

Media Release

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Landmark survey reveals one in four young Victorians experience low levels of wellbeing and may be 'at-risk' of depression

Although the majority of young people experience normal levels of wellbeing, many young Victorians are lonely and struggling to cope with daily life, according to new VicHealth research.

A landmark survey of 1,000 Victorians aged 16 to 25 has found one in four has lower than normal wellbeing, placing them at higher risk for depression, with females 50 per cent more likely to be affected than males.

The VicHealth report, conducted by researchers Dr Melissa Weinberg and Dr Adrian Tomin from Deakin University's Australian Centre on Quality of Life, also revealed that one in four young people had limited access to social support in a time of need.

"Over 75 per cent of serious mental health problems start before the age of 25," says VicHealth CEO Jerril Rechter. "Our relationships have a powerful protective effect on health including mental wellbeing. This research reveals a darker side to our increasingly-connected world.

"Young people are more connected than most and yet this research suggests many feel lonely and isolated which increases their risk of serious mental illness including depression. In an era of smartphones and social media, this study highlights the importance of our relationships and taking the time to connect with others in real time and in more meaningful ways."

VicHealth commissioned the research during the development of its Mental Wellbeing Strategy, to be launched next month, which aims to build stronger approaches to resilience.

The study found young Victorians with strong social and support networks have higher levels of happiness, are less vulnerable to depression and better equipped to cope with life's ups and downs.

It also found that belonging to a sporting or physical activity group was generally associated with having above average wellbeing.

"Our research confirmed that social networks have strong protective effects on health," says lead researcher Dr Melissa Weinberg from Deakin University. "We found young Victorians living at home with their parents or with their partner and those participating in sport or other recreation activities had higher wellbeing."

"Our research also shows young people who belonged to a sports or other organisation had higher levels of resilience. Having access to a strong support network during a time of need was also beneficial."

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With one in 8 young Victorians reporting an intensity of loneliness that places them at a higher risk for depression, the study reveals also that loneliness is more harmful to young people's wellbeing at lower levels than either stress or anxiety. The researchers also found young Victorians generally cope well with stress and can actually tolerate even relatively high levels of stress, without it affecting their wellbeing.

"Although Victorian young people commonly report feeling stressed, average wellbeing only falls below the normal range for groups of people reporting a very high intensity of stress," says Dr Tomyn. "Stress is often considered the enemy to wellbeing, but our research suggests this isn't necessarily the case. Often, feeling stressed means we care about certain things in our lives, and it can motivate behaviour, like studying for an exam that we want to do well at".

The research findings will be presented at the Australian Association for Adolescent Health Youth Health Conference in Melbourne on Thursday 12 November 2015 and can be viewed at <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/young-victorians-survey>

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