

Youth Mental Health Barometer – Gen Alpha and Gen Z Speak: Listening to Young People in Malta

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Introduction

Conversations about youth mental health have become increasingly prominent in recent years. Concerns regarding anxiety, emotional wellbeing, resilience and access to support now feature regularly within public debate, educational settings and policy discussions. Yet amid these conversations, there is often a tendency to speak about young people rather than with them.

The Youth Mental Health Barometer commissioned by Richmond Foundation offers an opportunity to redress that imbalance. Conducted among young people aged between 13 and 25 years, the Barometer provides insight into how young people themselves describe their experiences, concerns and sources of support. While statistics form part of that picture, the value of the exercise extends beyond measurement. It offers a glimpse into the realities young people are navigating and the environments within which they are growing up.

This paper reflects on a number of themes emerging from the Barometer findings. It considers young people's experiences of support, the continuing significance of relationships, the growing role of digital spaces and the challenges associated with understanding contemporary youth through simplistic generational narratives.

Listening Beyond the Numbers

Survey findings often invite immediate attention towards percentages and rankings. Such measures are useful in identifying patterns and trends, yet they can also create a degree of distance from the experiences they represent.

The Barometer findings are perhaps most useful when approached as indicators of broader questions. What are young people telling us about how they experience support? How do they navigate difficulty? What sources of connection remain significant in their lives? Where do they feel understood, and where do they feel alone?

Approaching the findings in this way shifts the emphasis from measurement to interpretation. The data become less a catalogue of problems and more an invitation to understand the social and emotional landscape within which young people are living.

The picture that emerges is neither wholly reassuring nor wholly alarming. Rather, it reflects many of the tensions associated with growing up in a period characterised by rapid social, technological and cultural change.

Relationships as Sources of Stability

One of the clearest messages emerging from the Barometer concerns the continuing importance of relationships.

Despite frequent claims that contemporary young people are increasingly isolated or disconnected, respondents consistently identified people in their lives as important sources of support. Family members, friends and trusted adults continue to occupy a central place within young people's support networks.

Particularly encouraging was the finding that 62% of respondents reported having at least one teacher with whom they would feel comfortable discussing personal concerns unrelated to academic matters.

The finding offers an interesting perspective on the role of schools. Educational settings are often discussed primarily in terms of academic outcomes. The Barometer suggests that their significance extends beyond this. Schools also function as relational environments where young people encounter adults who may become trusted sources of guidance, encouragement and support.

The finding should not be interpreted as suggesting that teachers assume therapeutic roles. Rather, it highlights the value of trusted adults who are present, approachable and willing to listen. For many young people, these relationships may represent an important bridge between personal difficulties and more formal sources of support.

The broader implication is that resilience rarely develops in isolation. It is shaped through relationships, opportunities for connection and the presence of people who provide stability during periods of uncertainty.

Knowing Support Exists and Knowing How to Find It

Among the findings that generated considerable discussion during the conference was the question of help-seeking.

Overall, 44.6% of respondents reported having experienced serious difficulties while not knowing where to turn for support. Viewed from one perspective, the finding suggests that a majority of young people believe they know where support can be found. Viewed from another, it indicates that uncertainty regarding support pathways remains a common experience.

The finding raises questions about how young people encounter support systems. Awareness of mental health issues has increased considerably over recent years. Conversations about wellbeing are more visible than they once were and young people appear increasingly comfortable discussing emotional difficulties. Yet awareness alone does not necessarily translate into confidence about where support begins, who to approach or how assistance can be accessed.

Further analysis revealed notable variations across age groups. Particularly high levels of uncertainty emerged among respondents aged 15, 18 and in the early twenties. While caution is required when interpreting subgroup data, the pattern invites reflection on the relationship between support-seeking and life transitions.

Periods of educational change, increasing independence and shifting social roles often involve movement between familiar and unfamiliar environments. It may therefore be useful to consider whether some of the uncertainty reflected in the findings is linked less to age itself and more to the transitional experiences associated with particular stages of life.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest the value of paying attention not only to the availability of support but also to its visibility and accessibility from the perspective of young people themselves.

Digital Spaces and the Search for Connection

The findings also point towards the growing significance of digital environments within young people's lives.

Public discussions of technology often gravitate towards questions of risk and harm. While these concerns warrant attention, they tell only part of the story. Digital spaces also provide opportunities for connection, information-sharing and support.

Increasingly, young people turn to online environments when seeking reassurance, advice or a sense of belonging. This trend raises important questions about the functions these spaces fulfil.

A story that received considerable media attention shortly before the conference concerned a man who developed a deeply dependent relationship with an artificial intelligence chatbot during a period of grief. Reflecting on the experience, he remarked that whenever he needed someone to talk to, the chatbot was always there.

The observation is striking because it points towards a broader human need rather than a technological phenomenon. People are often drawn towards spaces that offer responsiveness, availability and connection. The popularity of digital platforms may therefore reveal something about the needs they are meeting.

Rather than asking only what young people are doing online, it may be equally valuable to ask what they are finding there.

Beyond the “Snowflake Generation”

Contemporary discussions of youth mental health frequently oscillate between concern and criticism. Increased reporting of distress is sometimes interpreted as evidence that young people have become less resilient than previous generations.

The Barometer findings encourage a more cautious reading.

Greater willingness to discuss emotional difficulties does not necessarily indicate greater fragility. It may equally reflect increased emotional literacy, changing cultural attitudes and a greater readiness to articulate experiences that previous generations often kept private.

At the same time, the social context within which young people are growing up has changed considerably. Economic uncertainty, digital connectivity, shifting educational expectations and global instability form part of the backdrop against which contemporary youth are navigating adolescence and early adulthood.

The question is therefore less whether young people are more resilient or less resilient than those who came before them. A more useful enquiry may concern the forms that resilience takes within changing social conditions.

Viewed in this way, the Barometer findings suggest a generation that remains capable of drawing on relationships, seeking support and adapting to challenge, while simultaneously negotiating pressures that differ in important respects from those experienced by earlier generations.

Conclusion

The Youth Mental Health Barometer offers valuable insight into how young people in Malta understand their experiences and the environments within which they are growing up.

Several themes emerge from the findings. Relationships continue to provide an important source of support. Uncertainty regarding where to seek help remains a significant issue for a substantial proportion of respondents. Digital spaces occupy an increasingly important place within young people's search for connection and information. Simplistic narratives concerning youth fragility appear insufficient to capture the complexity of contemporary experience.

Taken together, the findings reinforce the importance of listening carefully to what young people are telling us. Effective responses to youth mental health challenges depend upon more

than services alone. They require an ongoing willingness to engage with young people's perspectives and to understand the realities that shape their everyday lives.