

Deep and Meaningful Conversations Report 2025



WHĀRAURAU

Empower the Workforce | Manaaki Mokopuna

Introduction

Background of DMC

The Deep, Meaningful Conversations (DMC) kaupapa is a series of workshops designed to elevate and amplify the voices of young people in decision-making spaces, with a specific focus on the mental health and addictions sector. Since 2019, multiple DMC workshops have been held across the motu, engaging youth in conversations that inform and shape policies and practices within the sector. The insights gathered from these discussions are compiled annually into comprehensive reports. The Youth Advisory team at Whāraurau facilitates all DMC workshops and produces the reports.

The Youth Advisory Team

The Youth Advisory Team at Whāraurau are a team of young people with lived experience of mental health, substance use, or addiction concerns, and accessing youth services. They apply their lived experience insights and perspectives across the work they do, while also gathering the voices of young people across Aotearoa to further inform their mahi.

They also advocate for the uptake of youth consumer, peer support, and lived experience (YCPSLE) roles, working closely with services to ensure that these roles are well supported.

Whāraurau

Whāraurau provides workforce development through training, advisory, and resources aimed at improving service delivery for Infant, Child, and Adolescent Mental Health Services (ICAMHS). Whāraurau's work is guided by the expertise of its youth advisory team, cultural advisory team, and principal advisors.



2024 DMC events

In 2024, we held 7 DMC events in Whakaoriori (Masterton), Te Whanganui-a-Tara (Wellington), Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland), and virtually. We were privileged and grateful to partner with organisations such as RainbowYOUTH, Neurodiversity in Education Coalition, New Zealand National Refugee Youth Council (NZNRYC), and Mind and Body.

This year, the DMC events continued our commitment to inclusivity. There were no prerequisites for service access, and we invited young people aged 16-25 to attend. Our focus was to explore how young people define wellbeing, understand the factors impacting their wellbeing, learn about their experiences with support, and discuss what ideal support systems would look like for them.

The events were held at youth-friendly venues selected in collaboration with local Youth Consumer Advisors (YCA's). We also offered virtual DMC options to ensure accessibility for all young people.

Each event began with a karakia, followed by whakawhanaungatanga to create connection.

To capture the insights shared, we used a combination of Slido, an anonymous online feedback tool, and note-taking. This approach gave all young people the opportunity to contribute their thoughts, ensuring anonymity for those who preferred not to speak publicly.



What does wellbeing look like to young people?

This question explored how young people define wellbeing. The open-ended nature of the question encouraged diverse discussions about what wellbeing means, how it can be maintained, and the factors that influence it.

“Looking after yourself in a holistic way”

Understanding of wellbeing

Young people generally agree that wellbeing is closely linked to identity and is a multifaceted concept. It encompasses emotional, physical, social, sexual, environmental, cultural, and spiritual health. However, the ways in which young people maintain their wellbeing vary significantly, highlighting that it is not a one-size-fits-all concept. This diversity is valuable, as rigid approaches to wellbeing may not address the unique needs of all young people.



Contributors to wellbeing

Young people identified a wide range of factors that contribute to their wellbeing, including both positive and negative influences. These factors included:

Connection and relationships

Strong, supportive relationships were frequently mentioned. Many young people noted that their happiness and sense of security are closely tied to family, whānau, friends, and other meaningful connections.

Self-care

Practices such as spending time in the sun, being active, eating well, getting enough sleep, and engaging in hobbies like yoga or reading were identified as important aspects of self-care that positively impact wellbeing.

Meeting basic needs

Access to essential resources like financial stability, housing, healthcare, food, and education were seen as fundamental to wellbeing. Financial pressures, such as living paycheck to paycheck, limited job opportunities, and rising transportation costs, were noted as significant burdens.

“You can’t work on your mental health when you’re worried about rent and food”

Mental and emotional strain

Overthinking, stress, and the effects of trauma were common themes. Many young people also expressed frustration from unmet expectations and the pressure of working hard without seeing results, which contributed significantly to mental and emotional strain, ultimately affecting their overall wellbeing.

Accessibility and accommodation

Neurodiverse young people expressed that “It is hard to exist,” highlighting the significant challenges they face in managing their health and wellbeing within a society that is not always accessible or accommodating. The importance of support from those around them, such as teachers and whānau who have taken the initiative to learn and create inclusive spaces for neurodiverse young people cannot be overstated, as it has a profound positive impact.



Inequity and discrimination

Young people highlighted experiences of discrimination, such as gender inequality, racism, transphobia, and homophobia, as major factors that harm their wellbeing. Additionally, in New Zealand, systemic inequities where certain groups face disadvantages due to factors like race, gender, or sexual orientation were identified as significant barriers to the wellbeing of those young people.

Generational differences

Young people highlighted a gap in understanding between their generation and older generations regarding wellbeing. Phrases like “You’re so young, you have nothing to be sad about” were seen as a lack of empathetic communication. This leads to feelings of whakamā (shame) and a reluctance to discuss wellbeing openly, which negatively impacts young people’s ability to seek support and express their concerns.

“When I try to talk about my mental health, people just tell me ‘you’re too young to feel like this’”

Abuse and response

Experiences of abuse, specifically sexual violence, were identified as serious threats to wellbeing. Many young people reported feeling dismissed or belittled when disclosing abuse, especially when the perpetrator shared their gender. Ethnic minorities and rainbow youth mentioned facing compounded risks due to the intersectionality of their identities.

Local and global politics

Many young people expressed distress about both global and local political issues, including conflicts and the marginalisation of indigenous and ethnic communities. Additionally, the prevalence of divisive rhetoric, particularly regarding transphobia in the media and politics, was seen as contributing to a heightened sense of societal tension and personal distress.

Online life

The impact of the digital world on wellbeing was a common theme. While online support networks were seen as beneficial, issues like cyberbullying and the challenge of balancing online and real-world interactions also emerged as concerns.



If you were not feeling like yourself, who would you talk to or where would you get some support?

This question focused on gaining insights into the primary sources of support young people turn to during times of struggle, as well as their awareness of professional services. Attendees were encouraged to share what support looks like to them, leaving the question open-ended to capture a wide range of perspectives.

Main areas of support identified:

Hobbies

Many young people find comfort in their hobbies such as drawing, exercising, listening to music, and reading.

Friends

A significant number of young people rely on their friends for support. Responses included terms like “BFF” (Best Friends Forever) or “close friends.”

Intimate partners

Many young people identified casual sexual relationships, where intimacy occurs without being in an exclusive relationship, as sources of both support and self-discovery

Whānau/family

Family members, such as mothers, sisters, or chosen whānau, were commonly identified as key sources of support.

Religious, spiritual, and cultural practices

For some, spiritual practices like prayer or “talking to God” were important sources of comfort and guidance. The role of a Reiki master was also mentioned.

Services

Professional supports were highlighted, including therapists, kaiārahi, counselors, and peer support workers. They also mentioned several phone and text services, such as 1737 and Outline.

Self-care

Activities like talking to self, taking walks, sleeping, showering, visiting meaningful places such as parks, beaches, or nature (also said as the whenua), and journaling were mentioned as helpful for recharging.

Pets

Many young people find the company of their pets to be very comforting.



Stand out points:

The most common sources of support identified were friends, whānau, and family, underscoring the importance of close personal relationships for wellbeing. However, many young people expressed concerns about overburdening their friends, whānau, or family with their struggles.

The next most common source of support was self-care, which often involved solitary activities. This could be attributed to a desire not to overwhelm others, a preference for alone time, or a lack of supportive figures to reach out to.

Most young people were unaware of the services available to them or how to access these services.

Young people who were aware of available services often hesitated to seek support, feeling they weren't "bad enough" to access help or fearing they might take the place

of someone in "greater need." This hesitation was further amplified by the understanding that many services have long wait times, or from having negative personal and peer experiences associated with them.

Schools were not mentioned as a place where young people seek support. Many young people highlighted the lack of adequate support in schools and the overall deficiency of mental health education within the education system.

Religious, spiritual, and cultural practices were mentioned more than they had been in previous years. A number of these responses came from young former refugees.

Intimate relationships and encounters were mentioned, which haven't been a standout in previous years. A number of these responses came from rainbow young people.



If you have accessed support, what has that looked like and what was good or bad about it?

This question worked to understand young people's experiences with support. We kept the question open-ended, allowing them to speak about any type of support they have accessed, not just professional health services.

Respectful and empowering support

Young people generally appreciated healthcare professionals who were humble, open, and who respected their autonomy. When professionals acknowledged the young persons needs and treated them as equals, it created a sense of empowerment and trust.

“Respect and autonomy go a long way, we can tell when we’re being treated as equals”

Support from peer-based services

Services like Rainbow Youths trans peer support and Outlines counselling were identified as particularly helpful. Young people felt more understood and connected when support was provided by those with lived experience, as it often created a more empathetic and relatable environment.

Non-judgmental counselling

Counsellors who supported young people in a non-judgmental manner were seen as beneficial. This kind of support allowed them to feel heard and validated without fear of being judged for their experiences.

Medication support

Some young people found medications, particularly those for emotional regulation, empowering as they helped them feel more in control of their lives.

Personalised support plans

Tailored services were often seen as more effective. For instance, the creation of a personalised plan that considers a young person's wants and needs is likely to result in better outcomes.



“The waiting room shouldn’t feel like another barrier”

Waiting room anxiety and environment

Many young people noted that healthcare services, such as GP visits, were beneficial but hindered by uncomfortable and intimidating waiting room environments. The atmosphere of these spaces made the process of seeking support feel more stressful.

Difficulties in finding the right fit

Finding a suitable counsellor or therapist was frequently mentioned as a challenge. The process of choosing a good fit could be difficult, and even when a good fit was found, young people sometimes experienced limited therapy sessions, which hindered the depth of support they could receive.

Limited access to therapy and support services

Long waitlists and referrals to closed services were common frustrations. Many young people felt discouraged by unhelpful responses, such as long periods of being on hold or dismissive comments from practitioners. The experience of waiting for support was mentally draining, and some felt that there were limited services available, especially for those with multiple concerns or diagnoses. This was particularly true for neurodiverse youth, who often felt services weren’t equipped to meet their comprehensive needs, or they faced issues with an abrupt, unsupported transition when their care ended.



Barriers to medication and information

Some young people noted difficulties accessing the right medications and the lack of information regarding medication options and side effects. The process could feel like a trade-off between emotional wellbeing and productivity. Many felt that they weren't fully informed about the medications they were prescribed.

Birth control dismissal

Health professionals frequently dismissed emotional changes as being solely related to the side effects of the birth control pill, which frustrated young people who felt their mental health needs were not being fully considered.

Breaching confidentiality

A significant concern raised by many was the breach of confidentiality by school counsellors. Young people who had accessed counselling services reported instances where the counsellor shared details of their sessions with parents or caregivers without their consent. This breach of trust led to hesitation among young people to engage with counsellors in the future, as they felt their rights were not being effectively communicated or respected.

Inconsistent access to gender-affirming care

A major concern for many young people, particularly those who are transgender, takatāpui, or non-binary, was the inconsistent access to gender-affirming care. Young people pointed to systemic under-resourcing and the need for more inclusive healthcare approaches that prioritise autonomy and inclusion.

"Access to gender-affirming care shouldn't depend on your postcode"

Denial of services

Some young people shared experiences of being denied access to services because they were not considered to be at high enough risk. For example, one attendee was told they could not be referred to a service because they "weren't in crisis," while another only gained access to support after reaching a "disaster point." These experiences highlighted concerns that the support system sometimes fails to meet young people's needs unless they have reached a severe crisis stage.



If you wanted professional support, what would you want that support to look like?

This question was designed to give young people the chance to share their vision of ideal professional support.

Casual and approachable

Many young people prefer support that feels more casual and less formal. They want professionals who are easy to connect with, approachable, and humble. For instance, some mentioned that they would feel more comfortable with a counselor who dresses casually.

“Don’t assume, ask, listen, and learn from us”

Openness to learning

Professionals who are willing to learn from lived experiences were highly valued, especially in relation to gender and cultural issues. This approach makes young people feel more understood and respected.

Understanding of background

Young people expressed a strong desire for professionals who understand their unique sociocultural backgrounds and lived experiences. They reported frustration when clinicians did not respect their pronouns, mispronounced their names, or lacked knowledge of Te Ao Māori. Some felt more comfortable working with clinicians from the same cultural or ethnic background, while others noted that professionals from different backgrounds could still be effective if they showed respect and understanding for diverse identities.



“We need more mental health education in schools, not just assemblies after something bad happens”

Religious alignment

For some, religious alignment is important in their support. Young people who value faith in their support want professionals who are open to discussing or incorporating their religious beliefs into the process.

Easily accessible services

Young people stressed the importance of services being easily accessible. This includes having affordable options, as well as services that are convenient and easy to reach, whether in terms of location or availability.

Tailored to diverse needs

Young people also expressed the need for services to be better equipped to handle their complex and diverse needs. Additionally, professionals should not assume that a shared demographic identity automatically makes someone the best fit.

Safe and comfortable space

A comfortable, safe, and equitable environment is seen as essential for effective support. Young people want spaces where they feel respected, valued, and free from judgment.

Mental health education

More education about mental health and wellbeing in schools was highlighted as a key need. Young people want resources and support to be promoted more actively in schools to increase awareness and reduce stigma.

Holistic, personalised approach

Young people emphasised the importance of a holistic, personalised approach to care. They want professionals who consider their individual circumstances and offer support that addresses their unique needs.

“Talk to me like a human being instead of just treating me like a problem, writing it down, and trying to solve it”



How services can use this information and how YAT can help

We strongly urge you to consider the insights shared in this report when designing or adapting your services. These insights provide valuable feedback on the specific needs, challenges, and preferences of young people.

Additionally, we encourage you to review the previous DMC reports, which cover a variety of topics, including social media, gender roles, youth-friendly space designs, ideal supports, and more.

Connect with the Youth Advisory Team

The Youth Advisory Team at Whāraurau is available to support you in a number of ways. For example, gathering youth perspectives, understanding the wants and needs of young people within the mental health and addictions sector, establishing and supporting youth consumer, peer support, and lived experience (YCPSLE) groups and roles, and, engaging with and supporting young people.

If this opportunity interests you or you have any questions at all, please don't hesitate to contact us at

yca@auckland.ac.nz

Youth friendly services

We recommend that you review and implement the **Youth Friendly Audit**, a tool designed for youth services to assess and enhance the youth-friendliness of their spaces. This audit helps identify areas for improvement, ensuring services are welcoming and accessible to young people.

[www.wharaurau.org.nz/
all-resources/youth-friendly-
services-an-audit-tool](http://www.wharaurau.org.nz/all-resources/youth-friendly-services-an-audit-tool)



Conclusion

This DMC report is not just a summary; it is a powerful reflection of everything we have learnt from young people during the 2024 DMC events. It captures their perspectives on wellbeing, the challenges affecting them, their experiences with support, and their aspirations for what an ideal support system looks like.

Through every piece of work the Youth Advisory Team does, especially through the DMC kaupapa, our mission is clear; to ensure that the voices of young people are heard in the spaces where decisions are made, reflecting the truth behind the saying, 'nothing about us, without us'.

This isn't just about giving young people a seat at the table; it's about actively listening to their lived experiences, valuing their input, and creating change that truly benefits them.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all the young people who shared their stories, struggles, and aspirations with us. Their voices are the heart of this work, and their contributions are invaluable in driving the change we need.

To you, the reader, we ask that you approach this report not just as a set of findings but as a call to action. Thank you for your attentive review of this report.



