

YOUNG PEOPLE WERE ASKED:

“How might some of the social media and digital technologies that you already access be used to create connections to life and contribute to the prevention of youth suicide?”





The internet is one of the places young people now live, and online and offline life are seamlessly interconnected. Digital places can offer valuable experiences that are not available offline due to stigma or other barriers.

The internet is many things at once to young people: It is a place of knowledge gathering, belonging, toxicity, exclusion, risk, safety, purpose and possibility.

Traditional or mainstream approaches to suicide prevention often draw from an individualistic perspective, where the primary focus is on predicting and assessing risks, with the ultimate aim of intervening and preventing deaths by suicide. Mainstream approaches to suicide prevention often unwittingly place the primary onus on young people to “find their way” when they are already in need of help. When it doesn’t include consideration of social, political, and cultural realities, this can lead to further despair and isolation, instead of promoting connections with life and living.

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THE INTERNET IS STILL RELATIVELY NEW IN THE GRAND SCHEME OF THINGS, AND I FIND IT HARD TO BELIEVE IT ISN'T RESPONSIBLE FOR A LOT OF THE INCREASED MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES. THERE NEEDS TO BE MORE FOCUS ON COLLECTIVELY ADDRESSING THIS IN THE FUTURE.

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An illustration of a person in a dark, dense forest. The person is wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt and light-colored pants, with their arms raised and hands reaching towards the branches. The scene is rendered in shades of blue and black, with thick, gnarled tree trunks and branches. A white rectangular text box is positioned at the top of the image, containing the text "But it's also confusing and toxic." in a handwritten-style font.

But it's also confusing and toxic.

The current state of online “helping” resources for young people is a challenge, due in part to duplication and a lack of organization. The internet is a busy place and existing mental health and suicide prevention websites are detached and discreet. This is analogous to creating one safe island, in a sea of toxicity.

Young people have expressed a desire to have the places they already visit made safer. They are not asking for more digital content, but a different online culture - one that is hospitable and kind, clear and transparent, and designed with youth mental health and well-being in mind. They'd like the islands that they already inhabit to be made safer, and navigational tools to help them find new places.

Young people already do many things to take care of one another online and envision themselves as committed digital citizens. Above all they are committed to harnessing the potential of online spaces as places for identity development, healing, community wellness, and social justice.

But they need the help of adults for real change.

HERE'S HOW WE DO IT:

Efforts are needed across multiple domains and across the continuum from crisis response and treatment to life promotion.

Building on “possibility rather than probability” online life promotion can involve the transformation of cyberspace through the co-creation of digital places that are hospitable, responsive, and inclusive to young people in all their capacities and diversity.



Suicidal despair is not just about individual people, so connect it with other issues.



RECOMMENDATION 1 Simplify the online journey

Funding and organization of resources is a major barrier to more effective online help for youth. Greater collaboration between services agencies is required: Rather than investing in new one-off initiatives and microsites, there is a need to evaluate and consolidate resources. Invest with organizations already doing online life promotion, and bring them into conversation with one another.

Youth would like the internet as a whole to be more responsive to the paths they are already walking. Engage large technology and information partners (ie. Google, Facebook) in ethical Algorithmic interventions to improve online suicide prevention - such as geolocating for 1800 numbers.

Poor mental health is not necessarily a sign of individual pathology. Youth tell us that oftentimes feelings of despair are reasonable response to genuine stresses such as climate change, racism, animal cruelty and human rights abuses on and offline. In the time of Covid-19, experiences of loneliness, disconnection, fear and loss of hope for the future are not forms of mental illness but understandable responses to our current cultural and global moment. To meaningfully respond to this, engage non-traditional partners (such as environmental organizations, gaming platforms and educational institutions) in life-promotion efforts and imbue these partner webpages with life affirming and community-building content.



RECOMMENDATION 2 Policy and Regulation


Canada/BC need to establish a robust watchdog function related to online safety and youth mental health. One way to achieve this would be to partner with an interested professional body/ institution to issue an annual independent report card / state of the internet report. Sites could be issued a healthy community score based on transparency, moderation and other factors. Similarly, partner with an accreditation body W-3 to establish safe youth mental health certification for online sites.

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THERE'S KIND OF THIS CONCERN ANY TIME YOU'RE ON THE INTERNET AND SEARCHING THINGS UP ABOUT ANY SORT OF PAPER TRAIL ABOUT WHERE YOU'VE BEEN, WHERE YOUR INFORMATION IS STORED.

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Youth stated that one way to build trust was through more legible privacy notices and transparent disclosure statements. Beyond individual site disclosures, there is a need to compel large technology and information partners (ie. Google, Facebook) to disclose aggregated “high risk data” to the relevant government bodies in Canada for public research.



And cultivate a deeply caring
and safe online culture.

RECOMMENDATION 3 Cultivate Caring + Hospitable Spaces online

Youth are seeking more livable online spaces. They are committed to co-creating more friendly and safe user guidelines with large technology, gaming and information sites that they use frequently. There is a need to articulate and amplify the work of companies already cultivating hospitable online spaces. Many youth also stated that a universal approach is not helpful: They need online spaces to be responsive to their diverse lived experiences.

Partner with experts in this space (ie #Wematter) to co-create an online campaign with youth. This campaign would strive to create more responsive and hospitable online places, reduce toxicity, and increase care and compassion – with the ultimate aim of contributing to youth experiences of emotional safety and mental wellness in online places.

“ INSTAGRAM IS THE HIGHLIGHT REEL OF PEOPLE’S LIVES. I FOUND MYSELF ALWAYS COMPARING MY WORST MOMENTS TO PEOPLE’S BEST MOMENTS. IT TOOK ME AND MY FRIENDS A LONG TIME TO REALIZE THAT PART OF THE REASON WE WERE FEELING UNHAPPY WAS DUE TO THE THINGS WE WERE SEEING ON SOCIAL MEDIA.

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