

MEDIA RELEASE



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Lockdown learnings help youth mental health

A youth mental health initiative developed with students during Victoria's lockdowns, is hoped to help reduce the stigma surrounding mental health issues and encourage teens to seek help early.

The ground-breaking youth mental health project was created in 2020 with three Melbourne secondary colleges and piloted over three years with assistance of Brighton Secondary College and Sandringham College.

Launching today, 'Brain Bloom' offers a practitioner toolkit that makes best-practice research, training and support available to all schools and youth-support settings.

Created by Connect Health & Community, CEO, Amanda Murphy, said the initiative is designed to support young people during a highly vulnerable time in their lives, with one-in-four Australians aged 16-24 experiencing mental illness.

"Mental Health is the number one health issue for young Australians, so by working with students we have been able to identify their biggest challenges and develop the best supports and processes to help them overcome as many hurdles as possible," she said.

Ms Murphy, said developing the program over the three years of the pandemic provided robust testing for the program.

"The initiative focusses on increasing young people's understanding of mental health, encouraging help-seeking behaviours and reducing the stigma associated with mental illness among school communities. Being able to develop and offer that support to students during these fraught years has certainly proven to be a benefit to the students involved."

Ms Murphy said that based on feedback from the pilot, Connect Health & Community was able to develop an easily accessible toolkit and rebrand the initiative to Brain Bloom (from Boss Brain) reflecting empowerment and the ability to flourish, following a student vote.

"Through the Brain Bloom program young people can help take charge of mental health issues in their school. They can play a positive role in breaking down the stigma associated with mental ill-health and help others in their community to access the support they need.

"Brain Bloom helps students to be the driving force for change in our community by starting essential conversations about mental health. We know these conversations can be difficult, but we also know how important they are, particularly in recent years," Ms Murphy said.

As part of the program at Brighton Secondary College in 2021, 23 students from years 11 and 12 were trained in teen mental health first aid – teaching them how and where to get help, and how to provide mental health first aid to their peers.

Students also designed and developed a mental health video for the school featuring an interview with a mental health practitioner from youth support organisation, Headspace – providing a clear avenue of support in a challenging year.

“All our Year 11s and 12s sat down at the same time and watched the video we made - this was the first time anything like this has ever happened at our school. It sends a very clear message that mental health is something our school takes seriously, and it was an important step in raising the profile of mental health as an important issue to tackle together,” said Argia, a year 12 student who participated in the project.

Student Wellbeing Manager at Brighton Secondary College, Peter Mangold, said the initiative proved an invaluable investment by the school in a very challenging year.

“Not only did the program enable our young people to make a difference in their community, but it has given them the training they need to manage mental health and skills to promote good mental health for their peers. Recent years have been the kind no-one could have foreseen, but armed with the skills and confidence to address their mental health, our students have certainly fared much better than they would have without it,” Mr Mangold said.

Ms Murphy said feedback from the pilot program prompted the creation of Brain Bloom, with the obvious potential for it to continue making a positive impact in the community, especially during such turbulent times for young people.

The Results

Since 2020, Sandringham College has had the program embedded into its Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) curriculum. In 2022, participating students held a mental health awareness day for their peers with approximately 70 students participating in various mental health activities designed by the VCAL class.

As a result of participating in the pilot:

- 81% of students reporting an increase in their understanding of mental health
- 77% reporting an increase in their ability to recognise the signs and symptoms of mental illness
- 74% reported feeling more comfortable to talk openly about mental illness
- 81% reported that they were more likely to seek support for a mental health concern.

Here’s what participating students had to say:

‘I like that we got to gain an understanding of something that is so important’

‘I was able to learn so much about mental health’

‘I liked that schools and teens have the opportunity to be open and talk about mental health. Getting the mental health certificate for Teen Mental Health First Aid was great’

‘I think it’s a great program that helps bring awareness and educate students and really gets them involved and thinking about their mental health and others’

The pilot was supported by the Bendigo Bank Cluster of Bayside Branches through their Community Grants program. It was developed by Connect Health & Community in partnership with Headspace (Elsternwick/Bentleigh Branch), Bayside City Council, Glen Eira Council, Bayside Glen Eira Kingston Local Learning & Employment Network and Holmesglen Institute.

The new toolkit can be downloaded for free on the [Connect Health & Community website](#).

Schools or local councils seeking more information can contact healthpromotion@connecthealth.org.au.

Connect Health & Community will amalgamate with Star Health and Central Bayside Community Health Services to create Victoria's largest community health organisation, Better Health Network, in 2023.

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