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INTRODUCTION

Generation Z, (born 1995-2009), currently make up 20% of Australia’s population and have grown up in a world very different from that of previous generations. Young people of today are required to keep on top of schoolwork, navigate the world of social media and prepare for a future that will likely involve multiple careers. Understanding the impact of these factors on young people’s wellbeing is key to supporting their ability to flourish. By understanding this, parents, educators and society more broadly can effectively empower the young people of today to succeed in a rapidly changing world.

This report, commissioned by MyStrengths Australia, provides a key contribution to the national conversation around young people’s wellbeing. MyStrengths Australia created the MyStrengths Assessment, a personality survey designed to help young people identify their top 5 personality strengths. High school students are assessed and then given insights into how their unique personality leads them toward their best self and future. MyStrengths also conducts a wellbeing survey with students to understand how stress, sleep, social media and relationships are impacting Australia’s young people. This report presents the key findings from this wellbeing survey, which has been completed by 9,193 Australian high school students aged 11 - 18 between February 2020 and May 2021.
KEY INSIGHTS

KEY AREAS OF STRESS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
On average, young people typically report higher levels of mental ill health compared to the general population. The top causes of stress and worry in young people today are:

**TOP CAUSES OF STRESS:**
- Schoolwork: 62%
- Feeling anxious about what might happen: 41%
- Self-esteem/feeling low: 35%
- Friend problems: 27%
- Family difficulties: 27%

**TOP CAUSES OF WORRY:**
- Schoolwork: 42%
- Worry about what they will do in their future: 38%
- The way I look: 34%
- What people think/say about me: 31%
- Missing out on my goals: 24%

32% of young Australians do not talk to anyone when they are struggling.

Only 2% seek professional help from organisations such as Headspace or Beyond Blue.

SOCIAL MEDIA: A HELP OR HINDRANCE?

**IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON YOUNG PEOPLE’S LIVES AND RELATIONSHIPS**

- 40% of young people in Australia believe social media helps their friendships while 2% believe it hinders their friendships.
- 15% of young people in Australia believe social media helps their self-esteem while 11% believe it hinders it.
- Students report that bullying happens face-to-face (19%) twice as much as online (8%).

**TOP 5 USES OF SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE:**
- To connect with friends: 58%
- Watching funny/interesting things: 53%
- To follow things I like: 32%
- To avoid missing out: 22%
- I can be more confident on there: 11%

3 in 4 young people (aged 11-17) (74%) engage with social media daily.
**Key Insights Continued**

### Sleep Habits

**Average Bedtime by Age Group**

- **12 - 13 yrs**
  - 8pm: 10%
  - 9pm: 33%
  - 10pm: 37%
  - 11pm: 12%
  - after 12am: 8%

- **14 - 15 yrs**
  - 8pm: 8%
  - 9pm: 25%
  - 10pm: 30%
  - 11pm: 22%
  - after 12am: 15%

- **16 - 17 yrs**
  - 8pm: 6%
  - 9pm: 15%
  - 10pm: 20%
  - 11pm: 25%
  - after 12am: 36%

### Sleep Impacts Mental Health

The later students go to bed, the more likely they are to experience mental health challenges:

- 65% of students interact with screens in the hour before they go to bed

- 31% Watching TV
- 24% Social media
- 10% Video games

### Young Australians Turn to Peers More Than Adults

Young people are most likely to seek support from:

- A friend my age: 45%
- Mum: 42%
- Dad: 22%
- Teacher: 3%

### Young People Are Relationship Driven

The most important things to young people are their relationships with others:

1. Family: 73%
2. School friendships: 30%
ANXIETY AND STRESS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

On average, young people typically report higher levels of mental ill health compared to the general population, where 43% of young Australians aged 15-19 report feeling stressed either all or most of the time. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this for young people particularly as the daily routines and social interactions that support them have been disrupted. In addition, student support systems have been impacted, with over 75% of school mental health programs being disrupted in 2020. There are a number of factors influencing the mental health of Australia’s youth, including schoolwork, uncertainty about the future and low self-esteem.

**TOP CAUSES OF STRESS:**
- Schoolwork: 62%
- Feeling anxious about what might happen: 41%
- Self-esteem/feeling low: 35%
- Friend problems: 27%
- Family difficulties: 27%

**TOP SOURCES OF WORRY:**
- Schoolwork: 42%
- Worry about what they will do in their future: 38%
- The way I look: 34%
- What people think/say about me: 31%
- Missing out on my goals: 24%
SCHOOLWORK PRESSURES

In 2020 over 4 million students were enrolled in either primary or secondary school in Australia. With students spending an average of 11,000 hours at school throughout primary and secondary school, the experience of school is a key factor in young people’s social and emotional development. Despite this, schoolwork is the number one cause of stress (62%) and worry (42%) for young people. Young people place a lot of importance on their achievement at school. In fact, one in five (21%) rank school work as their second priority in life.

Overall, young people who attend an independent school have higher levels of stress and worry than those who attend a Government school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Stressed about school work</th>
<th>Feeling anxious about what might happen</th>
<th>Self-esteem or feeling low</th>
<th>Friend problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INDEPENDANT</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOVERNMENT</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DO MALES AND FEMALES EXPERIENCE STRESS DIFFERENTLY?

While the common causes of stress and worry in young people are the same between females and males, on average, females experience higher levels of stress than males.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anxious about what might happen</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The way I look</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem or feeling low</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family difficulties</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2% of students identify as non-binary, sample size is too small to include insights.
For young people in Australia, global concerns are overshadowed by personal challenges and worries. For many young people, stress and worry stems from the possibility of a disruption to their personal lives, whether they experience that personally or through a close relationship. While broader world issues such as equality do impact them, it is less prominent in the everyday life of most young people.

89% of young people are worried about at least one thing within their world (the way I look, what people think/say about me, missing out on my goals, school work, illness/getting sick, what I’ll do in my future).

35% of young people are worried about at least one thing in their family (family money problems, family illness, fighting/anger at home).

21% of young people are worried about at least one thing about the world (equality, war, global warming/environment, peace in the community/world).
HARDSHIPS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Many young people face hardships that influence the way that they view and interact with the world around them. These challenges may be a result of things out of their control or may come from witnessing others experience hardships. The most common hardship young Australians have experienced is the loss of a loved one (41%). More than one in three young Australians (36%) have experienced conflict at school, although this is more prevalent in females (41%) than males (29%).

Three in ten young people (30%) have experienced mental health challenges and this is also more common among females (35%) than males (21%).

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HARDSHIP AND SELF-ESTEEM

Young people experiencing low self-esteem are more likely to have experienced hardships than young people in general.

- Mental health challenges (me): 53% (Young people experiencing low self-esteem) vs. 30% (Young people in general)
- Conflict at school: 45% (Young people experiencing low self-esteem) vs. 36% (Young people in general)
- High and regular anger at home: 26% (Young people experiencing low self-esteem) vs. 18% (Young people in general)
- Bullying — face-to-face: 26% (Young people experiencing low self-esteem) vs. 19% (Young people in general)
- Bullying — online: 14% (Young people experiencing low self-esteem) vs. 8% (Young people in general)
Sleep and wellbeing are undeniably linked, both physically and mentally. In fact, it is the most effective way to reset the brain and body each day. Deep sleep is key in brain development and maturation, enabling young people to cope with challenges they may face in the world around them. Since school work is the primary stressor for young people, concentration in and beyond the classroom is key. Sleep significantly contributes to a person’s ability to concentrate and so, must be a part of the conversation around wellbeing in young people.

Similarly, the use of screens before bed significantly impacts a person’s ability to sleep restoratively. When using screens before bed, melatonin, the hormone regulating the sleep cycle, is suppressed by up to 50%. This means that while young people may be asleep, they may not be sleeping in a way that restores and refreshes them.

A large proportion of young people are night owls. Although more than half of young people (56%) say their usual bed time is 10pm or before, more than two in five (44%) go to bed at 11pm or later. One in ten (11%) go to bed at midnight and 9% go to bed at 1am or later.
SCREEN TIME IS THE MOST COMMON ACTIVITY IN THE HOUR BEFORE THEY GO TO BED

More than half of young people (65%) interact with screens in the hour before they go to bed, either watching TV (31%), engaging with social media (24%) or playing video games (10%).

Females are more likely to be on social media the hour before they go to bed (28%). Males are more likely to be playing video games in the hour before they go to bed (19%).

Young people who go to bed after 11pm, are more likely to be on social media (33%) in the hour before bed than those who go to bed earlier (16%).
MENTAL HEALTH AND BEDTIME

There is a strong relationship between the time young people go to bed and their experience of mental health challenges. In fact, the later a young person goes to bed the more likely they are to report a mental health challenge.

% REPORTING MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES BY TIME THEY USUALLY GO TO BED
Support that recognizes how young people’s experience of hardships shape who they are, is key in cultivating thriving and flourishing young people. This support must come from all spheres of life, including family, friends and school as well as professional help where appropriate. Currently young people are turning to family members, such as mum or dad, and friends their age for support. Seeking professional help is not common in young people today.

Key priorities in young people reflect how relationship driven they are. Three in four (73%) young people rank family as their number one priority and 30% rank school friendships as their second priority.

When feeling low, young people will most likely turn to friends their age for support (45%). Perhaps there is some comfort for students in knowing that their experience is not unique to them, that is, their stresses and worries are a shared experience among people their age.

As well as providing a means for connection, social media also provides an avenue to receive emotional and mental support. Students who are on social media daily are more likely turn to a friend their age for support (49%) compared to those who use it weekly or less (34%).
As teenagers go through the process of individualisation, they increasingly internalise their struggles or turn to their peers for support. While 63% feel that their parents understand them really well or quite a bit, less than half would actually seek help from their parents. Young people are more likely to turn to mum for support (42%), while only 22% would turn to Dad for support. Outside the family, young people seek support from teachers (3%) and organisations such as Headspace and BeyondBlue (2%).

Both males and females are more likely overall to talk to their mum than dad:

- Females: 44%
- Males: 40%

- Females: 17%
- Males: 29%

While young people are able to recognise key causes of their stress and worry, many do not seek professional help or help at all.

- Females: 44%
- Males: 40%

- Females: 17%
- Males: 29%

One in three young people do not seek support from anyone.

One in three students (32%) do not talk to anyone when they are struggling.

Only 2% seek professional help from organisations such as Headspace or Beyond Blue when they are struggling.
CURRENTLY, ONLY 3% OF STUDENTS SEEK SUPPORT AT SCHOOL THROUGH THEIR TEACHERS.

IMPROVING STUDENT SUPPORT IN SCHOOLS IS A PRIORITY

As schoolwork is the top source of stress and worry for students, a strong support system at school is crucial to students’ ability to thrive in and beyond the classroom. While one in three young Australians (30%) feel that their school is extremely/very effective at providing support for mental wellbeing and overcoming personal challenges,8 students are unlikely to turn to their teachers for support. In fact only 3% of students seek support from their teachers at school.

- In 2020, the NSW government set a goal to have a full time school counsellor in every high school by 20239
- From October 2020 to May 2021, non-government schools in NSW have increased funding to facilitate student support and wellbeing10
Most young people are highly engaged with social media. Three in four young people (74%) engage with social media daily. Two in five students (38%) use social media many hours a day while 36% use it a bit each day.

**TOP 5 USES OF SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE**

- To connect with friends: 58%
- Watching funny/interesting things: 53%
- To follow things I like: 32%
- To avoid missing out: 22%
- I can be more confident on there: 11%

Contrary to how adults view the impact of social media, young people believe it to be of benefit to their lives. Students see social media as a tool for connection and value its role in enhancing their relationships with others. With Gen Z growing up as digital natives, it is unsurprising that technology and social media play such a central role in their experience of connecting with others. In fact, the most common use of social media among young people today is to connect with friends (58%). Social media also plays a role in empowering young people in Australia. A higher proportion of young people feel that social media has helped improve their self-esteem (15%) rather than damaging it (11%).

"I find it hard to socialise at school and have been bullied because of my ASD. I like social media and gaming online as there are like-minded people and I can just block people who are mean.”

— MATT, 16YRS
ONLINE VS. FACE-TO-FACE BULLYING

While bullying does occur on social media and technology, students are more likely to experience bullying face-to-face rather than online. In fact, students are more than twice as likely to experience face-to-face bullying (19%) than they are to experience online bullying (8%).

Although online bullying is only experienced by 8% of young people overall, those that spend more time on social media are more likely to experience online bullying. The proportion who have experienced online bullying increases to 11% for those who are on social media for many hours a day.

PROPORTION WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED ONLINE BULLYING BY TIME SPENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Spent on Social Media</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Many hours per day</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A bit each day</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A few times per week</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almost never</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not on it</td>
<td>3%</td>
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F.O.M.O

F.O.M.O or the Fear of Missing Out is a common Gen Z phrase used to describe the dread of being left out in a social setting or not being up to date with the latest social media trend or viral video. More than one in five young Australians (22%) use social media to avoid F.O.M.O. Those who use social media daily, are more likely to use it to avoid missing out than those who use it a few times per week (25% cf. 16%).

CONFLICT AT SCHOOL: 40% 32%
FACE-TO-FACE BULLYING: 21% 17%

Young people who attend a non-government school are more likely to experience higher levels of conflict at school and face-to-face bullying:

- Non-government
- Government
About MyStrengths

The MyStrengths Assessment helps students discover their top 5 strengths and equips them to draw on these strengths through a school program. The combination of these tools promotes a growth mindset in students, helping them flourish while at school and into the future.

Almost 9 in 10 students (86%) find their top 5 strengths either exactly or mostly accurate.

The Mystrengths:

- Charismatic
- Coaching
- Confidence
- Creativity
- Determination
- Even tempered
- Excelling
- Expressive
- Fairness
- Flexibility
- Hard working
- Harmony
- Helper
- Historical
- Inner values
- Investigator
- Lead
- Loyalty
- Managing
- Memory
- Observant
- Positivity
- Practical
- Prudent
- Purpose
- Recognition
- Responsibility
- Solution finder
- Strategic
- Structured
- Thinker
- Understanding
- Uniqueness
- Visionary
- Winner

While 19% of students felt their self-esteem was already strong before taking the survey, one in three (33%) feel that MyStrengths has helped them grow significantly in their self-esteem and confidence and a further 26% felt it helped them quite a bit.

MyStrengths encourages students to be aware of their peers with 81% of students suggesting they understand other people better by learning about different personalities and strengths.
METHODOLOGY

In March 2021, MyStrengths commissioned McCrindle to present the key insights of their wellbeing survey, looking at the mental wellbeing of high school students. The survey was completed online and was distributed to students in 36 NSW schools (Independent, Catholic and Government) and one youth camp. The survey collected 9,193 responses between February 2020 to May 2021. Where referenced in the report, non-government schools combine data from Catholic and Independent schools.

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Gender:

- Male: 38%
- Female: 60%
- Non-binary: 2%

School years:

- Year 6: 176
- Year 7: 3,606
- Year 8: 536
- Year 9: 163
- Year 10: 4,015
- Year 11: 334
- Year 12: 322
- Youth camp: 36

School type:

- Government: 4,544
- Catholic: 3,485
- Independent: 1,123

DATA COLLECTION DATES

- 2020: 5,327
- 2021 (up until May): 3,866
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