FUTURE MINDS

ABOUT, FOR AND WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

WHAT DOES JONNY BENJAMIN MBE THINK ABOUT ONLINE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS?

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO BE A CO-RESEARCHER IN A MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH PROJECT?

NEW ZINE

INTRODUCING A NEW ZINE MADE WITH, FOR AND ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE

DIGITAL

CAN A GOOD SOCIAL CONNECTION ONLINE HELP IMPROVE DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY IN YOUNG PEOPLE?

CONNECTION

IS IT IMPORTANT TO HAVE GOOD SOCIAL CONNECTIONS? DO THEY HELP PREVENT DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY?

RESEARCHERS' NOTE

Welcome! It is our pleasure to welcome you to the first ever Institute of Global Health Innovation (IGHI) research Zine – part of a virtual series showcasing our research about young people and their wellbeing and mental health -

but with a twist.

To design the series, we will work together with young people with experience of mental health difficulties.

It is so important to find creative ways of sharing our research to the people that it is about.

Each Zine will feature a new exciting IGHI project that uses meaningful patient and public involvement and engagement (PPIE) or works together with young people. We will also chat to those involved in the project or the making of the Zine.

Our first issue Zine will focus on our Wellcome funded project that looked at whether a good social connection online can help prevent depression and anxiety in young people.

Other funded research teams explored other things that could help including:

addressing repetitive negative thinking, mental imagery and reducing loneliness.

We also talk to our young team members in this issue about their lived experience and how they found working on our project.

We hope you like our Zine!

Lindsay, Emma, Lily and our young advisory group

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Please feel free to send us your comments and questions to our email address:
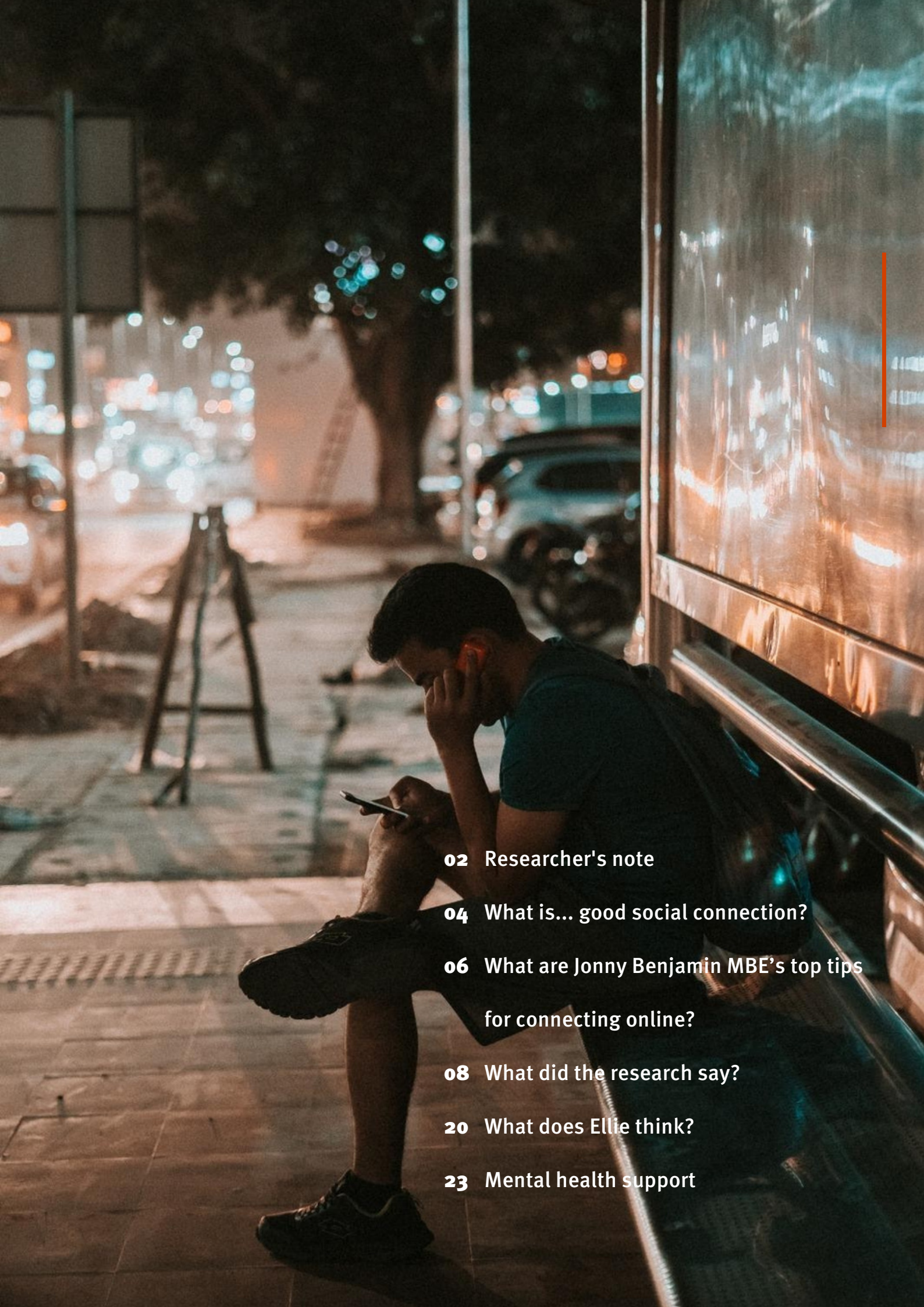l.dewa@imperial.ac.uk
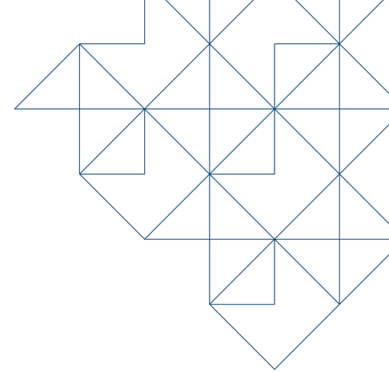
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GOOD

SOCIAL CONNECTION?

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

We are all connected to something. It could be to a friend, a partner, a group or even internet communities! Social connection can be defined in different ways – as the opposite of loneliness or the number of friends we have.

Sometimes the number of connections we have can get confused with the quality of those connections. However, having lots of connections does not necessarily mean that they are all good connections.

A good social connection is difficult to define. The closest definition in the field of psychiatry is having a therapeutic alliance. A therapeutic alliance is a close and consistent relationship between a healthcare professional and the person having treatment or therapy. This definition does not expand on what closeness means or in a context outside of treatment. It also does not consider the perspective of the person receiving support.

Our team felt "good social connection" could be defined as how valuable people believe certain aspects of an interaction between two or more people to be.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Evidence shows that having a good social connection can reduce loneliness, and help improve treatment and mental health.

What we do not know is how long these effects last, and whether they occur outside the therapeutic relationship and in more informal interventions.

WHY LOOK AT DIGITAL INTERVENTIONS?

We do not know if a good social connection exists within digital interventions (e.g. social media, apps etc.), if it does exist, and what it looks like. Does it improve outcomes (e.g. improved depression)?

"

How we value the interaction between two or more people

"

WHAT DO YOU THINK... JONNY BENJAMIN?

What comes to mind when thinking about having a good connection with somebody? One of our young team members, Nathan Jackson, interviewed mental health campaigner, author and vlogger Jonny Benjamin MBE about what it means to him.

What do you think it means to have a [good] social connection?

That's such a good question. There's a lot to unpack from that. I'm 34 but growing up I didn't really understand what a positive social connection was. Particularly in my twenties, I think I had a lot of toxic social connections.

There was a lot happening for me. I was struggling with my mental health and sexuality. That led me to some quite toxic relationships and connections. But I wasn't very aware or reflective of those connections. It's only now in my early thirties that I think I'm really conscious of what connections I have around me and keeping them positive for the sake of my mental health.

I'm very lucky now to have a lot of what I'd say are positive social connections, where I have people that I can rely on, trust and be honest with that won't judge me.

How important do you think having a good social connection is to help improve anxiety or depression?

Yes, it's massive. I know that in the UK, more and more GPs are doing what we call 'social prescribing'. When it comes to anxiety, [and] depression, some GPs tend to go straight for prescribing medication.

I'm on medication for both anxiety and depression and that's fine. But I know that GPs now are turning more towards social prescribing. They're looking at the person holistically and assessing what can be done to improve social interaction and connection with the outside world.

For example, I know there's more and more gardening groups that people are being referred to from their GP as there are so many positive aspects for people's mental health being in nature and around people. I really like the idea of social prescribing.
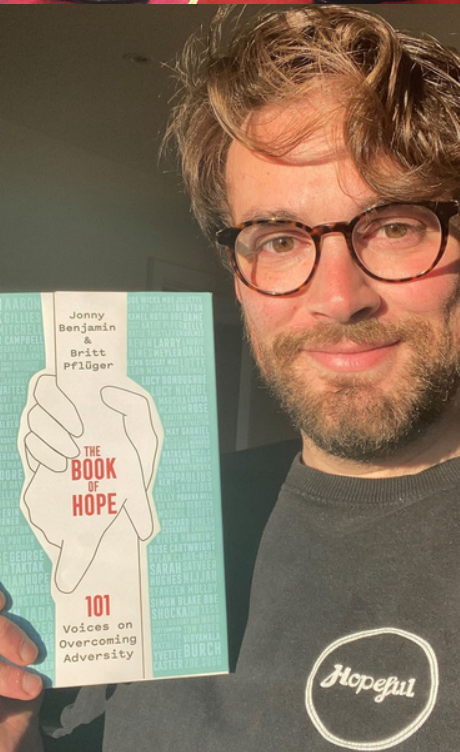
> "...just listening to other people be very honest, frank and vulnerable is really helpful"

And finally...what are your three top tips for GETTING a positive social connection on digital platforms?

I've been accessing lots of groups online such as wellbeing groups. For example, on Monday evenings, there's a group that I attend called HUMEN. It's a group for men all over the world coming online to chat and be very honest and open.

I find groups like that really helpful for me, even if I'm not saying anything, just listening to other people be very honest, frank and vulnerable is really helpful. There are so many groups online now. A lot of the mental health charities are putting on activities online, so I'd definitely say connecting to a group.

Secondly, taking time away from devices, technology and taking time for yourself is a really important factor. Some time away from your screen can be really helpful.

Reading a book for instance, I find quite therapeutic. I've always read, but I find reading during the present moment is even more helpful to counteract the screen time.

My third tip would be making sure you've got some more fun light-hearted ways of connecting with people through technology. My friends and I have done a few quizzes on Zoom. That's been really fun and different. Particularly things like quizzes add a bit of escapism from this quite difficult period that we're living in. I think that can be really healthy.

Find out more about Jonny's new mental health charity Beyond here: https://wearebeyond.org.uk/

Beyond

RESEARCH ROADMAP

DOES A GOOD ONLINE SOCIAL CONNECTION HELP IMPROVE
DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY IN YOUNG PEOPLE?

1 WON FUNDING!

In January 2020, Wellcome introduced their new mental health strategy. People were invited to apply for money to look into what they thought was the 'best bet' to prevent or treat depression and/or anxiety in young people.

As more and more of our interactions are online we wanted to see if good digital connections could improve mental health.

In May 2020, we found out we were successful and so we started the project by reviewing evidence and speaking to experts.

2 WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

It was important to us to work together with young people with experience of depression and anxiety to shape the project — as they know best! We were really lucky to have nine young people on the team. They were called a young person's advisory group (YPAG).

They were involved in the design, management, data interpretation, and sharing of the research. One member was also involved in the literature review (next page!).

3 ONLINE CHATS TO SHAPE RESEARCH

We also asked mental health professionals and other young people from outside the UK what it meant to have a good social connection online and offline. We also wanted to know the signs of having it and what search terms we should use for our review.

4 REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

A systematic scoping literature review is a strong approach to review the evidence on a particular area that is largely unknown. The stages of our review are listed on the right hand side.

Define objectives
To know what a good social connection looks like online, what factors help depression and anxiety or make them worse, if findings are different across contexts, people's preferences and how young people engage

Decide on the type of studies to include
Each article focuses on:
* young people
* good online social connections (e.g. via an app)
* depression and/or anxiety

Search for evidence
Searched databases, key websites, journals, Google and included studies reference lists

Screen the evidence
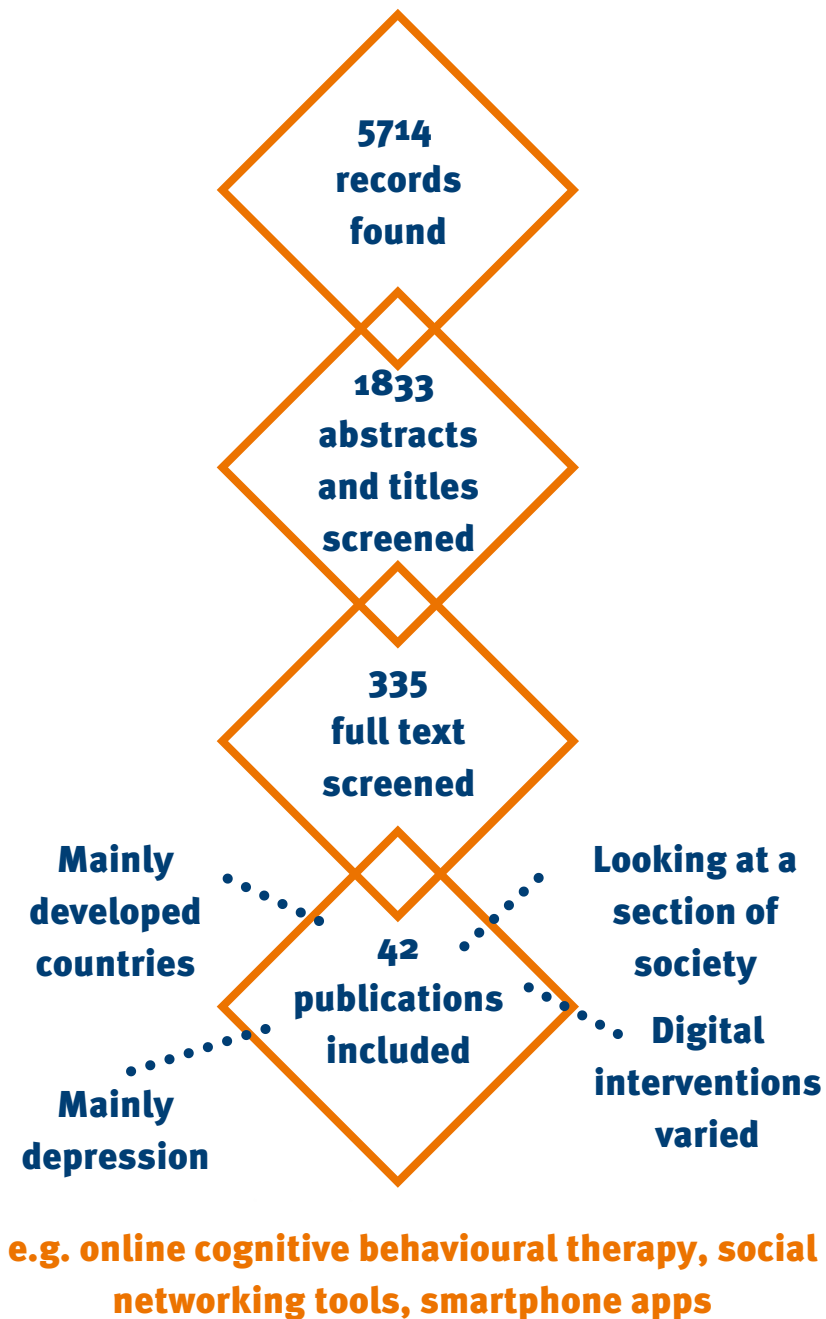One person screened all literature and a young person screened 10% of this

Gather the data
Main parts of the study (e.g. what you want to find out, type of study, key findings)

Analyse the data
Collate the main data into key themes

WHAT DID THE LITERATURE SAY?

5714 records found

1833 abstracts and titles screened

335 full text screened

42 publications included

Mainly developed countries

Mainly depression

Looking at a section of society

Digital interventions varied

e.g. online cognitive behavioural therapy, social networking tools, smartphone apps

FACTORS THAT SHOW GOOD SOCIAL CONNECTION IS THERE (OR NOT THERE!)*

Social support

Social connectedness

Relatedness

Feeling accepted

Being able to share

Feeling normalised

Feeling close to a peer

Less alone in one's feelings

Sense of belonging

Emotional connection

Feeling you are not a burden

Rapport

Feeling validated

Shared understanding

Trust

*Negative interactions

*Loneliness

*Feeling ignored

6 WHAT DID OUR EXPERTS SAY?

All experts reported having a good social connection was crucial for our mental health.

It was deemed important for how well digital interventions work and whether people successfully engaged with them.

Trust, safety and having a choice came across strongly as important signs of having a good social connection.

"It's a different set of skills. You know, learning to connect digitally"

"...to understand what features are going to make them do it so engagement is a huge issue with digital interventions... If we get half the number of people doing half of the intervention we're totally cheering"

"Choice is key [within digital interventions]. They need to be based on what works for people personally"

"The thing that makes a mental health issue a crisis is disconnection from other people"

Chris Martin, Chief Executive of The Mix

"

The connectedness that's helpful is where people feel they can trust somebody

Dr Peter Fuggle, Director of Clinical and Service Improvement at the Anna Freud Centre

"

WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

GOOD SOCIAL CONNECTION IN DIGITAL INTERVENTIONS LARGELY IMPROVED OUTCOMES

From 10 studies that reported change in outcomes for depression we found depression symptoms decreased by 26% overall after having a good social connection within a digital intervention.

From the 5 studies that reported a change in outcomes for anxiety, there was a decrease by 15%. In contrast, negative interactions, loneliness and feeling ignored were all associated with worsened outcomes for depression and anxiety.

Overall, across all studies, depression and anxiety improved following good social connection.

FACTORS WE STILL NEED TO CONSIDER

Digital mechanisms can be helpful or unhelpful when trying to make good social connection online possible.

✓ **EASE OF ACCESS AND ANONYMITY**

Digital environments can facilitate openness and sharing.

✓ **CONNECT WITH PEERS**

Participants valued opportunities to support others using digital. Networking component considered most useful.

✓ **BLENDED WITH FACE-TO-FACE CONNECTIONS**

Digital social connections blended with face-to-face therapy or connecting offline before engaging in digital was most valuable.

✗ **CANNOT SEE BODY LANGUAGE OR FACIAL EXPRESSIONS**

More likely to feel ignored and misunderstood. Easier to hide true feelings.

✗ **HARASSMENT**

Occurs frequently online. Unmoderated forums can be unsafe environments.

✗ **DISCONNECTION FROM REAL WORLD**

Connecting online to replace face-to-face connections can be harmful and result in loneliness.

THE RIVER FRAMEWORK

WHAT IS IT?

We designed the RIVER framework which is made up of factors from our review that show good social connection is present in an interaction.

WHAT DOES IT DO?

The RIVER framework provides a starting point for creating new, regular measures and digital interventions for good social connection.

WHO IS IT FOR?

The RIVER framework is for digital developers, researchers, clinicians and young people. For example, the framework can be used as a tool to identify the factors needed by young people and clinicians to make sure a good social connection is present.

WHAT FACTORS ARE IMPORTANT TO YOU?

There are five main areas and 28 factors in the RIVER framework. The framework is dynamic and flexible. Find out more on page 20.

THE RIVER FRAMEWORK

R

Rapport
Words and actions that build good social connection

I

Identity and commonality
Shared values or experiences that facilitate individuals feeling like they are part of the same group

V

Valued interpersonal dynamic
Factors that make an individual feel like they're valued in a relationship
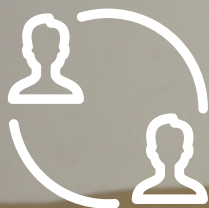
E

Engagement
People feel fewer barriers to actively engaging in formal and informal support

R

Responded to and accepted
Individual feels they are seen as valuable and worthy of care and support

Experts mentioned things not mentioned in literature, i.e. trust, anonymity and safety

Good social connection online is important, but under-considered

Achieving good connections should be considered in the development & application of digital interventions for depression

Developers should consider young people's preferences, anonymity, how it's delivered and content moderation

Clinical video consultations preferred for body language to be observed, & to be blended with face-to-face

HOW WILL THE FINDINGS IMPACT OTHERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

- As youth mental health needs rise during the COVID-19 pandemic, our work holds particular relevance as support will be increasingly provided online.

- Clinicians should be trained in how to incorporate techniques for developing or maintaining good social connection online.

- Guidelines should be developed to improve social connections online and to ensure that moving face-to-face therapies to the online setting does not impact the quality of the social connection between the clinician and the young person.

10 NEXT STEPS

WHAT CAN WE DO WITH THESE FINDINGS?

We can use the RIVER framework to develop measures and know if good social connections are there in our interactions online, with therapists and with digital mental health apps and tools. We can take our findings from our research to create better connections.

WHAT NEXT FOR OUR RESEARCH?

More research is needed across different digital interventions and user groups, particularly low- and middle-income countries. The RIVER framework can be used to further look at relationships between the different factors.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED IN RESEARCH?

If you'd like to sign up to our newsletter, IGHI updates or patient and public involvement list please email Justine at j.alford@imperial.ac.uk and follow us on Twitter here: @Imperial_IGHI

ASK THE TEAM...

ASK ELLIE

We had a chat with one of our young team members about her experience working on the project and what she's learned.

Ellie, you applied to join our team back in June 2020. What made you apply for the project?

At the time I applied, we had already been in a national lockdown for two months and it was clear how important digital tools would be during this period - from remote learning tools to social media to stay connected from a distance. This, alongside the surge in youth mental health problems due in part to the feelings of isolation in the pandemic, made me eager to be involved.

What was the best thing about working on this project?

The people. Throughout the course of the project, I have had the opportunity to meet (virtually of course!) fascinating people from a range of backgrounds, ages and professions all of whom have introduced me to such interesting views on an area of research I feel very passionate about.

Can you give us an example of how you/ the YPAG improved the project?

I feel very lucky to have been involved as a second reviewer in the scoping review and this allowed me to include literature that would have perhaps been overlooked by an older professional, as the age range of the YPAG allowed us to relate to the young people at the focus of this project on a peer-to-peer level.

What would you improve about working on a future project?

Honestly there isn't anything I can think of that could have realistically been improved! Obviously in-person meetings would likely have given us a further opportunity to debate around the topic and learn from one another but with the current global situation this was impossible; overall I think this was dealt with amazingly by the team under the circumstances.

Would you recommend working on projects to other young people?

Undoubtedly YES!

WHAT IS PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT?

Public involvement is when patients, carers or members of the public are meaningfully involved in research. They bring their lived experience to help make decisions and influence the project. For example, we worked with young people in the project and on this Zine. This is different to being a participant of research, when an intervention or product is tested on them and information about them is collected and analysed. It's about working alongside researchers as part of the research team.

WHAT IS THE IMPERIAL YOUNG PERSONS' ADVISORY NETWORK?

The Imperial Young People's Advisory Network (YPAN) are a group of around 70 young people aged 17–25 across the UK who are interested in improving, and learning more about, research being undertaken at Imperial College London which is relevant to young people.

We send members a range of involvement opportunities usually via email. This may include opportunities to be involved in focus groups, workshops, 1-1 discussions or to become part of a larger project advisory group.

Get involved

If you are interested in helping to shape and influence research relevant to young people, we would love to hear from you! You can sign up to the YPAN via this short online form: https://bit.ly/3mF1fGr If you have any questions or queries about the YPAN or being involved in

research please contact Halle Johnson or Katherine Baker at: publicinvolvement@imperial.ac.uk or see the website: https://www.imperial.ac.uk/ patient-experience-research-centre/ppi/our-public-involvement-networks/young-persons-advisory-network/

Latest opportunity

The researchers would like to invite young people aged 18-25 to join the Student Lifestyle Tracking study team to help shape the research on assessing lifestyle behaviours such as sleep, physical activity and diet across the student life course. Deadline 31st December.

For more information and to register see QR code:

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

The content mentioned in this Zine might raise thoughts, concerns or strong emotions. If your experience impacts on your mental health or you have worrying thoughts or feelings, you are not alone. Below are some places that can provide support.

Shout
24/7 crisis text line that allows you to receive anonymous support over text

Text 85258
www.giveusashout.org

Samaritans
24/7 phone line to talk through any issue you're facing

Call 116 123
www.samaritans.org

Childline
Phone line for support for people 19 years and under

Text 0800 1111
www.childline.org.uk

Papyrus
Phone line for confidential advice for anyone experiencing thoughts of suicide or is concerned about someone else

Call 0800 068 4141
www.papyrus-uk.org

CALM
Phone and online web chat for men experiencing emptional stress

Call 0800 58 58 58
www.thecalmzone.net

Beat
Phone line supporting anyone affected by eating disorders

Call 0345 634 1414
www.b-eat.co.uk.org

NHS 111
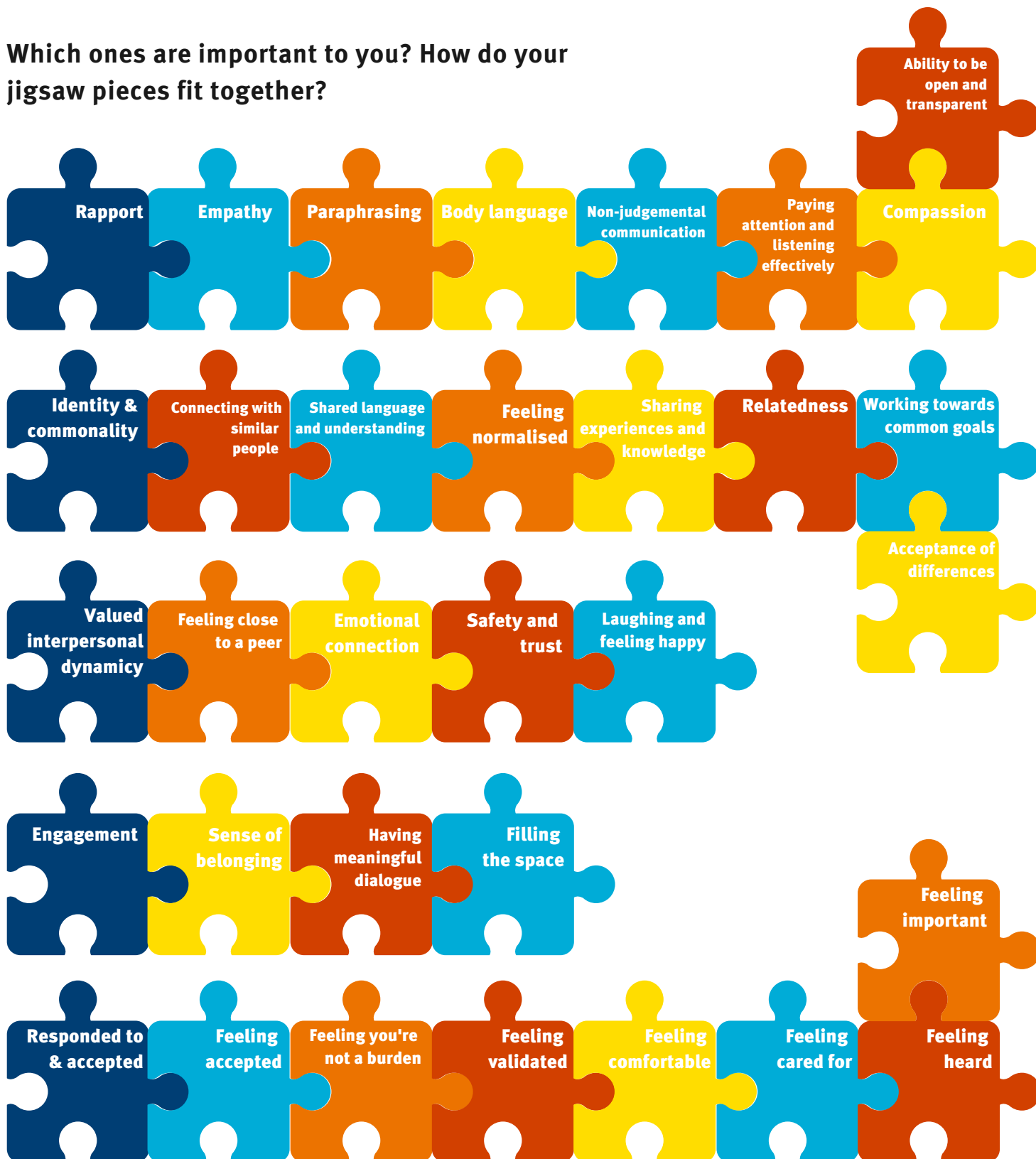Phone line to discuss any new symptoms you are experiencing
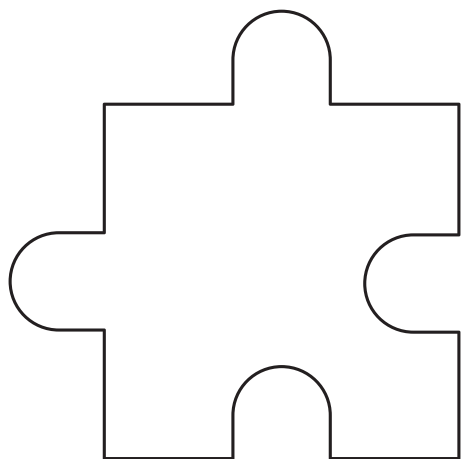
Call 111
www.111.nhs.uk

We can see the RIVER factors as jigsaw pieces that fit together. Some people may need all of them and some people may need just a few to feel the presence of quality social connection online. For example, Nathan from our YPAG group feels that laughing and feeling happy are the most important to him.

Which ones are important to you? How do your jigsaw pieces fit together?

- Ability to be open and transparent
- Rapport
- Empathy
- Paraphrasing
- Body language
- Non-judgemental communication
- Paying attention and listening effectively
- Compassion
- Identity & commonality
- Connecting with similar people
- Shared language and understanding
- Feeling normalised
- Sharing experiences and knowledge
- Relatedness
- Working towards common goals
- Acceptance of differences
- Valued interpersonal dynamicy
- Feeling close to a peer
- Emotional connection
- Safety and trust
- Laughing and feeling happy
- Engagement
- Sense of belonging
- Having meaningful dialogue
- Filling the space
- Feeling important
- Responded to & accepted
- Feeling accepted
- Feeling you're not a burden
- Feeling validated
- Feeling comfortable
- Feeling cared for
- Feeling heard

Use this space to make your own framework! You can use this to start a conversation about what matters to you to ensure you have a quality connection online (e.g. with a friend, mental health professional).

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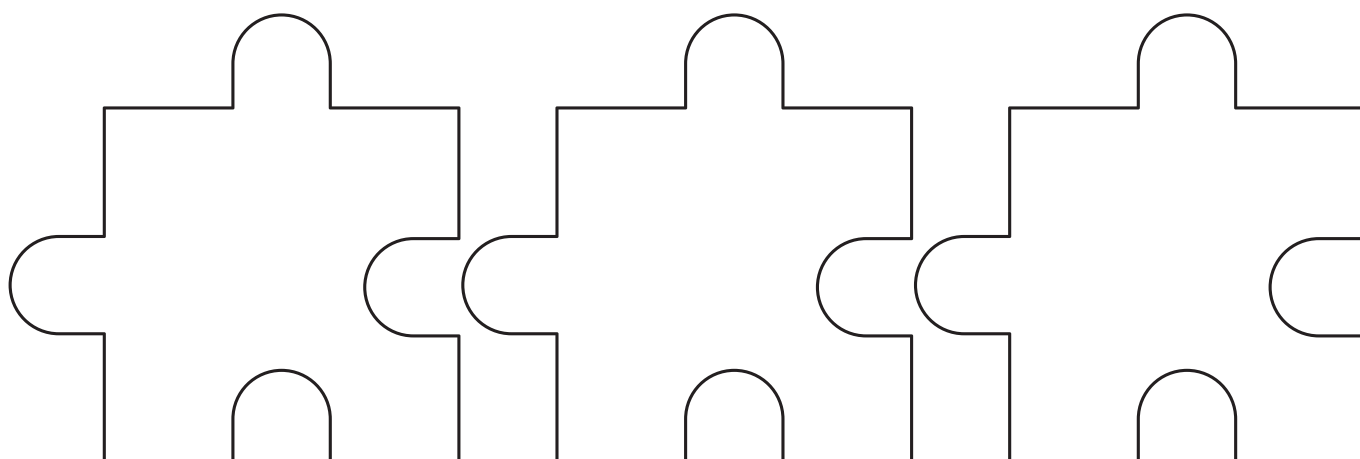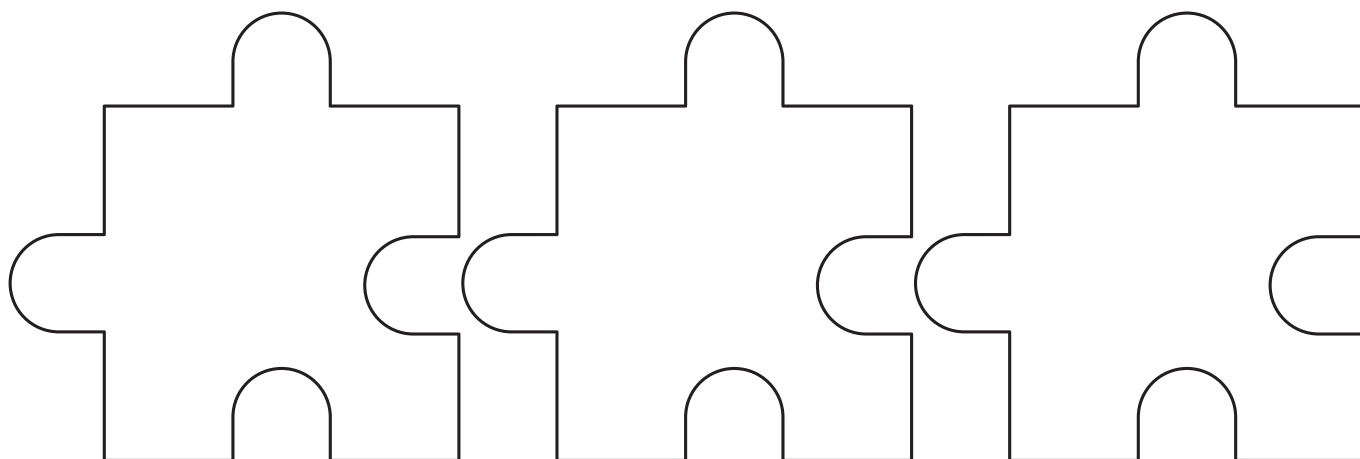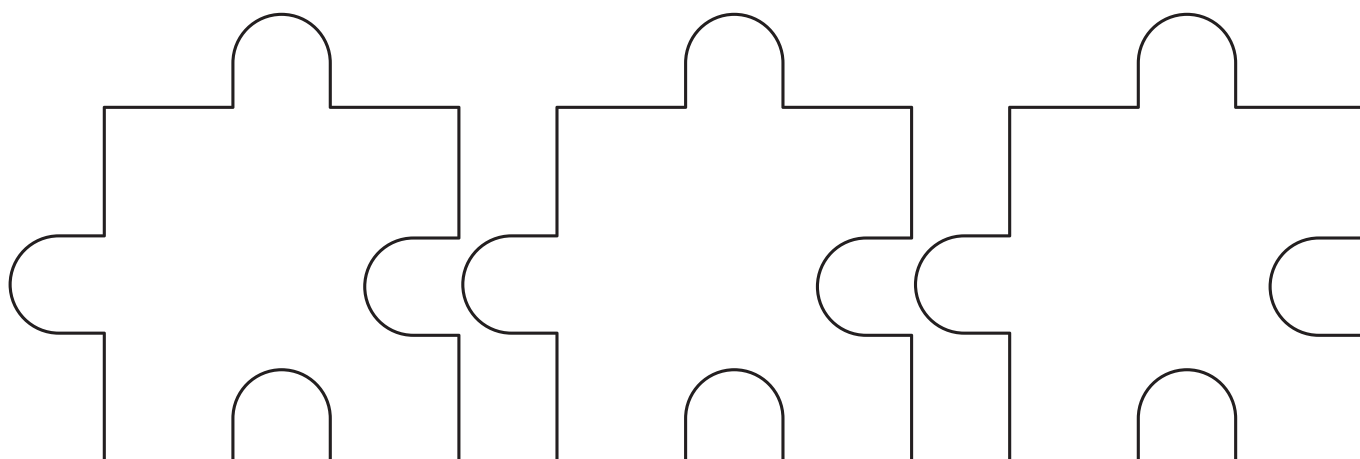
INSTITUTE OF GLOBAL HEALTH INNOVATION

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