

# Observations of a Youth Reconciliation Practitioner on the impact of Covid-19 on Young People who are Residing in Refuges

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Hope Street Youth and Family Services' Youth Reconciliation Program (YRP) provides one-to-one strengths-based and solutions-focused counselling and support to young people who are experiencing homelessness. Co-located at Hope Street's youth refuge in Brunswick, the program supports young people to establish and maintain constructive relationships with family and broader support networks, where this is desired by the young person. It also provides family counselling, mediation and facilitation of family meetings that support young people. Here, the Youth Reconciliation Practitioner, Shelley Karpathakis, reports on the impact of Covid-19 on the program and the young people it supports.

Since the beginning of 2020, the world has seen many changes in the face of Covid-19. Some of which will change the way people live, interact and perceive what is important. For the many young people experiencing homelessness, Covid-19 is an additional stressor and trigger, but it also presents an opportunity for workers to gain insight to the internal thoughts and emotions that may be living behind a smile or behind an 'I'm ok'.

Currently, the Youth Reconciliation Program is focusing on supporting young people with their concerns regarding the Covid-19. The program provides a space safe for young people to share their concerns and questions about this time of change and uncertainty. All housing situations for young people living homelessness are different and research as well as what young people share during the counselling time with me is that they want to feel safe.

Many different community stakeholders are working hard to advocate for housing sustainability and for young people to have appropriate access to support that will enable and secure their long-term wellbeing and living position both during and after this global health pandemic. In an unexpected silver lining, the self-isolation restrictions have provided young people with more time than usual to work on their internal worlds with therapeutic support.

As past studies demonstrate, more therapeutic work will need to be done post Covid-19 restrictions as people come out of quarantine and deal with the psychological effects of being part of a state of emergency. Lifeline received its highest ever number of calls in one day (3,197) on Good Friday.<sup>1</sup> This tells us that, as quarantine continues, discomfort of being in lockdown with restrictions that are unusual for young people will also continue to rise.

A familiarity that many young people experiencing homelessness share is a feeling of helplessness and fear.<sup>2</sup> Add living through a global pandemic into the mix and services are now having to work even harder to advocate for the needs of young people. Taking a holistic approach, these challenges can also be seen as opportunities. Now is therefore a key time to provide young people with a range of different therapeutic methods that support young people to work through their learned helplessness and fear. This will also assist young people to continue working towards their housing as well as other life goals.

Mindfulness strategies used to support young people during the Covid-19 crisis include short-term

planning and approaches that encourage young people to take one day at a time. 'Reparenting By Committee', an approach developed by Walker<sup>3</sup> who highlights the positive impact Reparenting By Committee can provide to people who have experienced complex trauma. Reparenting By Committee gifts young people the ability to develop new ways of having interactions and relationships that are safe and healthy. This is especially so in refuges; a young person is surrounded by adults in an environment where new connections are formed. These connections are integral to a young person's wellbeing, as highlighted in the Developmental Relationship Framework compiled by the Search Institute.<sup>4</sup>

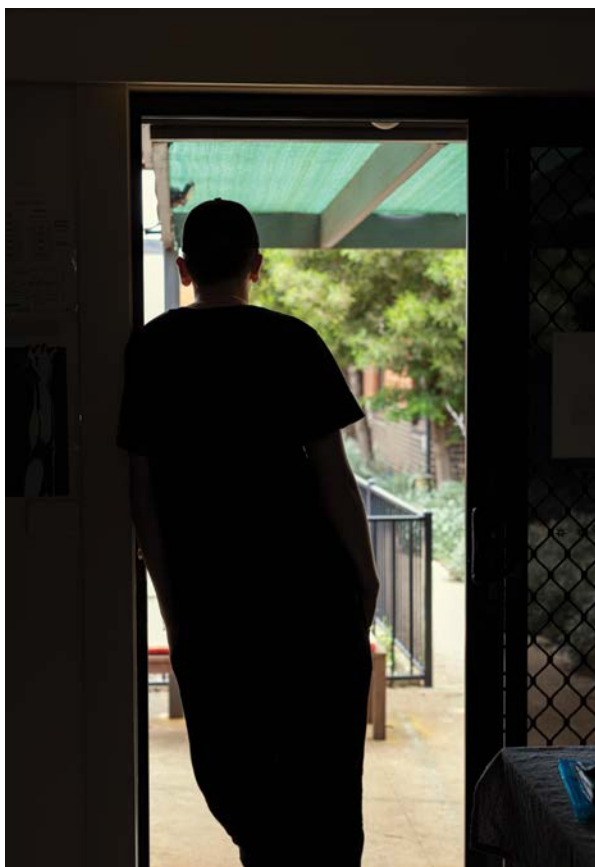
As Walker explains, Reparenting By Committee is an opportunity to unlearn what has been learned that is not helpful or healthy, and to understand what can be provided by young people and by the community around them.<sup>5</sup> Reparenting By Committee doesn't only occur through new relationships with peers and adults, but also via relationships with authors, teachers and via connections with hobbies of interest. The Youth Reconciliation Program encourages diverse approaches for young people to engage with their inner emotional world and to build resilience. Learning how to care emotionally for ourselves can be one of the most challenging new ways of living for young people who have experienced homelessness.

Residing in a refuge presents young people who have experienced homelessness with the ability to enhance resilience and confidence by forming healthy connections with adults. Whilst hard work is done to assist young people with the

best housing option, it is the development of their social skills and abilities that will support their careers, relationships and everyday needs into the future. We don't just wake up one day with brilliant relationship management skills — these need to be developed with deliberate input. After a short stay in a refuge, a young person can leave with one or more resilience building skills, and the capacity to work on more throughout their lives, which will hopefully be part of homeless prevention in their future.

Young people staying in the refuge have shared that, whilst they currently continue to work on future housing goals, they are fearful of leaving the refuge and stepping into a world that, due to Covid-19, will be very different than what it was just a couple of months ago. It is during these times that programs and practitioners must work as coaches, as Hromek suggests — implementing effective interventions such as 'flexible and culturally specific strategies that reduce risk' to assist young people when dealing with uncertainty.<sup>6</sup> In this time of great uncertainty and vulnerability, the Youth Reconciliation program sees these strategies as instrumental in resilience development with young people.

Our new lives in self-isolation have got us all thinking in completely new ways. For young people staying in a refuge who are introverts, this time may come as a welcome bliss that allows one to focus inwardly and encounter less activity on the outside. For those who are extroverts, a new struggle appears. In my search of research, I have been unable to find much data that shines a light on the emotional impacts of self-isolation in a refuge, however it's clear that extroverts benefit from structure and finding new ways of connecting. To support young people with vulnerability during this present time, constant communication and updates shared provide clarity and moments of calm. One consistent message coming out of trauma research is that daily practices assist in healing and recovery.<sup>7</sup>



Photograph by Hilary Faye, taken for Hope Street Youth and Family Services.

Brooks et al<sup>8</sup> reviewed studies that highlighted the negative psychological impact of quarantine. Brooks et al suggest that quarantine should be used for no longer than necessary due to the implications it can have, such as post-traumatic stress symptoms, anger, fears and anxieties about infection. Studies that were conducted post SARS virus showed that people felt not only bored and inadequate but also rejected by people.<sup>9</sup>

For young people experiencing homelessness, these added pressures further complicate their situations. Therapeutic alliances and skill development are crucial in our response. The Youth Reconciliation program is providing content to young people about changing mindsets during Covid-19 and finding new ways of working towards inner calmness. As social restrictions ease throughout the year, therapeutic approaches will be even more important to support young people who may feel psychologically impacted from months of isolation.

The Youth Reconciliation program is flexible to respond to the emerging and changing needs of the young people it supports by using a range of different therapeutic methods.

These include, strength-based approach, emotion focused therapy, motivational interviewing and mindfulness. I am regularly gaining feedback from the young people about the support they seek to comfort them through yet another change in their lives. During this challenging time, some young people will thrive, and some will survive — both outcomes are equally important. When there is a culture of healing, recovery and support in a refuge, an opportunity is provided for young people to learn new emotional skills to enhance their emotional worlds.

Together, youth homelessness services and young people who are experiencing homelessness, will get through this. And the silver linings of what will have otherwise been a challenging time, may well surprise us.

#### Endnotes

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