



Being Your Best You

Mental Health Resilience - Empowering Melbourne's East

Final Project Report

April 2024

A project delivered by a partnership of agencies in Melbourne's East



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Executive Summary

Being Your Best You was focused on deepening the understanding of the diverse needs of young people in building positive mental health and resilience. The initiative was established to understand how to better respond to increasing mental health challenges for young people, aged 8 to 16 years in the eastern region of Melbourne. A co-designed community engagement approach was used to engage with, and listen to young people who have lived or living experiences (LLE) of challenges to their mental health and wellbeing. The intention was to learn from them and use their advice and insights about what is helpful in building mental health wellbeing and resilience and to create resources to be used by the partners agencies and others in the region.

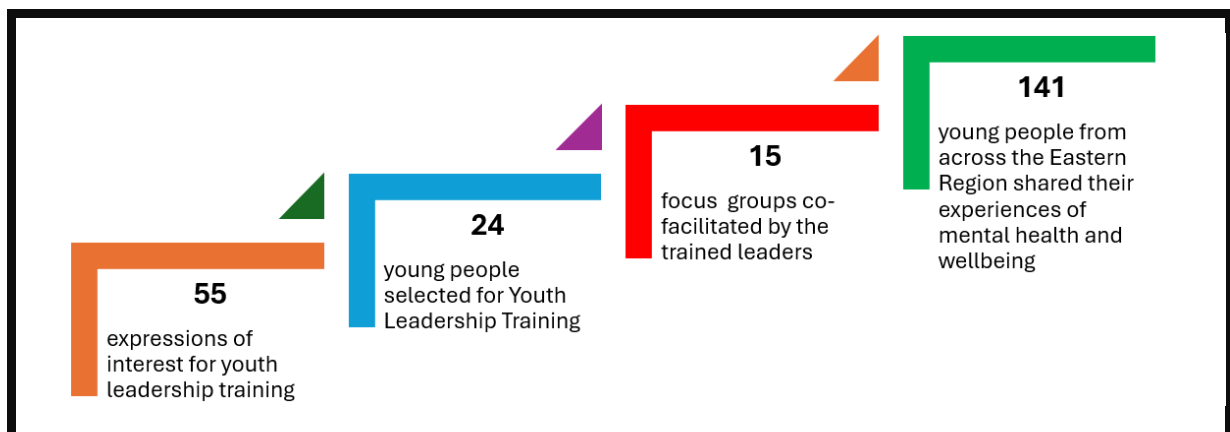
The initiative focussed on young people across a range of different cohorts to build a representative sample of both people trained as youth facilitators and those participating in focus groups.

Building capacity for youth leadership and peer facilitation

Being Your Best You sought to build capability in young people for facilitation and leadership. As such, twenty-four young people were trained in how to facilitate a focus group, and together with a team of professional youth workers, co-facilitated 15 focus groups. These peer facilitators engaged in a recruitment process that asked them to share why they wanted to be involved. Common themes included wanting to help their peers and to share their own experiences. The peer-facilitators were paid for the contribution of their time, effort, and experience. Their feedback indicated that the remuneration was motivating and prompted a feeling that their time and contribution was valued. During the training, the young people were introduced to critical concepts in mental health and wellbeing in an age-appropriate manner. The training occurred over two sessions. Following the training, the group of now trained peer facilitators were asked to support the design of the focus groups they were to co-facilitate.






Learning about mental health and wellbeing, and resilience in young people

Fifteen focus groups, with 141 participants, co-facilitated by the trained peer facilitators were hosted over several weeks. Each focus group ran for 60 – 90 minutes and included young people aged between 8 and 17 years.



The focus group canvassed conversations and sought feedback on issues such as sleep and exercise, mental health and wellbeing messaging. There was also a specific discussion about social media. The focus groups provided deep and rich information that would prove useful in developing resources for use in community settings.

An excerpt of key messages is provided in the figure below.

Key distractions to sleep were use of technology and stress or anxious thoughts	The most common two reasons cited for lack of exercise were technology, and lack of motivation.	Almost all participants said they knew someone who had experienced mental health challenges in the past 2 years	Compared to after 20 minutes on line, young people reported feeling more bored, less happy and less calm after 60 minutes on line.	Young people reported that they had seen things online that they were unable to talk to their parents/carers about
 SLEEP	 EXERCISE	 MENTAL HEALTH	 SOCIAL MEDIA	 WELLBEING MESSAGING

Developing community facing resources for use by agencies in the region

The key themes from the focus groups were used as a basis for crafting videos which featured the same young people sharing their experiences of mental health and wellbeing. These videos, were supplemented by messages to be used in social media and other channels. Together, these assets provide resources for the agencies, schools and the community to share information about mental health and wellbeing in young people in the eastern region and to support appropriate health seeking behaviours.

Key learnings and recommendations

Delivery of *Being Your Best You* has revealed an impressive level of interest and engagement of young people in youth leadership and activities that support their peers. The routine activities of life such as sleep, exercise, social media use and public transport use can have both a positive and negative impact on mental health and wellbeing. Further parent/carer and school have a critical role in creating a positive environments. Each day, young people are exposed to threats to their positive mental health and wellbeing and so appropriate supports, messaging and information about access to supports are critical.

There are several recommendations arising from this initiative including the need for sustainable youth led, peer-to-peer supports/networks and identifying the supports that schools and parents/carers need to create consistent environments for positive mental health and wellbeing. In addition, there are recommendations related to sharing this report with public transport providers given the experience of young people in using public transport and ensuring that there is further work to reach groups that were not able to be engaged easily through this initiative, including young people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and young people in out of home care.

Introduction

Being Your Best You was focused on deepening the understanding of the diverse needs of young people in building positive mental health and resilience. The initiative was established to understand how to better respond to increasing mental health challenges for young people, aged 8 to 16 years in the Eastern region of Melbourne. A co-designed community engagement approach was used to engage with, and listen to young people who have lived or living experiences (LLE) of challenges to their mental health and wellbeing. The intention was to learn from them and use their advice and insights about what is helpful in building mental health resilience and to create resources to be used by the partners agencies and others in the region.

The initiative was intended to develop and deliver a series of online and in person seminars for boosting mental health literacy and improve the capacity of consumers to better navigate the service system. It was developed in response to the experience of mental health practitioners, community and school leaders who had raised concerns about the levels of mental ill health in young people and the need to better understand the drivers and possible supports.

The initiative was funded through the Metropolitan Partnership Development Fund round for 2022/23 and was informed by previous research undertaken through the Eastern Metropolitan Partnership. Five agencies from the partnership came together to deliver this initiative: Eastern Health, EACH, Knox City Council, Maroondah City Council and Yarra Ranges Shire Council.

The anticipated project outcomes were:

- Improved understanding across the service sector of the barriers young people face in accessing the right supports, and
- Improved understanding and awareness in young people of mental health indicators and how to access the support available in the eastern region.

The initiative was of particular interest in the post COVID-19 period given, that many of the partner agencies were concerned about the impacts of the COVID -19 management strategies (face to face learning disruptions, and social isolation) on young people. This was aligned with the Metropolitan Partnerships priority related to COVID-19 recovery in the region and the Eastern Metropolitan Partnership focus on mental health.

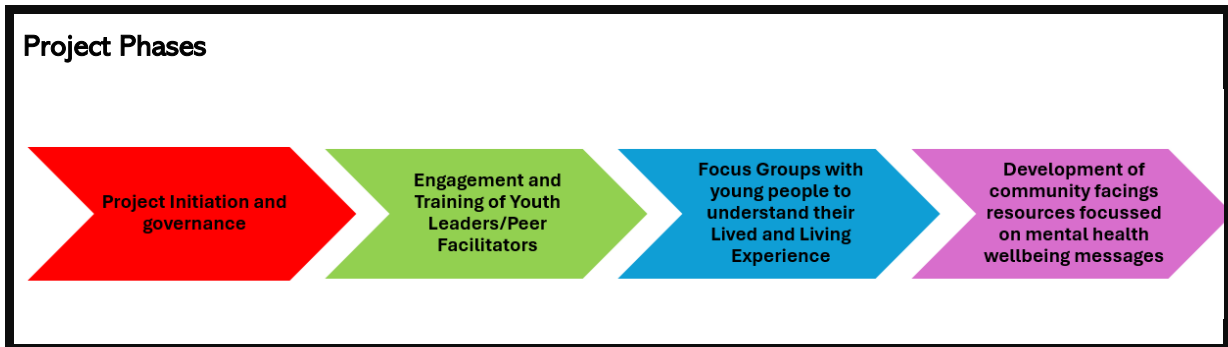
Consistent with the research undertaken previously, the project intended to focus on different cohorts to capture the experience of those considered more at risk alongside (well) young people without obvious risk factors. The cohorts included:

- People attending the Headspace Youth Group – Eastern Region
- LBGTQI+ Youth Community
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities
- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities (Mandarin, Chin Haka and Cantonese)
- Out of Home Youth
- Young people living with a disability
- Well young people.

Project Delivery

Project Stages

The Project was delivered through a series of phases as outlined below.



Project Initiation and Governance

The project was supported by a Project Working Group comprised of members of the partner organisations. Eastern Health was the fund holder, and initially EACH held the role of the project manager. Over the course of the project, EACH sought to change their role in line with their organisation's priorities, and Eastern Health took on the role of project management. During this transition, the project went into hiatus for several months requiring an extension to the funding agreement and extra investment in keeping young people engaged over a significantly longer than anticipated period.

Engagement and Training of Youth Leaders/Peer Facilitators

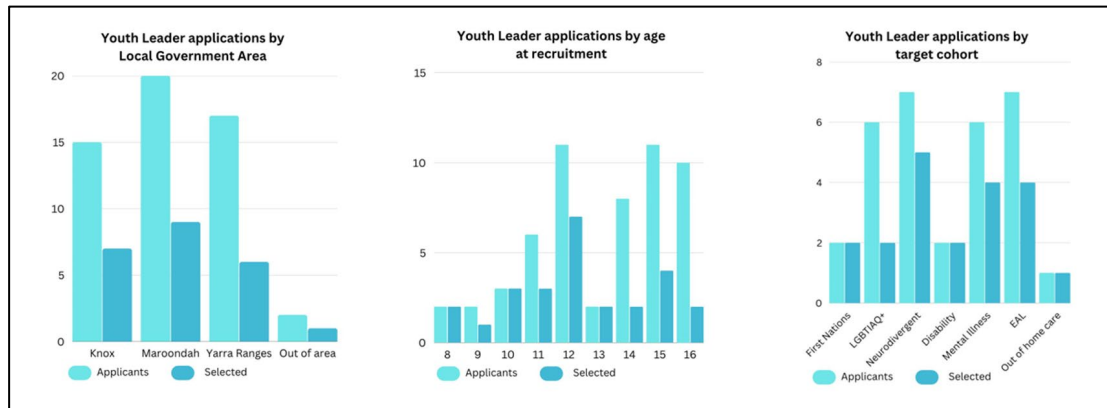
Being Your Best You sought to build capability in young people for facilitation and leadership. The Human Development Workshop, specialists in development and delivery of programs that promote the social development of young people as individuals, as responsible family and community members, and as citizens, were engaged to support the delivery of the initiative.

Youth leaders were recruited using broad advertisement and a simple online application form, with information shared across existing local government networks in the Eastern Metropolitan Partnership region. Priority cohorts were targeted, including approaching young people directly and sharing information with targeted schools and services.

An expression of interest process was established and generated 55 applications. Initially the intention was to recruit and train 20 facilitators, but with a such a high level of interest, 24 were selected, of which 22 remained engaged for the entirety of the training and into the focus group phase.

There was a reasonable spread of youth leader applications and those selected across different locations, age and target cohort as shown below.

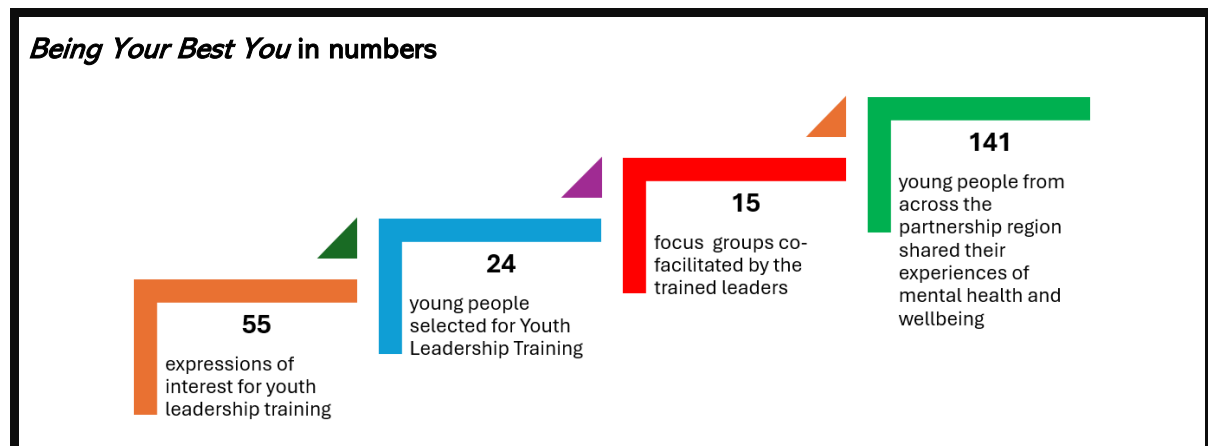
Profile of young people who expressed an interest and were selected for youth leadership training.



Through the expression of interest process, applicants were asked to nominate why they wanted to participate in the training and focus groups. Common themes in their responses included wanting to help their peers and to share their own experiences. The peer-facilitators were paid for the contribution of their time, effort, and experience. Their feedback indicated that the remuneration was motivating and prompted a feeling that their time and contribution was valued.

The training for the selected young people was offered over two sessions. Young people were introduced to critical concepts in mental health and wellbeing in an age-appropriate manner. (Appendix 1 provides a more detailed description of the training).


Following the training, the group of now trained peer facilitators were asked to support the design of the focus groups they were to co-facilitate by providing feedback on questions and format.





Focus Groups with young people to understand their Lived and Living Experience

Fifteen focus groups with 141 participants were hosted over several weeks. Each focus group ran for 60 – 90 minutes and included young people aged between 8 and 17 years. The focus groups canvassed conversations and sought feedback on issues such as sleep and exercise, mental health and wellbeing messaging. There was also a specific discussion about social media and public transport use. The focus groups provided deep and rich information that proved useful in developing resources for use in community settings. Detailed focus group output can be found at Appendix 1 with selected findings outlined below.


Selected findings from focus groups with 141 young people from the Eastern Region.


 <p>SLEEP</p>	<p>Most older participants (13+ years) reported not getting enough sleep.</p>	<p>Key distractions to sleep were use of technology and stress or anxious thoughts,</p>	<p>The groups who self-reported the highest levels of sleep distraction from stress were in community school settings, EAL and LGBTQIA+.</p>
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<p>The most common two reasons cited for lack of exercise were technology, and lack of motivation.</p>	<p>Amongst young people (under 13 years) the main factors in getting enough exercise were formal participation in sport (school or team) and when parents or carers have expectations of exercise participation and support this through limits to technology use for example.</p>	 <p>EXERCISE</p>
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<p>Almost all participants said they knew someone who had experienced mental health challenges in the past 2 years.</p>	<p>Participants across all age groups displayed high levels of mental health literacy.</p>	 <p>MENTAL HEALTH</p>	<p>Many older participants (greater than 13 years) who has friends who disclosed mental health concerns to them did so using shared or direct messaging rather than face to face.</p>
<p>Participants reported they if they were to speak to an adult about their mental health it would be to their parents/carers or school staff, with most younger participants reporting they would speak with their parents.</p>	<p>Most young people didn't think young people sought professional help, but if they did there was long waiting periods which discouraged help-seeking.</p>		

Many focus groups identified negative interactions with peers, including bullying and discrimination as factors in poor mental health. Common forms included name calling and online bullying. Participants from LGBTQIA+ group, community schools and EAL classes identified discriminatory experiences with peers as commonplace and expressed frustration and anger and resignation. Older students identified academic stressors which were compounded for EAL students by the requirements to learn in English..

<p>You Tube, TikTok and Snapchat were the most used platforms. Snapchat was used to communicate with friends and they used the location sharing features.</p>	 <p>SOCIAL MEDIA</p>	<p>Use of social media generated more negative than positive experiences. Postive experiences related to connections, whilst negative experiences related to 'getting hate' comments and comparing themselves to others.</p>	<p>Compared with after 20 minutes on line, young people reported feeling more bored, less happy and less calm after 60 minutes on line.</p>
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<p>School, home and online are the three places where young people access their wellbeing messages.</p>	<p>Young people thought their parents need more information about the way young people engage on line. The generational differences in understanding were often a source of conflict and communication breakdowns.</p>	 <p>WELLBEING MESSAGING</p>
<p>Schools messaging is considered trustworthy, however complex issues such as relationships, sexuality and vaping were not considered by young people to be detailed in school settings.</p>	<p>Young people reported that they had seen things online that they were unable to talk to their parents/carers about as they were worried about getting into trouble.</p>	

Development of community facing resources focussed on mental health wellbeing messages

Following the focus groups, the project working group considered the key messages and consistent themes shared by focus group participants. The project working group decided to adjust their approach from the originally intended online and face to face sessions to share key messages, to an approach which focussed on developing videos, with support of young people and supporting materials for community facing use. This approach would enable the 'products' to have greater longevity and to be able to be used in a larger set of channels (rather than just face to face and online person to person interaction)

Momentum Studios, experienced in working with young people, was engaged to work alongside the Human Development Workshop to develop video resources with young people who agreed (with necessary parental/guardian consent) to be filmed. Over a period during the school holidays in April 2024 videos were developed with twelve young people being filmed.. These videos together with supportive messaging and other media products (social media copy, website copy etc), developed with the support of JAW Communications are available to be used by the project partners, more broadly by the members of the Eastern Metropolitan Partnership, and schools, community groups and other service providers in the eastern region.

Outcomes and Recommendations

The *Being Your Best You* initiative has highlighted the persistent challenges facing the mental health and wellbeing of young people in the eastern region. The initiative engaged directly with 141 young people who participated in 15 focus groups. These focus groups were facilitated by young people from the region who had expressed an interest and been trained to co-facilitate the focus groups. Twelve young people made themselves available to be videoed in the creation of the initiative resources.

The initiative supported engagement with a significant number of young people about critical issues, particular in the post COVID-19 period when concerns about the mental health and wellbeing of young people were elevated.

Encouragingly, the initiative highlighted the level of engagement of young people in wanting to support each other on a background of reasonably high levels of mental health literacy. The engagement of young people as facilitators and others as participants in the focus groups is the strength of this initiative.

The work with young people reinforced the importance of physical well-being, daily habits and relationships on the experience of mental health and well-being. The videos and supporting materials produced through the initiative provide a lasting resource that is able to be accessed and used by local government and other service providers in the region.

The smooth running of the project was challenged by changing priorities of the partners over the life of the project. This created disruptions for the young people and extra effort, time and resource were required to support their continued engagement. That the young people continued to be engaged over a longer than anticipated period is a testament to their commitment to the process and their resilience.

Meeting the funded outcomes

The funded initiative is considered to have meet the anticipated outcomes of:

- Improved understanding across the service sector of the barriers young people face in accessing the right support, and
- Improved understanding and awareness in young people of mental health indicators and how to access the support available in the eastern region, the initiative.

The focus group outputs provide a deep and rich representation of the challenges and potential protectors for the mental health and wellbeing of young people in the east. The young peoples' key messages have been used to develop communications and engagement materials that will go on to provide information and possibly support to a much broader audience. The supporting communication materials provide information about available supports.

Key Learnings

There are learnings from the delivery of *Being Your Best You* and these should be considered when undertaking similar programs in the future, including:

- That many of the 'routine' activities of life such a sleep, exercise, and use of social media and public transport can have both a positive and negative impact on the health and wellbeing of young people.
- Behaviours and strategies employed by parents, carers and schools play a critical role in creating environments that support positive mental health and wellbeing or conversely can impact mental health and wellbeing negatively.

- The creation of spaces for young people to come together and share their experiences in a supported environment will deliver rich insights and is reaffirming for young people.
- There is an appetite amongst young people to engage in activities of leadership development and leadership within their peer networks. Each of the facilitators reported positive experiences of their role as a facilitator and as such, in and of itself, these experiences are likely to contribute positively to mental health and wellbeing.
- Engagement of young people from some target cohorts remains challenging, in particular First Nations and Out of Home Care young people were not able to be engaged in this initiative. From the perspective of the initiative, the reasons for this are unclear but it may possibly reflect the complex nature of building trust and providing safe spaces for these young people.
- The importance of using age-appropriate strategies in youth leader/facilitator training, in particular when younger young people (under 13 years) are mixed with older young people was highlighted. Differentiated approaches are required to ensure the active participation of the younger young group and to give them confidence in sharing their experiences and opinions.
- The importance of remunerating young people for their time and commitment to such a program. It is seen as a motivating factor and gives young people a sense that their contributions are valued.
- The importance of maintaining a consistent level of engagement over a period of time that aligns with the rhythm of life of young people (school year, school terms, school holidays etc). This initiative was challenged by a mid-project hiatus which affected the engagement of young people and despite the success of the initiative, the process was more difficult, more time and resource intensive than it would otherwise have been.

Recommendations

Several recommendations developed in response to the experience of delivering *Being Your Best You* are outlined below.

- Given the level of interest and engagement in the *Being Your Best You* initiative, there is likely to be an appetite for investment in sustained youth-led groups or similar that can provide positive young-people connections and be a source of trusted health and wellbeing messaging. These groups could be supported by existing agencies in the region to augment existing work with young people, providing more opportunities and different avenues for engagement, information and help seeking.
- Given the specific feedback about the experience of young people in the use of public transport, use this final report to share the information with Department of Transport and Planning and public transport providers to inform the development of strategies that target improving the experience of young people on public transport.
- Given the critical role that schools and parents/carers play in the creation of positive mental health and wellbeing environment, identify though engagement with parents/carers and schools across different cohort groups, the type of supports and resources that would be beneficial to creating these positive environments consistently.
- Explore a range of differentiated strategies for engaging with some target cohorts that were not engaged in this initiative such as young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and young people in out of home care. It is possible that these cohorts have different experiences of mental health and wellbeing and would benefit from different messaging and supports.
- So much of the experience of young people is influenced by their interactions with technology, which is changing at pace. As a result of this fast-paced change, the

interactions of young people and their experiences are also likely to change. This context creates a risk to the relevance and longevity of the key messaging and supporting communications that have resulted from the *Being Your Best You* initiative. There would be value in repeating the program (with some adjustments for age-appropriate training strategies) to understand how the experience of young people changes over time and to understand which strategies and services for support may be enduring. There may also be value in replicating the program in another geographical catchment to understand what experiences are 'universal' and those which might be place specific.

- When engaging young people to undertake training and work similar to that of *Being Your Best You*, appropriate remuneration should be part of the offering to young people. The remuneration reflects the value that is placed on their unique and vital contribution to this type of work and serves as a motivating factor for their engagement.
- Ensure that there is strategic alignment between the project partner's organisational priorities and the intention of the project. Each of the partners invests discretionary effort and resources to support the partnership work, and when the level of partner engagement varies, the project and the work of the remaining partners is compromised.

Conclusion

The *Being Your Best You* initiative, funded through the Metropolitan Partnership Development Fund has resulted in a deeper understanding of the mental health and wellbeing of young people living in Melbourne's East. This deeper understanding has been used to inform the development of videos and supporting resources that can be used by agencies, schools, and the community. The initiative was unique in that it supported the training of young people to co-facilitate peer focus groups build the capacity and capability for youth leadership in the region.

Although there were some challenges in the smooth delivery of the initiative, the ongoing commitment of young people over the long run to participate in activities that have a positive influence on their own mental health and wellbeing and that of their peers has been extraordinary.

Appendices

*1: Being Your Best You Report – Compiled for the Project Working Group, April 2023.
(The Human Development Workshop)*