

Part 1- Technology and Young People

The following document and corresponding slides aim to provide you with a basic understanding of how using technology may help your practice. It will also begin to provide you with strategies to integrate technology into your sessions. Specific learning goals are;

- An understanding of the benefits associated with using technologies both to your own professional development and with young people;
- An understanding of what young people feel might be useful and why;
- A basic knowledge of current research into the use of technology with young people and evidence supporting this;
- An understanding of why it's not essential to be an expert in technology in order to use it with good effect with young people.

It is also important to note that Part 1 of this module is designed to be utilised with the other 3 remaining parts. Each section has been developed with the aim of providing you with an overview of the key aspects of technology, how you can implement these into practice as well as covering professional considerations. We recognise that the evidence supporting the use of technology is still emerging and that there are risks associated with technology use. We therefore advise reviewing the information about risks and managing your online safety which can be found in Part 4.





The changing face of technology

Within each generation, technological changes become faster and more innovative. However, this means that it can often seem like once you've got your head around one version of a program, an update appears! Or once you understand one social networking site, young people move onto another.

As clinicians who work with youth, we are often time poor, resource stretched, and can at times work with difficult to engage clients. For these reasons, any tools that enable you to engage more readily with young people are helpful. Whether it be through assisting in building rapport, assessment tools, monitoring mood or symptoms, or even psycho-educational – technology can make your job easier for you.

Youth and Technology

For many reasons, young people may engage better with a technology assisted session, than a traditional face-to-face, medical model consultation. This is likely to be due to the integration of technology in young people's lives - a trend that is becoming increasingly more apparent.

Within Australia;

- 91% of 12-17 year olds indicated that the internet was a 'highly important' part of their life ^[1].
- Over 95% of young Australians use the internet ^[2].
- The majority of young people spend between 1.1-3.0 hours per day on the internet ^[3].
- Online chatting was ranked at the most favoured leisure activity by young people ^[1].
 - This use dramatically changes the ways in which they interact with one another, their families and communities.
 - The use of technology by young people has been shown to enhance communication with family, friends and wider networks ^[4, 5] and is thought to be key in social inclusion ^[6].
- Of those online, social media has become the most common activity - with 73% of online Australians using social media in 2010 ^[7]

In addition to the traditional computer-based internet, increasing prevalence of mobile technology is also allowing online interactions to occur more frequently and easily.

- In 2010, 95% of Australians had mobile phones
- 10% of people in Australia no longer have landline phones, using mobiles instead ^[8].
- Of those Australians that are online, 25.3% are now accessing the internet using mobile phones ^[2].



The constantly connected generation

This constant connectivity and use of technology has resulted in the current generation of young people being labelled the 'constantly connected generation'^[9]. Understanding why and how young people use technology is a vital part of this understanding both the young people themselves, and how to communicate with them. Whilst social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace receive the most publicity, many young people use the internet to access information and services that they would not feel comfortable doing day-to-day. Internet connectivity is now a crucial part of help seeking for many and is helping to reduce traditional barriers to accessing help.

Recent research has indicated that;

- The internet has been identified as a key source of advice and support by young people^[10], and the proportion of young people accessing support and advice through the internet has increased from 10.1 per cent in 2002 to 22.5 per cent in 2009^[11].
- When seeking help, 85.9% sought help from friends – which may be initiated through face-to-face contact, instant messaging or chat, SMS, or via networking sites. Comparatively, only 11.7% would seek help from community agencies (eg youth workers)^[6].
- The headspace National Youth and Parent Community Survey (2008) assessed young people's Internet use in Australia and the perception of usefulness of online mental health services. Within this survey, 76.9% of young people reported using the internet to connect with other young people. Of those in the 18-25 year old group, 33.9% reported using it to seek information about a mental health problem^[3].
- The recent ReachOut.com National Survey 2010 has shown that in tough times, more than 65% of young people would be likely or very likely to seek help on ReachOut.com or other websites whereas 52% would be likely or very unlikely to talk to a professional such as a GP or counsellor^[12].



The argument for technology

Within the field of medical management and healthcare, there is increasing interest being paid to Health 2.0. Such a model encourages the health care professional and patient to engage with technology in the form of information sharing and monitoring. This is likely to enhance access to patient information but also facilitate meeting clinician needs through the use of streamlined educational delivery and access.

The improvements in technology have not only benefitted and empowered health care professionals. Young people want to access mental health support in a manner that suits them, in the time and place that it will be most beneficial^[13]. However, the majority do not seek help through mental health services^[14]. As therapeutic relationship is thought to be one of the best predictors of outcome with young people [15, 16], engaging them in a way in which they relate to and understand, such as using technology, may help to facilitate outcomes^[17].

There are many advantages to using technology with young people. These include, but are not limited to;

- The internet is not restricted by geographical, psychological or physical barriers and can reach those that would otherwise be difficult to reach^[18-20].
- The effectiveness of online therapy can be a beneficial adjunct to standard therapy^[21-24] or as a brief intervention^[18], particularly in areas of limited resources, such as in youth mental health^[25, 26].
- Using the internet can result in the young person feeling empowered and more in control^[9]. It allows them to be 'able to dip their toe in or out' and moderate the intensity and duration of contact – particularly around sensitive topics^[14, 27].
- Technology also spans the digital divide and may help marginalised young people gain access to services^[11].
- Embracing technology many help to overcome generation awkwardness or barriers such as shyness or lack of confidence in communication
 - Emails for example, have been shown to increase the directness in help-seeking and the reporting of physical complaints by adolescents to healthcare professionals^[28].
- Failing to recognise and link the young person to online networks leaves a crucial area of support ignored.
 - The internet has been shown to be important in building the support networks of young people^[29].
 - Additionally, the research indicates that young people may more accurately represent their perception of their personality online^[30, 31]. Therefore providing an alternative data source during assessment.

In addition to these factors, the role of health care professionals in guiding young people through these sites has also been recognised. Recently, a study of youth workers indicated that 90% of respondents believed that youth workers had an important role in helping youth navigate technology^[32].



Using technology with young people

Regardless of the individual clinicians' experience, there is no doubt that the idea of using technology in clinical practice is daunting and raises a number of challenges. In fact, despite the increased awareness of need, only 35% of youth workers felt equipped with the knowledge to assist young people navigate the internet ^[33]. Technological change is so rapid and many of us have never been exposed to social networking, ipods, the internet, mobile phones or computers while we were at school or university. Even if you were exposed to computers in your mental health training there is a good chance you've not received any training or exposure to how computers can be used to enhance your work with young people and support mental health outcomes.

Upgrades to available technologies happen regularly, and in many cases faster than most can keep up, however the general foundation for use never changes, it just gets easier based on user needs. Similarly to keeping up to date on current research outcomes by following journal articles, keeping up with technology requires regular but not extreme effort and can easily become part of regular practice. Once a basic understanding is developed, often general principles can be applied across programs and settings.

The good news is that in order to gain the benefits from using technology in sessions, you don't have to be a technological expert. What a young person would find useful will vary for each individual. The essential consensus in interviews with young people suggests having an open dialogue with the young person, taking an interest in their needs and knowledge and having a variety of options and suggestions is ideal.

- While young people don't require clinicians to be experts on using technology, they appreciate openness to exploring their opinion and flexibility of practice. Each young person who presents to you may find different things helpful to them. Consequently, we encourage an active dialogue with the young person regarding the use of technology.
- Let them be the expert and let them guide you as to what would be preferable. Having a basic understanding of what types of technologies you might use in clinical practice, along with a good sense of clinically appropriate boundaries and safety is recommended, but the rest can be negotiated with the individual you are working with.
- Young people describe an appreciation of being listened to and being acknowledged as the experts in their own lives, given technology is often such a big part of those lives, we encourage you to take the same approach.
- Websites such as Beacon (<http://www.beacon.anu.edu.au/>) can also offer support and guidance about the strength of evidence of an intervention ^[34].

“Be open to using technology in your practice. We young people live in a world of technology, so we know our stuff. If you are unsure about how to use something, let us know, because we would be more than happy to help you understand it. Especially if we know that it is going to be used in supporting other young people. We like to help as it gives us a voice in our treatment plans. If you want to know more about mobiles, let us talk to you about them. If you want to understand how to surf the net for places that we young people hang at, give us this knowledge so we can inform you. Be open with us, and we will be open with you.” [Becks 2010](#)

“Technology plays such a huge role in the lives of young people - and I don't think it's about the health care professional even being a pro at using technology because it's constantly changing. I used to help my counsellors learn chat lingo and it made me feel like I had something to offer and communicated to me that they were interested in my world (not just my problems).” [Meke 2010](#)



Technology, risks and professional boundaries

Whilst technology has many benefits, it also has its draw backs too. Issues around boundaries and appropriateness of communications can be blurred and so good judgement needs to be exercised. Part 4 – Safety and Professional Issues provides more details about ethical boundaries and safe use of technology to help guide you through this.

Despite the challenges of negotiating technology use, we believe and the literature supports, that when using technology with young people, the benefits far outweigh the risks.

Access to technology

Frustratingly, we recognise that many professionals who work with young people don't have access to the technology that would enable them to engage readily with some of the aforementioned sites. We understand that this can be limiting but is something that needs to be addressed if organisations and institutions want to engage young people in new and innovative ways.

The one page rationale document attached below presents key statistics and references as a resource for professionals who are wishing to negotiate within their organisations for improved access to technology for the purpose of working with young people [\[link to Rationale document\]](#).

What's next

The following three parts to this Module will help you to negotiate the technology path. Part 2 will introduce you to common programs, tools and sites that young people are using, or that you may like to use in your practice. Whereas Part 3 is more of a 'how to guide' which will assist you in using technology or initiating conversations with young people about technology.

[Click here](#) to proceed to Part 2 – Learning the Language of Technology

For further information on the information presented in Part 1 refer to the reference list below.

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