

Creating Digital Pathways Out of Homelessness: Digital Technology Design for Young People, Wellbeing and Engagement with Support

Rhianon Vichta, Brisbane Youth Service (BYS)

and Dr Karleen Gwinner, Adjunct Research Fellow, Latrobe University, Health Sciences

Improving young people's engagement with, and pathways through, the homelessness service systems is a priority for the Queensland youth and homelessness sectors. Young people accessing homelessness services are often highly transient and their engagement with support is commonly unpredictable, opportunistic, sporadic and crisis-driven. This can negatively impact homelessness service providers' capacity to provide consistent support to enable young people to achieve sustainable longer term change. With the ever-increasing migration of contemporary culture into the digital space, there is a growing need to better understand the potential role that online technologies such as interactive apps and websites can play in both enhancing young people's engagement with support and

promoting better wellbeing outcomes for highly vulnerable homeless young people.

As early adopting and frequent users of web-based technology, young people see the internet as a valuable source of help and information.¹ Nascent research supports the use of digital technology (digitech) to promote young people's health and wellbeing.² Apps and internet sites that support self-tracking of daily activities and goals are evidenced to promote empowerment and more active engagement with wellbeing in the broader population.³ Mobile phone based technologies have been found to be particularly effective for young people experiencing mental illness.^{4,5} However, we know less about how digitech can be used with and by young people who are homeless for physical and mental health and wellbeing. The

homelessness sector, and particularly youth homelessness services, need to learn more about the role digitech plays in vulnerable young people's lives, and how we, as service providers, can potentially use information and communications technology to achieve better engagement and more effective outcomes.⁶

In a recent service user consultation, BYS asked young people about how they currently use digital technology in relation to their own wellbeing. Through a creative visioning process the consultation examined innovative approaches to using technology to promote youth wellbeing, how young people use apps and websites for their own benefit, and explored ways to improve their connection with support when they need it. A series of interactive workshops, with

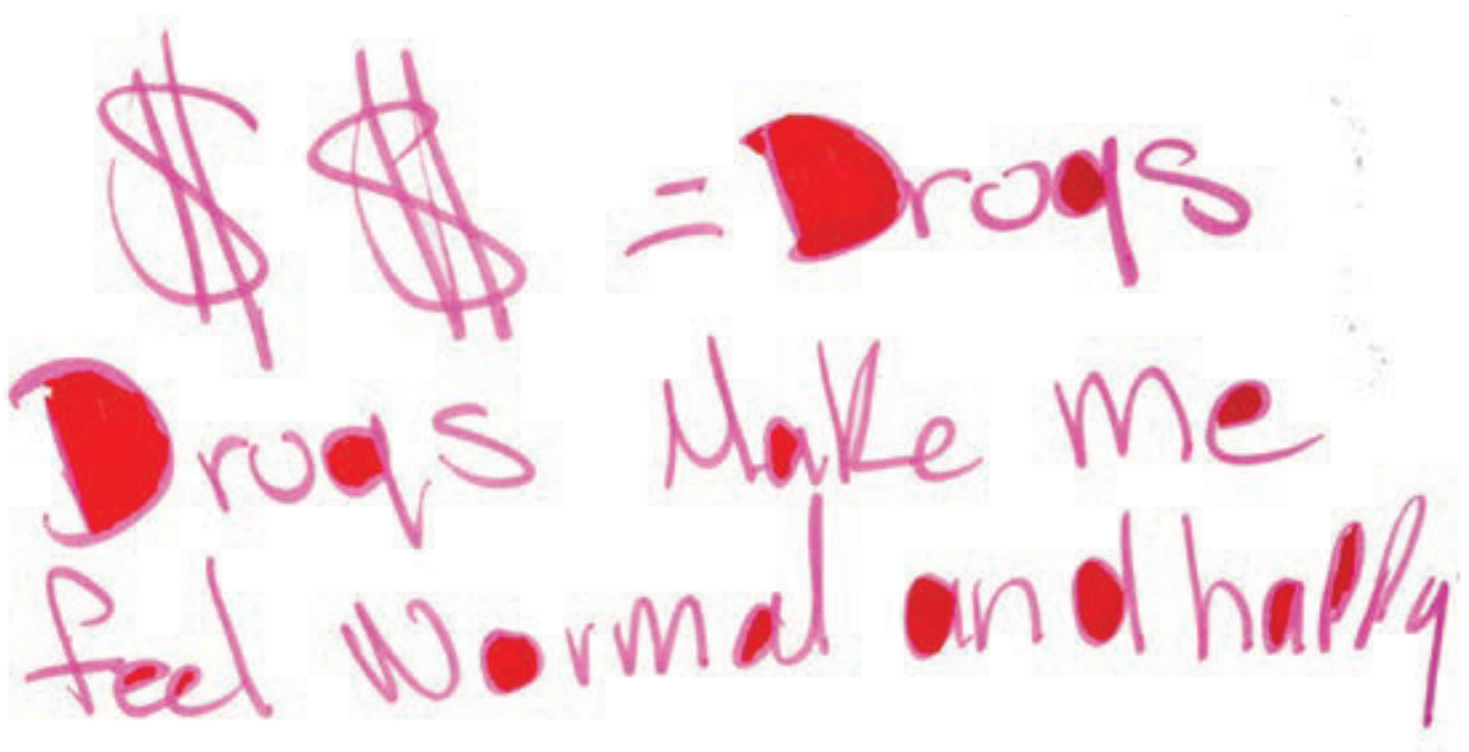


Figure 1. What is wellbeing — visual and text based interpretations from workshop participants



twenty young people aged 16 to 25 years old, yielded insight into the type of commitments and practices that may enable meaningful engagement with 'at-risk' young people in future development of digital technology support tools.

Insight into young people's perspectives of wellbeing emphasised, unsurprisingly, that being homeless directly impacted their capacity to access resources to 'be well'; and that addressing the impact of homelessness was 'really important for your wellbeing — like to be clean, having clean clothes, food, sleep, medical attention'.⁷ Young people understood wellbeing as a human right, in that they had a right to the basic necessities in life that underpin wellbeing. Recognising that young people who experience homelessness are highly likely to have

been exposed to disenfranchisement, inequity and injustice, the participants particularly emphasised the critical role that a sense of fairness and being treated with respect played in both experiencing wellbeing, as well as, in their engagement with support services. The centrality of respect, integrity and self-determination offered a different perspective to the dominant wellbeing frameworks adopted in youth services and literature.^{8,9} Respect, integrity and self-determination were consistently conveyed as themes into young people's actual and potential engagement with technology. The findings of this research emphasised the need to centre technology design around structurally and procedurally supporting rights-based principles as fundamental to young people's wellbeing and responses to the tools.

The basic principle of respecting young people's rights and autonomy extended into a clear need for design flexibility to allow young people to self-define and evolve their own wellbeing goals and interactions with support through technology. Findings from the consultation clearly showed that young people's conceptualisation and enactment of wellbeing was potentially contradictory. Young people described happiness, health and safety as all fundamentally important elements of wellbeing. However, their chosen pathways to happiness did not always align with health or even safety (Figure 1).

Young people's drive for happiness may potentially result in homelessness and compromised health. While there is research highlighting the weak and sometimes counterintuitive relationships between

an individual's objective life conditions and their subjective sense of well-being,¹⁰ service providers do not usually think of young people's goals as conflicting. That is, that progress in one aspect of wellbeing may be associated with loss or decreases in others. Where their goals in relation to change were not compatible, young people were clear that they needed to be free to choose their own pathway and not be boxed into imposed or adult perspectives on what they 'should' be doing. Technology design needs to, therefore, be flexible enough to allow young people to creatively express and navigate their own individualised self-identified priorities. This contra-indicates the format of self-tracking against pre-set or pre-determined wellbeing goals.

The integration of digital tools that promote youth wellbeing and support the effectiveness of worker–young person support processes should reinforce interactions that extend tenets of self-determination and the young person's control. It should be noted that self-determination does not equate to self-help. To satisfy self-determination principles young people require access to information to be informed, to opportunities for learning and to participate in ongoing dialogues. They need to be supported in choosing and attaining goals, and young people identify the important role played by relevant and encouraging feedback.

Young people in the consultation strongly affirmed that engagement and support through digitech must primarily be built on trusted personal interactions. This was particularly important for use of digital tools in homelessness service delivery. Young people wanted to know that they could use apps or tools to communicate with someone they knew, and who knew their story. Online privacy was acknowledged as important and necessitated knowing they had a trusted relationship with the workers who sit behind the app or website to support their wellbeing and housing needs. While young people's capacity for agency, self-care and joint responsibility were prioritised, these were in the context of a critical need to build and have a meaningful and trusted relationships.

It could be argued that worker and agency support is of utmost important when there is limited stable healthy parental (or carer) involvement in the young person's life and in which they do not have the social capital scaffolding (intimacy and belonging) associated with family. This provokes a conclusion that digital technology designed to be used by highly vulnerable homeless young people can be used to enhance but, not replace personalised support. Digital tools must be designed to be an individualised personal dialogue that sits within a therapeutic relationship, as opposed to being a widely disseminated source of generic or standardised advice or information.

Overall the findings from the consultation indicated that the design and integration of digital tools should be simple, engaging, creative and through multi-modal interactive platforms, available both online and offline. When embedded within an established therapeutic relationship, an app or website can facilitate creative self-development and enhanced pathways of communication with trusted support. Further exploration of intentionally integrating inter-sectoral collaboration is recommended to challenge traditional boundaries of service delivery and increase the potential reach of young people's networking, knowledge production, conversations, and innovative expression. Digital strategies supported through inter-sectoral networks could potentially cross boundaries to enhance protective factors, increase access to resources, build awareness, support advocacy, and provide practical ways for young people to exercise control, expression and choice for their wellbeing. This may require agencies and services to think differently about how they can share and expand resources and open up new opportunities to engage with young people across varied sites.

There is a clear need for opportunities for young people themselves to engage with support and enhance wellbeing through online pathways that allow self-expression to flourish in the context of client-led information sharing platforms. This requires

thinking 'youthfully' about how information and communication can meaningfully be exchanged in a digital space, beyond basic referral pathways and generic, broad scale tips or information.

The full consultation research report is available at http://brisyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/YouEngageTechnical-Report_Final.docx

Endnotes

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