity formation.



In this report, we have included examples from four personas – Jacob, Kim, Alex, and Elle – to illustrate how these four issues might be experienced by young people. These personas are fictional characters based on several young people we spoke to in this project, and do not represent a specific person.

The world we live in

Young people we spoke with are deeply concerned about the state of the world, particularly political, social and economic problems, including inequality, polarisation and inter-generational divide. Young people described feeling overwhelmed and exhausted, hopeless about the future, and helpless about the possibility of change.

Concerns about the future were common for young people. The economy, and worrying about being able to secure stable jobs and housing in the future, was a major focus for many, including those in both relatively privileged and underprivileged areas. Existential threats like climate change and the war in Ukraine were also named. Many participants described difficulty picturing what their future would be like and feeling anxious about the possibilities available to them.

Importantly, young people told us they feel exhausted and stressed day-to-day by the state of the world, often feeling overwhelmed, hopeless and helpless to do anything about it. Stress about the cost of living, living conditions, inequality, discrimination and rising polarisation were all named as impacting their mental health.

Social media was seen as exacerbating both division and young people's stress about the world and the future, with young people naming concerns about online conspiracy theories and constant exposure to news as negatively impacting mental health.

Target areas for intervention: When young people are exhausted, stressed, helpless and hopeless, their mental health will suffer and they may struggle to engage in their life, take steps towards a productive future, and see themselves as part of New Zealand civic society. Actions that target this area might look like:

- Systemic change, focused on addressing the core issues causing stress and overwhelm for young people – for example, targeted economic, social security or housing policies.
- Support services that reduce the burden of these issues on young people, which may in turn reduce young people's sense of exhaustion.

- Identifying and supporting programmes that aim to foster hope among young people and provide avenues to increase perceived agency and capacity for change.

Jacob discusses below how the world around him impacts his mental health and some of his hopes for the future:

Jacob, 22, lives in a flat that was damaged in the 2023 flooding. Jacob and his flatmates felt anxious about the rain for a long time after the flood. Jacob also started stressing about making sure he had a stable enough job and enough money in the bank that he could move somewhere else if the flooding happened again. He often burns himself out working extra shifts, and then has periods where he struggles to be productive and feels exhausted. One thing Jacob has found helpful is focusing on positive change in his community – and staying hopeful that the future could still look better.

With the floods and all that, everyone up here was affected and everyone felt the same way. We almost certainly are in a deteriorating point in history, the only question is whether it's going to lead to a genuinely awful future or simply a time of radical destruction of the old systems and building up better ones.

The pressures we experience

Young New Zealanders reported feeling overwhelmed and exhausted by continuous pressure to be productive and successful. Many described a deeply held fear of failure and stress about reaching high expectations set for them.

For many of the young people we spoke to, a lot of the pressure is academic, including pressure to get good grades, keep up with high workloads, and map out career paths to success. They reported feeling overwhelmed by teacher and parent expectations, particularly young immigrants and some Pasifika young people who recognised their parent's sacrifices and felt they owed it to them to make them proud.

Several young people also described pressure to support their families, including working up to full time on top of attending school to help financially support their families, and taking care of siblings.

Many young people feel the pressure to succeed does not acknowledge the barriers to success many experience – including the impacts of COVID-19, the financial hurdles, and the impact of health and disability on being able to regularly attend school and learn consistently. Social media accelerated these pressures, with young people describing the challenges of being compared to others and feeling like they're falling behind.

You can see from Kim's story how these pressures might impact a young person's mental health:

Kim, 16, is a student in secondary school. Kim is the oldest sibling and feels a lot of pressure to set a good example for her siblings. She talks about how her parents did not have the same access to education she did, and how important it is to her to make them proud. At the same time, Kim feels overwhelmed by trying to figure out what she's 'meant to do' after she leaves school. The stress and pressure can get to Kim, and she's had panic attacks in the past when she thinks about everything she 'has to' achieve in the next few years. She tells us she won't talk to her family about this because they're "already so stressed about everything else," and she feels pressure to "be okay" so they don't worry.

It's like, 'Okay, can I just take a breather?' Like what's happening in my life? Am I living in the present or am I just constantly planning for the future?.

Target areas for intervention: When young people feel overwhelmed by pressure and strained by reaching for standards they do not feel they can reach, mental health can be impacted. This could look like anxiety or fatigue impacting school and work performance, but it can also appear later in life, as chronic stress in youth increases the risk of later health challenges. Actions that could make a difference in this domain include:

- Including young people's perspectives in reviews of school and other education services and their curriculums, with a focus on ensuring young people are learning what they need to learn – and reducing the burden of learning things they don't need.
- Promoting and investing in programmes that teach strategies and skills to manage stress and failure.
- Taking a serious look at social media and how we prepare young people to be more digitally literate and critical consumers of content.

The connections we need

Connection and social support were key issues, with many young people feeling that support and connection were what they needed most to have good mental health. Young people told us they needed connections with people who understand them and that are consistent, stable and predictable.

Friendships were named as an important source of support and fun, but could also lead to stress as young people experienced conflicts, 'toxic people', and navigated the difficulties of fitting in. Several young people talked about not having friends around and how this negatively affected their mental health. This included young people who were isolated from their friends by COVID-19, living rurally, or moving, as well as young people who did not feel they had friends they could count on. While social media reduced isolation for several, others felt that the pressure to be constantly connected, particularly online, was stressful and could lead to them feeling more disconnected in 'real life'.

Family relationships, including with parents, siblings, cousins and wider whānau, were all seen as important. Some young people saw family as supportive, while for others family was distressing due to conflict, strain and inter-generational disconnection. Many spoke about the difficulties of speaking openly with their family, especially about mental health. This was particularly true for immigrant young people, young men and young Pasifika people we spoke with.

Communities were also important to young people, including sports teams, school communities (often characterised by forming relationships with supportive teachers), clubs, church groups, iwi, and connection to others like them such as the LGBTQIA+ community.

Target areas for intervention: When young people feel connected and supported, their mental health often flourishes. Supports can help young people take on stress and feel less alone facing the challenges of the world. When young people don't feel supported, isolation and loneliness can negatively impact mental health and can also make it harder to navigate the other challenges of life. Actions that could target this domain might include:

- Strengthening community and whānau-based supports that make it easier for young people to identify community networks that could provide meaningful connection and make it easier for whānau to provide meaningful support.
- Parent and whānau education, focused on the importance of connection and positive interaction from early in life and into adolescence.

Alex told us about the importance of connection for mental health:

When Alex, 21, moved to Auckland to start university, it was tough to make friends. Talking to friends online was helpful, but it could also be stressful trying to stay in touch and worrying someone might be upset about slow response times or missing messages. Alex's grades suffered, and Alex said it was hard to talk to family about this because they "don't really listen or understand". Recently, Alex became connected to some clubs at university and said it was "like a weight lifted off" to finally find some people to relax around.

Moving to Auckland during COVID was quite hard on my mental health. I'm still getting over that sense of loneliness. I felt like a single speck in a large place, and it's quite scary. Not only am I alone and I no longer have any support networks, I can't make any.

Navigating our path

Young people have agency in forging their own paths through the complex world around them, but they told us how hard this can be in today's world. One important part of finding this path is figuring out who you are, or forming your identity, which was seen as an ongoing process that can be stressful, complicated and at times contrived. Being 'real', getting your identity 'right', and being sensitive and accepting of others' identities were all seen as important, with some acknowledging they felt anxious they might offend their peers.

Social media makes it harder to form your identity, with young people feeling they were constantly on display and conscious of how others perceive them, which was connected to self-esteem and body image across genders. Some felt like they were curating two identities, on and offline, and felt confused about who the 'real' them is.

Having safe and supportive spaces to explore your identity was seen as essential for wellbeing, and many spoke positively about connecting with communities like the LGBTQIA+ community, churches and iwi. Many had experienced identity-based discrimination, including transphobia, homophobia, sexism and racism. This could be overt, like bullying, or more subtle, with some describing having to 'prove' the legitimacy of their identity. Many also spoke about being frustrated at negative stereotypes of young people in general, and how hard it can be to want to find your place in a society that doesn't seem accepting of you.

Overall, knowing oneself, understanding and accepting one's feelings, and knowing coping strategies for one's own mental health were seen as essential to finding a path through a complicated world. Strategies included going to the gym and reconnecting with nature, while others reported using substances or vaping to manage their mental health.

Target areas for intervention: Identity formation – figuring out who they are and their place in the world – is a key developmental goal of youth. When young people aren't able to safely and freely explore their identities and learn how to navigate their lives with agency, this can negatively impact on mental health and wellbeing. To target this area, we could consider interventions that:

- Foster free and accessible spaces and communities that promote healthy identity development through freedom for young people to explore who they are.
- Explicitly acknowledge the impact of discrimination on identity formation, and identify strategies to reduce experiences of bullying.
- Acknowledge that young people have agency in their mental health, and want strategies and interventions that will work for them and align with who they are.

Elle told us about the challenges of finding her path through the world, and how this impacts her mental health:

Elle, 17, left school at the end of year 12. Elle feels angry when people jump to conclusions about her because she left school early. She tells us she made the best decision she could at the time, since she didn't really see herself going on to uni and was feeling really low and out of place. Elle felt like the adults in her life didn't have her back and that she could only rely on herself to figure out what to do. She is working on accepting all her emotions – even the anger she feels towards people who judge her.

When you look a certain way or if you do stuff a certain way, you're stereotyped. The way you dress, the way you act. People pick that up and they tell you who you are. It's frustrating, how they see you compared to how you see yourself.

Moving forward

To address declining mental health and wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand, we need to understand the issues that matter most to young people. In this project, we explored young people's understanding of what impacts their mental health and their attempts to deal with these issues. Young people highlighted as critical issues the challenges they perceived in the world, the pressure of expectations, finding social connection, and developing and protecting their own identities.

It is clear when we review these issues that there is no 'quick fix' that would target any or all of these concerns. Many of the issues that are impacting young people are also impacting New Zealand at large, and several have their origins in long-standing, intergenerational patterns that cannot be changed overnight. To meaningfully address young people's mental health and create sustainable change, we must commit to: (1) outcome-led, rather than reactive, policymaking focused on what we want to achieve for young people and what the best options are to get us there; (2) strategic investment and budget decisions, with commitment across political cycles; (3) involving young people in every stage of our mental health decision-making; (4) measuring the outcomes of every action we take – so we know what actually works for young people over time.

Conversations about youth mental health often focus on social media.⁴ In some ways a focus on social media is intuitive, as the introduction of social media has aligned with rising rates of mental health challenges.¹² However, social media clearly emerged in this project as an amplifier, impacting mental health by amplifying both the positive and negative effects of other issues. Addressing social media alone will not be a solution to addressing young people's mental health, as the issues seen on social media reflect those also present in the offline world. For example, social media can increase the visibility of social issues and in turn increase stress, but the social issues will remain if social media is removed.

Young people are all different, and live diverse and varied lives. There is no single 'youth perspective' that could capture what impacts mental health for every young person living in Aotearoa New Zealand. While we heard the same issues in our conversations across demographics, specific issues tended to emerge more strongly in some discussions than others. For example, while even higher income young people expressed concerns about economic futures, lower income students spoke more about how their current financial situations impacted current mental health and wellbeing. Future analyses from our team will explore the needs of specific sub-populations within our sample.

Next steps

In this project, we have identified four key issues which point to a number of potential intervention targets. Next, we assessed possible evidence-based ways to address these targets, which you can read in the second report in this series *Addressing youth mental distress in Aotearoa New Zealand*.

We must continue to platform youth voices and listen to their perspectives. Young people can and should be included in all decision-making about the future of youth mental health in New Zealand.

Attention must be given to developing a long-term and sustainable policy agenda on youth mental health. An outcome-focused, cross-government policy agenda, including an investment strategy, is critically needed.

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