

Results of a Youth Consultation

Health and Wellbeing Experiences for Young People in the Times of COVID-19

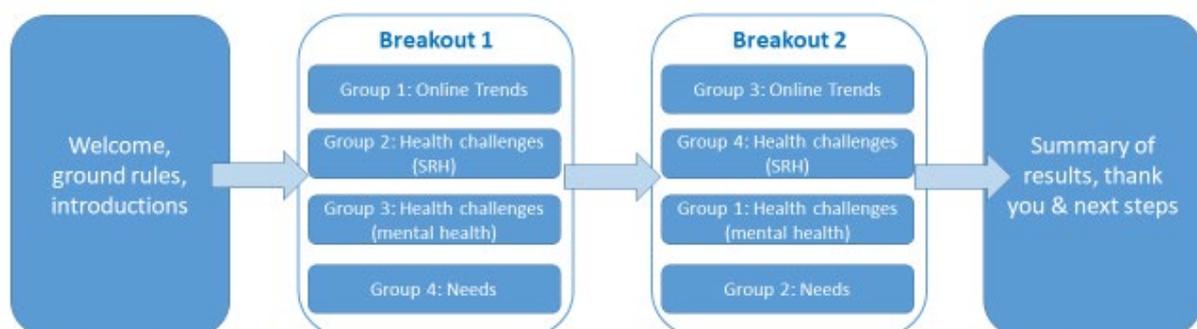
The unforeseen challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have taken a significant toll on people across the world, with populations affected in diverse ways. As well as the direct health implications of COVID-19, in the context of widespread school closures, increased economic insecurity, forced isolation measures and limited access to face-to-face social support, many are concerned about the secondary health and wellbeing challenges being faced by adolescents and young people across the world. Many are interested to know:

- What are the main health and wellbeing challenges that young people are facing?
- How are digital spaces currently mobilizing providing support?
- What can organizations seeking to support young people do to fill the gaps?

In order to explore these questions, UNESCO and the YTH Initiative (Youth Tech Health) reached out to and held focus group discussions with 20 young people, aged between 19 and 30. This included 11 females, eight males and one young person identifying as non-binary. These were all young people who attended [Switched On](#), a recent global symposium exploring the potential of digital spaces to deliver sexuality and other health information through digital spaces. Together, these young people - many popular social media influencers or leaders of youth networks - reach and communicate with thousands of other young people across the world.

Across a 90-minute session hosted on Zoom in early May, each participant contributed to two focus group discussions (5 people per group). In answering the questions, we asked them to reflect on the messages that they had heard coming from their communities and networks in the past few months.

While participants represented 19 country contexts (although their online networks reach followers beyond their national borders), discussions revealed a range of shared challenges and highlighted that digital spaces are responding in several different ways. The findings, presented below, will be of interest to other organizations seeking to support health and wellbeing of adolescents and young people in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Topline findings

Mental health – Young people are facing stress, anxiety and exacerbated mental health problems, often exacerbated by continued learning pressure in the context of school closures, but also noting a lack of access to social support and services.

Relationships and sexual health – despite confinement, many are understandably continuing existing; and pursuing new romantic relationships. This include continuing to find ways to conduct sexual relationships. Access to contraception is not always easy and not always a top priority. In addition, there were reports from popular influencers that their followers are submitting increased questions about masturbation and are looking for new ways to have continue their romantic relationships in the context of physical confinement. This included exploring digital sexual relationships such as sexting. The increase of online spaces to conduct relationships gives rise to concerns around consent and privacy.

LGBTI+ young people – young people from the LGBTI+ community are facing specific challenges linked to social isolation and family acceptance. There is a feeling that they are being left out of the equation in the response effort.

Violence – across contexts, there are reports of increased domestic and gender-based violence. In some contexts, the increase of violence is opening much needed conversations about what was a previously 'taboo' topic.

Digital spaces – young people who are connected are spending more time online and many digital spaces are mobilizing to provide young people with relevant information and support. But this digital support is not available across the board and there are some notable gaps in topic areas.

Call to action - How can we all better provide for young people's health and wellbeing?

There is a clear message from young people, their networks, and followers that young people are facing a range of elevated health and wellbeing issues in the times of COVID-19. In the context of continued confinement measures in some parts of the world, and increased relaxation in others, the following key messages are useful to inform organizations working to support the health and wellbeing of adolescents and young people. Many organizations and governments are mobilizing to support the needs of diverse groups as the world faces this global pandemic and it is hoped that the messages below will help facilitate an informed response.

- Recognize that young people are facing a range of elevated health and wellbeing issues that may not directly relate to COVID-19 but are secondary impacts of confinement measures, school and service closures and limited physical contact with support networks, including friends, their school community and other groups.
- Identify the most vulnerable groups and make a specific effort to target them with prevention messaging, programming, and support.
- Continue to harness digital spaces to provide health and wellbeing promotion and foster social connection and support. Be cautious about over-emphasizing the risks of COVID-19 and move towards broader sexual health, mental health and protection messaging. Include practical and detailed advice.
- Continue to position and provide contraception, abortion and other SRH services for young people as essential services.
- Where possible, provide signposting to youth-friendly services for mental health, sexual health and violence services that remain functional on platforms young people use. This support could include telephone and online counselling and support services.
- Focus on the issues that young people are interested in and/or that directly respond to the challenges young people are facing in the times of COVID: mental health, Masturbation, digital relationships, safe

sex online, privacy and consent, pregnancy and STI prevention measures...

- Organizations working on GBV and / or SRH can help young people by clearly summarizing the laws around consensual and non-consensual sharing of images and providing assistance for recourse.
- Meaningfully engage and collaborate with young people in your community/jurisdiction to ensure programming and interventions are youth-friendly and directly and appropriately meet their needs.
- Recognize that the global youth community is diverse with unique and nuanced needs. Ensure that the global, regional and local youth centered COVID 19 responses acknowledge this diversity and are inclusive in their strategy and execution.

Detailed findings

Most pressing health and wellbeing challenges

When asked about the most common **health and wellbeing challenges** young people are facing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the following were highlighted:

- General stress
- Anxiety, loneliness and amplified mental health problems
- Rise in domestic and gender-based violence
- Too much screen time
- Lack of service seeking for existing mental and physical health problems
- Limited service provision for existing mental and physical health problems

It was noted that many of these challenges are compounded for groups who were already vulnerable or discriminated against before the pandemic hit – those with existing mental health conditions, LGBTI+ young people, those with pre-existing health conditions including young people living with HIV and young people living in poverty.

“Young people living with HIV are missing their ARV doses. I don’t have money to get my meds. How long will this last?”

Mental health

Increased loneliness, feelings of detachment and social isolation, and anxiety linked to COVID-19 were reported widely. For school-aged young people, stress and anxiety were largely linked to school closure and the pressure of online learning. Continued pressure from teachers and parents to excel in the context of limited resources and support contributed to increased stress and anxiety levels. For learners at key stages of their education (e.g. national exams), the stress of falling behind, or not graduating, was significant. For others, the anticipation of returning to school is a cause for stress and anxiety, partly due to fear that they have fallen behind or for some because school has not been a happy place to be due to bullying or other issues.

Importantly, those with pre-existing mental health conditions are finding it challenging to access resources. There was a perception that resources are being redirected to the COVID-19 response.

Some influencers noted an increase in young people talking about suicide and anecdotal evidence of a rise in teen and adolescent suicide rates.

Sexual relationships

Despite the distancing measures that are being put in place in many places, it seems that many adolescents and young people are still finding ways to meet and conduct sexual relationships.

“Officially there is strict quarantine but clearly people are thinking a lot about and having a lot of sex.”

“I have had young people contact me to say they are still secretly meeting their partner to have sex and then they feel guilty that they might risk passing COVID to the people they are living with.”

This includes, participants noted, many young people contacting them to seek advice on first time sex and people contacting to ask specific questions about the risk of sexual transmission of COVID-19. For some young people, access to contraception has been challenging due to shops and services being closed, or not a priority given the secretive nature of their sexual meetups.

“Condoms are not being prioritized as they are more difficult to access and they want to hide that they are having sex.”

An increase in interest in masturbation was also noted, with people ‘having more time on their hands to explore their body.’

“... teenagers are locked in their houses and sometimes they don’t have much entertainment except to explore their body.”

Another trend has been an interest in digital sexual relationships. This trend is reflected in a reported increase in downloads and engagement of dating apps, such as Tinder which has made features previously requiring a fee now free.

“I have had questions around how they can interact with their partners who they can’t see physically - How to keep it sexy online.”

Relating to the increase in online sexual behaviors some people are reporting feeling distress and shame in sexting and feeling uncomfortable about these activities, particularly girls in places where such behaviour is frowned upon and/or against traditional gender norms.

This trend has been linked to wide reports of non-consensual sharing of images, and digital platforms being increasingly used as sites for abuse, with some websites specifically created as a platform to share explicit images and young people reaching out to seek advice about protecting privacy and clarification about privacy laws.

Sexual health services

Discussion about sexual relationships led to questions about access to broader sexual and reproductive health services. Influencers reported their followers asking questions about which services are still available. In many places, the answer there has been great confusion about whether services remain functional. In other places there were common reports of SRH services being seen as non-essential and therefore closed with implications for accessing contraceptives and abortion.

“They are calling us to ask about availability of abortion services and expressing guilt as they are worried that this is not an essential service at this time and don’t want to disturb doctors.”

There were reports of people feeling guilty about accessing services relating to sexual and reproductive health in case the health system is already overwhelmed with COVID-19 related issues which are deemed the priority.

Issues for LGBTI+ communities

There was a strong message that communities that have been traditionally at-risk face amplified

vulnerabilities in the current crisis. Moreover, some of these communities are receiving the least attention from governments and decision makers. This trend is particularly the case for the young LGBTI+ community. For those who are keeping their identity hidden, shelter-in-place rules can be especially challenging, with some reporting feeling unsafe in their homes.

“... shelter at home is possible when you have a safe home. Many LGBTQ youth don’t have a safe home or access to family support.”

One participant reported that many young people have been ‘kicked out of’ home because of their sexual orientation/gender identity.

Young people from the LGBTI+ community have expressed concern about the risks of sharing personal information when they are using apps or other digital platforms for relationships.

Domestic violence

There were many reports of increased domestic and gender-based violence in the home. Young people are both witnessing and directly experiencing violence. Gender-based violence was reported to be increasing as people are ‘stuck with their partners in close confinement’. For those already in abusive relationships, the abuse was becoming worse that there are limited options to escape.

“Youth are with families stuck in small spaces and simmering issues are coming to boil”

Violence is an issue across multiple contexts and in some places where it has been a taboo topic, the situation has become an amplifier for discussion about domestic and raising awareness (explored further below).

Online trends

Unsurprisingly, young people are spending a lot of time online, both with positive (social connection) and negative (overload of negative news/conflicting information) ramifications. Young people are turning to digital spaces to connect socially, with apps like House Party becoming popular. There was a noted increase in engagement with some Facebook groups and increased creative content being posted on TikTok and Instagram. These trends reflect sentiment from young people that they are tired of hearing about COVID-19 and reminded about the negative consequences. They want to be entertained and ‘reminded of normal life’.

“Now, they are interested in anything that can entertain them and not be about COVID or about school.”

Dating apps are seeing an increase in subscribers becoming popular.

“All my friends downloaded tinder - dating is really about going out and meeting people. Obviously you can’t do that right now, and there’s a feature to go anywhere in the world for free to chat with other people in other countries. People are bored right now.”

Perhaps a positive ramification is that in some contexts issues that have been traditionally ‘taboo’, including those related to mental health, sexual and reproductive health and violence – have come onto the agenda and are being talked about more openly.

“Use this time as an opportunity to bring to light conversations that might have been difficult before... Discussion around domestic violence is blooming in Russian media. People who never thought about it are talking about it.”

How are digital spaces responding?

Digital platforms are getting creative, especially around supporting young people's mental health needs. At the same time, mental health-related content has not been context-specific and does not adequately reflect the nuances of mental health problems. Moreover, more serious mental illnesses people may be dealing with are not recognized in online content.

“There is too much ‘everything will be okay’, rationally that might be correct but emotionally you are punching yourself”

“A lot of content being shared on blogs and through memes, but we are not finding useful and actionable mental health content. Like what to do if I am having a panic attack?”

On the other hand, it was noted that there has been limited specific effort to create and share SRH content specifically relating to the challenges that young people are facing (with the exception of antenatal and maternal care and a strong example on [Bish UK](#)). There was a sense of SRH being seen as a ‘secondary issue’ with other needs such as hunger and primary health care taking precedence.

It was noted that much of the digital information and support specifically developed for young people was coming from grassroots organizations and not from governments.

What do influencers and content developers need?

- Accurate information and resources to inform the creative of comprehensive content
- Information about what services are still functioning so that young people can be guided to appropriate and functioning services
- Guidance around how to adequately and comprehensively provide information and support for a range of mental health issues.

“There is a lot more that needs to be deconstructed around mental health and be supported.”

- Funding support because influencers currently have limited sponsorship / product endorsement at the moment.
- Assistance with advocacy for continued SRH services and education
- Information on how to work on comprehensive sexuality education in the digital sphere to share with their volunteers especially on the PR / marketing / digital side