



The Committee Secretary, Standing Committee on Health, Ageing, Community and Social Services, Legislative Assembly for the ACT,
GPO Box 1020,
CANBERRA ACT 2601.

Dear Committee Secretary,

I am writing to you as the CEO of Mind Blank and wish to provide input into the current Inquiry into Youth Suicide and Self Harm in the ACT.

Mind Blank

Mind Blank is a not-for-profit organisation that generates awareness and innovative education of mental health topics in youth across Australia. We are creatively committed to mental health education with mindfulness and integrity. Mind Blank is recognised Australia wide for mental health awareness & education through delivering innovative programs in schools, communities, and workplaces. We advocate a holistic and balanced approach through strategic partnerships and collaborations. Since 2011, we have reached over 16,000 teenagers at Mind Blank events Australia wide.

The process we utilise promotes self-agency by placing our audience of young people in control of the action and choicesⁱ. The audience are actively engaged and consider the thoughts, feelings and motivations of the characters, in order to actively influence the characters' (and their own) choices. Our experiential learning style delivers activities that allow students to rehearse social problem solving skills such as help seeking behaviours and promotes improved outcomesⁱⁱ.

Kerry Searle Registered Psychologist & Master of Science (Research) Candidate has conducted some initial research of our work through Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute and School of Psychology, University of Wollongong.

"My qualitative research suggests that this approach has the ability to reduce levels of stigma surrounding mental health problems. There are many reports of young people being increasingly engaged in discussion around the mental health problems of themselves or their peers. Young people are reported to be more comfortable with the fact that they have mental health problems and feel more justified in seeking assistance. One teacher described a Mind Blank show at his school as a 'life changing' event for one of his troubled students."

We have recently provided forum theatre events to 220 young people residing in the Australian Capital Territory and anticipate reaching 1,400 in total by May 2016, with future scheduled events.



The issue at hand

We understand that in the Australian Capital Territory, current dataⁱⁱⁱ indicates that:-

- a third of young people aged 15-25 who died in the ACT in 2013 died as a result of suicide;
- in 2013, suicide was the leading cause of death of children between 5 and 17 years of age;
- 37 persons died due to suicide in the ACT in 2013, which is a 54% increase on the previous year.

The most recent theories about the types of suicide and different motivations to suicide suggest that it may be any one or combination of the examples below^{iv}:

- a consequence of a mental illness, such as clinical depression or schizophrenia. However, many people with a mental illness are not affected by suicidal thoughts or behaviour, and not everyone who suicides is mentally ill.
- an outcome of reckless behaviour or impaired judgement. Suicide is, for example, often associated with alcohol or other drugs, or it may result from dangerous or life-threatening activities.
- an attempt to end unmanageable pain. It may be psychological pain and despair, stemming from guilt, shame, or loss; or it may be chronic physical pain or debilitating illness.
- an attempt to send a message or gain a particular outcome such as notoriety, vengeance, defiance, or leave a particular legacy or aftermath.
- an altruistic or heroic act, relieving others of a burden, dying to save another, or dying for a cause; and/or
- an expression of the person's right to choose the manner of their death. In some circumstances, the specific means or place of suicide has particular symbolic significance to the person.

External factors and experiences such as family life and social interactions also influence a person's reaction to difficult circumstances. Accumulated experiences from the past (cultural, social, family), and anticipation of the future (expectations, hopes, dreams and fears) all impact on the individual's ability to manage the range of events that can occur throughout life^v.

In a component of a National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, researchers found that, of those children and adolescents who had a mental disorder *and* who scored in the clinical range on the Child Behaviour Checklist *and* whose parents reported they needed professional help, only half had attended a service to get help for their problems. Parents were asked about barriers to obtaining help for their children, with 48% saying they didn't know where to get help and 25% stating that the child did not want to attend services^{vi}. It is clear that more work needs to be done to remove the stigma of seeking help and to promote existing services among both the target group – children and young people – and those who assist them, be these parents or other adults.





Given the range of motivations that may influence individuals, Mind Blank is of the firm belief that young people should be encouraged to seek help for any issues affecting their health and wellbeing, and at the earliest point of concern. We promote social connectedness and other protective factors that can assist young people in coping with everyday stress and accessing support to work through any issues affecting their mental health and wellbeing.

In conclusion

Mind Blank is encouraged to see that the ACT Government has already sought to promote awareness of mental health issues for young people by funding and implementing initiatives such as Let's Talk website (provided by ACT Health) and providing a wealth of practical information to promote help seeking behaviours for young people living in the ACT.

Mind Blank is also heartened to note that the Legislative Assembly's Terms of Reference acknowledges the contribution of services, such as schools, youth centres, and specialist housing service providers and their role in promoting resilience and responding to mental health issues in children and young people.

Mind Blank intends to develop extensive partnerships with these service providers to extend knowledge and awareness of mental health issues, and promote and norm help seeking behaviours with our audiences. Specifically, we would like to contribute to increased personal and community resiliency, and to see an increased focus on help seeking behaviours as well as services funded specifically to meet the needs of young people at risk through early intervention initiatives and strategies, in a variety of school, community and health settings.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Kind regards,

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ⁱ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22166129>

ⁱⁱ <https://works.bepress.com/cwilson/25/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/3303.0~2014~Main%20Features~Intentional%20self-harm%20by%20Age~10051>

^{iv} <http://www.livingisforeveryone.com.au/Research-and-evidence-in-suicide-prevention.html>

^v <http://www.livingisforeveryone.com.au/Research-and-evidence-in-suicide-prevention.html>

^{vi} Rickwood, D., Deane, F. P., Wilson, C. J. & Ciarrochi, J. V. (2005). Young people's help-seeking for mental health problems. Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health, 4 (3), 1-34.

