



Maintaining Connexions through COVID-19

Nick Pace has been working with Tyler for nearly all of the three years he has been a practitioner with Connexions. During this time, he's found how one of his personal values – transparency – is shared within the program.

Nick also appreciates how Connexions allows time to forge a truly transparent and supportive relationship. "Tyler and I are benefiting from having known each other for so long and having been through a fair bit together. We're at a crucial point of Tyler's recovery now."

Another key to the success of the program involves practitioners being able to meet young people wherever they feel safest and is convenient for them. Nick explains why this is crucial:

"Expecting someone to show up in an office, in a room at a specific time when someone's experiencing lots of different complexities and difficulties in their life, almost it sets them up to fail again. So, I regularly go to see Tyler, to drive out to his location. Being able to drive out and reach out as far as we can is so important."

When more severe COVID-19 restrictions came in the team at Connexions had to change the way they worked. To ensure that vital support was provided for young people already in the program, and for the increase in young people referred to the program, Connexions introduced a telephone counselling support service.

There have been some surprising positive outcomes associated with this approach. Practitioners have observed the increased willingness of some participants to engage in a deeper therapeutic intervention.

Nick recognises that he has been able to maintain effective contact with Tyler because they have built up a strong relationship over time, however he acknowledges that restrictions have had an impact on new referrals and have disadvantaged some young people with limited access to technology.

As restrictions are easing up Connexions can return to former ways of working too. "It does provide more opportunity to tailor our responses and connect with people in a way that suits them," says Nick.

Pictured above: Connexions Practitioner, Nick Pace

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Allowing more people to flourish

COVID-19 has impacted all facets of our lives throughout 2020, from our work with colleagues to our connections with loved ones. As we continue to navigate our way through this public health crisis, it is vital that we recognise the significant impact the pandemic has had, and will continue to have, on mental health and wellbeing.

At Jesuit Social Services, we see this every day with the people we work with – particularly in Victoria due to the prolonged lock down. The necessary changes that have been made to our lives to keep people safe, have been extremely challenging for people already on the margins of society.

What this period has shown us is the importance of strong, effective mental health systems to allow more people to flourish. Sadly, a recent report by our Support After Suicide program paints the picture of a Victorian mental health system that was struggling even before the impact of the pandemic. You will read more about that report, and our suggested areas for reform, in this newsletter.

We have also been actively involved with the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, which will hand down its final report and recommendations in February 2021. This is an opportunity to reshape the mental health system to improve outcomes for people who access it. Jesuit Social Services has continued to advocate for people in the criminal justice system who experience mental illness and for improved suicide prevention services.

As we come to the end of this challenging year, my hope is that you and your loved ones are safe and well. I wish you all a restful and joyful Christmas. I am very grateful for your ongoing support, particularly during this challenging year as we work together to build a just society.

Julie Edwards
CEO, Jesuit Social Services

Finding a space to be myself

Our Artful Dodgers Studios offers a space where young people can explore their creativity, find community, and have some respite from challenges they are sometimes confronting. These can include mental illness and social isolation.

For some of our participants, coming into the studios can be one of the key points of social contact in their week. When a COVID-19 outbreak in Melbourne led to restrictions on social contact, the Artful Dodgers team was faced with the challenge of continuing to provide the supports their participants relied upon, in a safe and socially distant manner.

With restrictions allowing for one-to-one contact, the team began meeting up with participants for socially distant walks.

For Artful Dodgers participant Georgina, her walks with Artful Dodgers' Community Cultural Development Worker, Halszka Masash, have offered a much-needed break from life in her high-rise apartment. Halszka and the other members of the Artful Dodgers team also facilitate Zoom catch ups with Georgina and other participants a number of times a week to further reduce feelings of social isolation.

Georgina says the walks have allowed her to "relax and be myself. Being able to go outside and talk about whatever comes to mind, things that are bothering me or random things that happened throughout the week, is a lot better than being alone most of the time.

"I know that I can talk to my friends through Zoom, but I feel like there's more interaction being able to talk to someone in person instead of being on the computer, having constant internet connection problems."

The walks have offered Georgina the opportunity to explore her neighbourhood and find a connection with nature that she hasn't experienced before. "I'm learning more about my suburb. I've lived here for many years, but I didn't even know about some of these areas and the amount of nature around the area!"



Georgina (R) enjoying a socially distant walk with Halszka

Mental Health and Wellbeing in a time of COVID-19 – Andy Hamilton SJ

During the coronavirus crisis mental health has been a focus of concern. This is not surprising. Our mental health is held within a delicate yet strong web of relationships that we ordinarily take for granted. Our daily routine, our workplace and fellow workers, our employment, our family, our schooling, our church associations, our friends, our celebrations, hobbies, games and level of comfort with our own company, and our secure hold on our future, are only some of the relationships that hold our lives in place.

The coronavirus tore holes in this web. Its restrictions limited close relationships outside our homes and put pressure on those within them, interrupted schooling, pastimes and employment, made distant our intimate communication by touch, and tore away any expectations of a predictable life. It put pressure on our own inner strength and on our domestic relationships. It threatened our mental health.

At one level the response to this threat was a dazzling burst of activity, like the springtime green explosion that follows a bushfire. People discovered zoom, shared their inner experiences of restriction, made connections with neighbours, looked out for the elderly, wrote, painted and played music, walked for hours in parks, and lingered for conversation in previously centrifugal families. It was a time for repairing the damaged net and weaving new strands to strengthen and extend it.

As in the bush, however, where after fires some trees and shrubs are badly burned and struggle to recover, the coronavirus exacerbated the vulnerability of people who suffer from mental illness and whose web of relationships is already fragile. Those who were already isolated, had few friends or little family support, or suffered from anxiety or depression, could lose their connections. They were at risk of a serious onset of mental illness.

Young people are at particular risk. Many have yet to learn how to survive under such pressure. The demands of social distancing intensifies their isolation. For many, mental illness is only one of many areas of disadvantage in their lives. These might include a chaotic or violent experience of childhood, the experience of school as a place of constant failure, physical illness and lack of access to health services and few supportive friends and acquaintances. The disruption caused by coronavirus ripped gaping holes in the already fragile web that supported their lives.

The community has recognised the threat to mental health posed by COVID-19 and the need for therapists to help those afflicted by it. Just as important is the need of vulnerable young people for skilled adults to walk with them. Jesuit Social Service has tried to provide this. By listening and encouraging creative self-expression the web of relationships is strengthened and resilience is built.

The time of coronavirus is demanding. It can be also be an occasion for weaving, patching, strengthening and enlarging the nets that keep people healthy and bind them together. It invites us to include in our own web of relationships people vulnerable to mental illness.



Andy Hamilton SJ

Update on our engagement with the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System

In July 2019, Jesuit Social Services made a written submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. Our aim was to facilitate the voice and experience of our participants and program staff in relation to mental health and wellbeing.

Jesuit Social Services' submission made recommendations across a range of areas. These include broader prevention strategies, such as place-based approaches to disadvantage, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led services, attention to the role of gender in mental well-being, and the importance of adequate housing.

Our submission made recommendations regarding people with complex needs, people intersecting with the justice system, family violence, and suicide postvention support. It highlights Jesuit Social Services' work providing soft entry points to the mental health system, dual-diagnosis services and supported employment programs, and pointed to gaps in existing systems, such as the NDIS.

Since lodging our submission last year, the Royal Commission has published its 680-page Interim Report (November 2019). The Interim Report refers to information provided by the Manager of Jesuit Social Services' Support After Suicide Program, Dr Louise Flynn, who told the Commission that Support After Suicide's "day-to-day work is about suicide prevention and assisting people with their mental health and in their engagement in community life" and that the service "does not have enough funding to respond to all the requests for support it receives and that services are restricted in regional areas".

Since then, Jesuit Social Services has made further contributions to the Royal Commission. These include a public (witness) statement by our CEO, Julie Edwards, participation in a public panel hearing held (via Zoom) focusing on the intersection of mental illness and the justice system, and a supplementary submission to the Royal Commission in October 2020.

Jesuit Social Services' supplementary paper provides further information to the Royal Commission regarding practical solutions based on our experiences of working with participants who intersect both the mental health and criminal justice systems. Contributions were made by staff across our service delivery programs, in collaboration with the central Learning and Practice Development Unit and Policy and Advocacy and Communications teams.

Our paper outlines challenges within the current service system and practical solutions to address these based on our grounded experience working with participants with mental illness and/or justice system involvement. The paper emphasises the importance of a coherent, comprehensive, value-based practice framework that drives service delivery and outcomes and discusses how, at Jesuit Social Services, this is provided by the Our Way of Working practice approach.

This final paper continues a thread common across our submissions to the Royal Commission – that it is often people experiencing disadvantage or complex life circumstances who fall through the cracks in our mainstream mental health system, and that this Royal Commission is a unique opportunity to address this.

Further reading

Read our submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System: bit.ly/mh-rc-sub

Read the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System interim report: <https://bit.ly/vmhs-ir>

New report gives a voice to those left behind after suicide

A recent report published by Jesuit Social Services' Support After Suicide program shows, through the experience of people bereaved by the suicide of a loved one, that Victoria's mental health system was under significant stress even before the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report was compiled from an online survey completed by family members of people who took their own lives. The survey was completed by 142 former and current participants of Support After Suicide's counselling services, and was supplemented with in-depth interviews with 28 people.

"Of the 142 people we surveyed, almost three quarters (70 per cent) told us their loved one who died had previously sought help from the mental health system," says Dr Louise Flynn, Manager of Support After Suicide.

"Almost half were known to have attempted suicide in the past, and 79 per cent of family members said they felt there were barriers to them accessing information or help in caring for their loved one.

"These serious gaps identified by our participants mean our mental health system is failing to be the strong, effective system we need, particularly at a time when we expect the pressures and demands on the system to continue to increase."

Caroline, one of our program participants, whose son suicided at age 17 (not their real names), is one of several people to share their experiences with the mental health system in the report.

"The night before he died, I didn't want him discharged. I told the private hospital psychiatrist I was afraid something terrible would happen. She told me I had to take him, that I was responsible for him. I was really worried, upset. And then something terrible did happen. He died the day I picked him up from hospital," she says.

"I don't think I ever felt confident about his management – apart from one psychiatrist. There were individuals within the system who supported David. But I just felt like the system was floundering.

"The system needs to include family members, especially in younger people. We are there because we want to help – not to be shut out and then told to look after him with no information about how to do it."

The report includes a range of key recommendations such as an increase in training, resources and targeted support for

health practitioners to assist people at risk of suicide, and a review of how confidentiality practices and protocols limit the information and guidance given to families around appropriate care.

It also calls for secure, long-term funding for post-suicide programs such as Support After Suicide, which provides services including counselling, group work and peer support to those left behind after a loved one has ended their life. In 2019, Support After Suicide helped more than 1,200 adults, young people and children bereaved by suicide.

"We know that family members of people who have taken their lives experience feelings of grief, anger and sadness and are at increased risk of suicide themselves, which is why it is incredibly important that people can access services like ours during times of need," says Dr Flynn.

To read the report, visit: bit.ly/3epHXz8



Coffee and Conversation in Mount Druitt

The Wilmott Community Hub has gone mobile by using a coffee van to stay connected to the local community. The Hub team has taken to the streets of Mount Druitt with coffee and conversation in an effort to give members of the community that vital touchpoint that they normally would get through the Community Hub, pre-COVID. The coffee van makes targeted stops to those residents the team knows may be struggling with isolation, and while respecting social distancing rules, the Hub team members can share a coffee and check-in with those who need it most.

Monique Perusco, Manager Social and Community Services at Jesuit Social Services says, "the van is a great way for us to touch base in a COVID-safe environment. Many people here have had a tough time this year and this allows us to keep in touch and let them know we're still here for them and supporting the community."



NSW post-suicide funding will prevent further suicides

Jesuit Social Services has entered a partnership, led by StandBy, to deliver our Support After Suicide program in NSW. The program helps people navigate the grief and trauma associated with suicide and prevent more people from taking their own lives. Funding for this service is being provided by the NSW government as part of their Towards Zero Suicides initiative.

Dr Louise Flynn, Manager of Support After Suicide says, "this funding will provide valuable support to up to 126,000 NSW residents, who are facing extremely challenging circumstances due to the suicide of a loved one, each year." The program has more than 15 years of experience providing counselling, group work and peer support to people in metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria and will deliver services to NSW residents for the first time.



Bush garden project strengthens links with culture

A new community bush garden project in Katherine will provide opportunities for young people to work alongside Elders and strengthen links with culture.

Participants in the Back on Track program – which we help deliver to young people in contact with the justice system – will work with Elders to establish and maintain a community bush medicine and bush tucker garden.

The bush garden project is funded by a Northern Territory Government Suicide Prevention Grant and led by the Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup of Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation.

Young people will benefit from experiences of building and strengthening an inclusive, resilient local community and learn about traditional cultural healing strategies. When the garden is complete, it will give the Banatjarl women access to important bush medicine and tucker.



Smoking Ceremony at the launch of the Growing Strongbala Way Community Bush Garden Project in Katherine

Dropping off the Edge 2021

We are pleased to announce that the next iteration of our *Dropping off the Edge* research into locational disadvantage across Australia will be published in 2021. This will be the fifth edition of this seminal research spanning more than 20 years.

Dropping off the Edge maps disadvantage in each state and territory and identifies that a small number of communities experience entrenched and persistent disadvantage that limits people's outcomes and opportunities.

As well as indicators to demonstrate social wellbeing and disadvantage, the next report will include environmental indicators for the first time to measure green space, heat vulnerability and air quality. This will allow us to illustrate a more complete picture of disadvantage in line with our broader ecological justice work.

We have engaged the University of Canberra as our research partner for this major project and will continue to share updates with you next year ahead of the report's launch.

Additionally, we have recently appointed Dr Susie Moloney (RMIT University) as Executive Director of our new centre for place-based research and action which will be established in

early 2021. This Centre will be the home of the Dropping off the Edge research, serve as a repository of models of good practice and accompany communities in their efforts to build resilience.

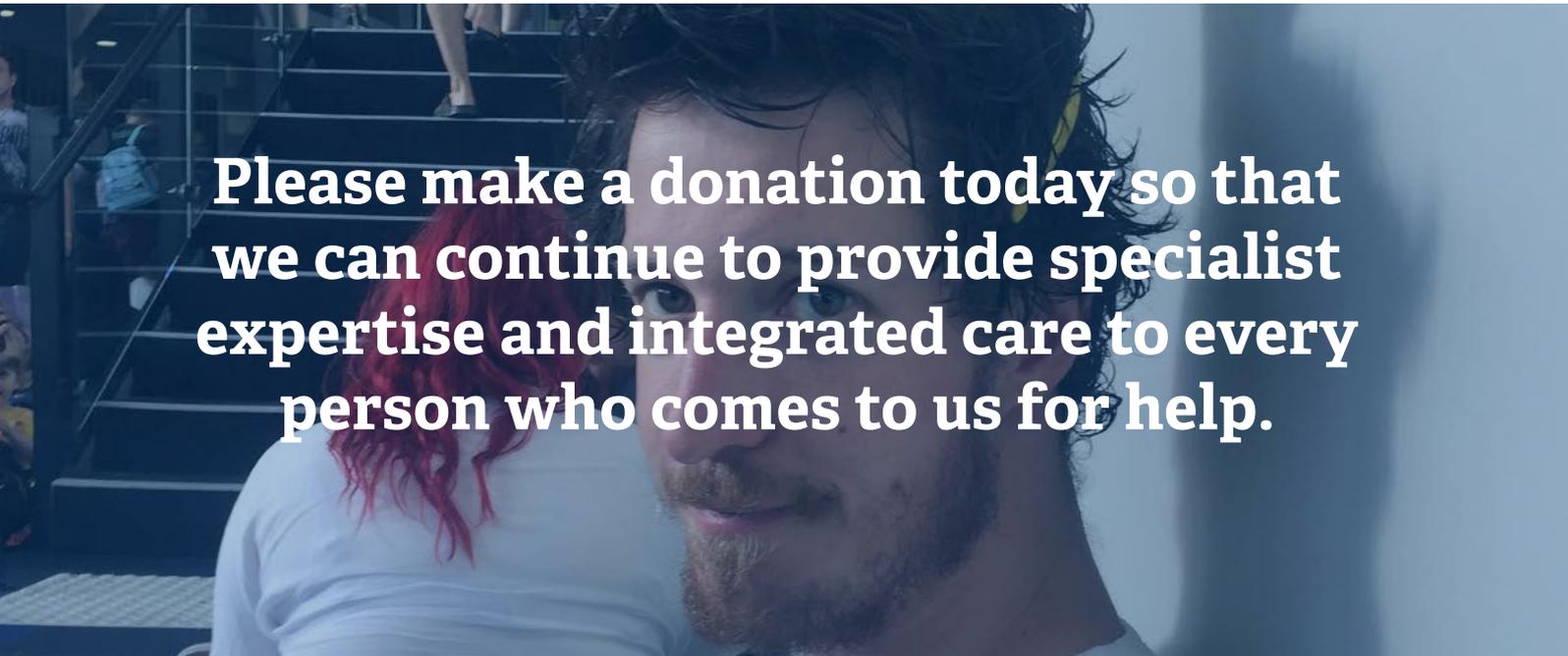
We are grateful to Gandel Philanthropy and the Victorian State Government for the initial funding to establish the centre.



COVID-19 has had significant impact on many areas of our lives with the toll on our mental health and wellbeing demanding particular attention.

For people who are in vulnerable situations or on the margins of society the strain on their mental health has been particularly severe.

We are committed to ensuring that every person gets the support that they need to make it through this crisis and beyond.



Please make a donation today so that we can continue to provide specialist expertise and integrated care to every person who comes to us for help.

Want to help Jesuit Social Services?

Together we can build a just society by advocating for social change and promoting the wellbeing of disadvantaged people, family and communities.

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\$ _____ (Please specify amount)

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Due to current safety restrictions in Victoria, we kindly ask you to consider donating online, if you are able. To do so, please visit jss.org.au, click DONATE, and select 'Summer Appeal' in your campaign selection. We still welcome donations by mail but please note there could be a delay in processing your generous donation.