



Me, Myself and I:

*Identity and meaning in the lives of
vulnerable young people*

**Institute of Child Protection Studies,
Australian Catholic University**

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Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to the young people who made time to talk with us about their lives and particularly those who participated in our Young Person's Reference Group which helped to guide the research process. The openness and honesty with which each young person reflected on their lives and discussed what were often deeply personal issues, was both humbling and inspiring. It was a privilege to be trusted with their stories and to be given the responsibility of translating them to a wider audience.

We would also like to acknowledge the participants of our Project Advisory Group who supported our project in a number of ways, most importantly with recruiting and referring young people and workers to participate in the study. Particular thanks go to our colleagues at Anglicare, Barnardos, CatholicCare, The Salvation Army and Canberra Youth Refuge.

This project was supported by funding from the Institute for Catholic Identity and Mission, Australian Catholic University. Without their support the project would not have been possible.

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ISBN: 1-921239-23-9

Preferred Citation

Noble-Carr, D., Barker, J., & McArthur, M. (2013). *Me, Myself and I: Identity and meaning in the lives of vulnerable young people*. Canberra: Institute of Child Protection Studies.

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Glossary

ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ACU	Australian Catholic University
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
ICPS	Institute of Child Protection Studies
PYD	Positive Youth Development
YPRG	Young Person's Reference Group

Executive Summary

Questions relating to identity and meaning are fundamental questions of life. As such, they have been the subject of study by scholars across a diverse range of disciplines, including psychology, theology, sociology and philosophy, throughout history. Despite this diversity, scholars agree that identity and meaning are inter-related issues which are central to the lives of human beings (Frankl, 1962; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010; Krause, 2005; McGregor & Little, 1998; McLean & Thorne, 2003).

It is widely accepted within the literature that adolescence is a critical period for the development of identity and meaning (Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009), and that these concepts may become even more pertinent to young people when they are confronted with persistent challenges or periods of uncertainty (M. Crawford & Rossiter, 2006). However, our knowledge of how vulnerable young people¹ perceive and experience 'identity and meaning' in their lives remains less clear.

This research study, funded by the Institute for Catholic Identity and Mission, Australian Catholic University (ACU), and conducted by the Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS) aimed to further our understanding of this area by exploring the following questions:

- What is the role and potency of identity and meaning in the lives of vulnerable young people?
- What are the implications of this for the way that we support vulnerable young people?

The study adopted a participatory and qualitative approach and was conducted throughout 2012. Twenty four young people participated in in-depth one-on-one interviews about their lives.

The role and potency of identity and meaning

The study found that identity and meaning issues are powerful, central and inter-related concepts in the lives of vulnerable young people. Young people in this study developed their identity and meaning from the experiences and relationships that had occurred over the course of their lives. The common experiences discussed by young people included trauma and loss, which was compounded by persistent instability and a distinct lack of caring connections. Young people stated that it was these experiences which helped them to formulate ideas of who they were, who they wanted to be, how they felt about the world around them and what they perceived to be their place in it.

¹ In this study 'vulnerable young people' were defined as; 'Young people who, through a combination of their stage of life, individual, family and community circumstances and barriers to participation, are at risk of not realising their potential to achieve positive life outcomes.'

However, without the secure base of family the young people in this study often struggled to cope with and make sense of their (often traumatic) life experiences. Disconnected from the world around them, they constructed their identity and meaning around what had been lacking in their own lives, or what they 'longed for'. As such, their identity had been constructed on values of respect and the importance of family, and personality traits of being determined and caring. This often allowed their traumatic past experiences to be transformed into an identity of 'survivor pride'. In much the same way, meaning was also located by a deep desire to help others who have faced similar issues and circumstances, and their own aspirations to achieve a happy family life.

Despite their formative experiences which were out of their control, young people held onto a steadfast determination to control their fate and autonomously decide who they were going to be. However their often forced independence frequently resulted in young people expecting too much of themselves. When persistent challenges confronted them and they found it difficult to live up to their self-constructed 'ideal selves', the young people retreated into further isolation and inescapable feelings of shame.

Factors contributing to positive identity and meaning

Confirming the findings from existing resilience and positive youth development literature, the study found that young people were able to attain a more positive sense of self and meaning when they were supported to build connections with the world around them. Central to this was the ability to develop genuine caring connections with others. Through care for others and/or through others caring for them, young people began to be able to care about themselves.

Consistent with previous research, the following factors were found to be pivotal in young people's development of a positive sense of self, purpose and meaning in life:

- Positive caring connections with others;
- Opportunities to participate in meaningful activities and/or contribute to their communities (through sport, study, work, youth groups, church groups, music groups, volunteering or caring activities);
- Being acknowledged for being good at something;
- Finding a sense of belonging to a place or group (via family, cultural group, or church); and,
- Developing hope for the future.

Implications for support

Support that provides or facilitates connections to attain the aforementioned factors, and which could build or locate a secure base in young people's lives is required. The findings of this study indicated that without a secure base and connection to the world, young people struggled in isolation to develop, challenge and question their identity and meaning constructions.

Through sharing positive and negative support experiences, the young people emphasised the important potential that services had in helping to shape their lives. Due to their isolation and steadfast independence, they often needed encouragement to seek assistance to cope with and make sense of their relationships and formative trauma and loss experiences.

Young people stated that what they wanted most from support services was someone who listened and provided them with genuine caring relationships founded on respect. Although they did not say that they wanted support workers to explicitly discuss identity and meaning issues with them, they did want workers to listen and connect with them as people, and help them with the things they perceived as being at the core of their being, including their happiness, future goals and aspirations.

The majority of the young people in the study expressed a desire to be caring and contributing members of society. However they often lacked the strategies and consistent and persistent support required to develop the pathways which enabled them to realise these 'ideal selves'. It was clear that for the most part, these pathways and much of the young people's lives were left to them to navigate, with the roles assumed by support services often being narrow and constrained. Nowhere was this more evident in the lack of linkages that support services developed between the other important and influential individuals or groups in young people's lives (such as their family, partners, peers, church or sports groups). In most cases, any substantial and deliberate enquiry in regards to these individuals or groups was absent from the support provided to young people. Formal or informal service linkages with these other important support locales in young people's lives were often non-existent.

It is imperative that the insights gained from young people in this study are carefully considered; in order to commit to a deeper exploration of how service responses can better encompass and address the issues of identity and meaning that are fundamental to how vulnerable young people feel about themselves, the world and their place in it.

Introduction

Purpose and scope of the research

Identity development and a search for meaning have long been recognised as one of the most important tasks undertaken throughout adolescence. Recent research confirms that the presence of a positive identity, purpose and meaning in young people's lives protects against risk factors (Drapeau, Saint-Jacques, Lepine, Begin, & Bernard, 2007; Sullivan, Farrell, Bettencourt, & Helms, 2008) and are among the core factors that promote thriving (Benson, Roehlkepartain, Sesma Jr, Edelbrock, & Scales, 2004; Lerner, Roeser, & Phelps, 2008).

However, few studies have addressed how vulnerable young people understand and engage in the development of identity and meaning, and there has been even less discussion relating to how these issues are incorporated into the design and delivery of youth support services.

This exploratory study aims to deepen our understanding of these issues, by talking directly to vulnerable young people and youth support workers to answer the following research questions:

- What is the role and potency of identity and meaning in the lives of vulnerable young people?
- What are the implications of this for the way that we support vulnerable young people?

The project was conducted from March to December 2012 and involved vulnerable young people between the ages of 15-25 years who were residing within Canberra, Australian Capital Territory (ACT).

'Vulnerable' young people were defined as 'young people who, through a combination of their stage of life, individual, family and community circumstances and barriers to participation, are at risk of not realising their potential to achieve positive life outcomes' (Department of Human Services, Department of Planning and Community Development, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, & Victoria Police, 2010). This definition recognises that experiencing some level of vulnerability during youth is not uncommon. However, for the purposes of this study, we sought to talk to young people whose life circumstances had resulted in them experiencing considerably higher levels of risk.

Background

The study of identity and meaning is essentially a study of 'who and how we are' and 'why we are here'. These are fundamental questions of life. As such, they have been the subject of study by scholars across a diverse range of disciplines, including psychology, theology, sociology and philosophy, throughout history.

Due to the breadth of literature addressing the role of identity and meaning, clear and consistent definitions or understandings of how these concepts function and impact on people's lives has remained elusive. However, a clear consensus has emerged which confirms that identity and meaning are inter-related issues which are critical and central to the lives of human beings (Frankl, 1962; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010; Krause, 2005; McGregor & Little, 1998; McLean & Thorne, 2003).

Identity and meaning have been shown to be dynamic concepts that are pertinent throughout the life-course of human beings. Whilst the literature acknowledges that adolescence is a crucial time for fostering and developing these concepts (Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009), the way in which young people engage in the exploration and development of these concepts may well be changing.

It has become apparent that the period of adolescence is now increasingly becoming a more difficult and complex time for young people, with traditional transitions to adulthood being challenged and extended (Roehlkepartain, Benson, Scales, Kimball, & King, 2008; Stetterson & Ray, 2010; Wyn, Lantz, & Harris, 2011) The roles and expectations of adolescents have perhaps never been more unclear with personal, cultural and structural factors becoming increasingly insecure. This has important implications for how young people develop identity and meaning. The conditions of modernity entail that individuals need no longer align themselves with any particular institution, tradition, or meaning-making system. Rather, this task has to be accomplished amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities (Giddens, 1991; Mason, Singleton, & Webber, 2007).

Situated within these broader changes that have occurred with modernity, it can be assumed that vulnerable young people face increased levels of uncertainty due to the complexities and challenges within their personal lives. In fact, many vulnerable young people may be confronted by what young people themselves have described as one of the most dramatic expressions of insecurity: "the feeling of having no place in the world or not belonging anywhere" (Vornanen, Torronen, & Niemela, 2009).

Viewed in this light we begin to acknowledge that concepts relating to identity and meaning may be critical in the design and delivery of supports to vulnerable young people. However, our understanding of the potential role of concepts such as identity and meaning in youth support remains in its infancy. Studies which have examined these issues have often done so by targeting one particular population group, or by concentrating on one or more isolated issues within people's lives. For example, many studies have highlighted the important role of meaning-making in assisting young people to cope with the various challenges in their life including; loss (Brewer & Sparkes, 2011), illness (Gartland, Bond, Olsson, Buzwell, & Sawyer, 2011), trauma (M. Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Krause, 2005; Meyerson, Grant, Smith Carter, & Kilmer, 2011; Williams & Lindsey, 2006), addiction, and mental health illnesses such as depression (Diaz,

Horton, McIlveen, Weiner, & Williams, 2011). Other studies have demonstrated the importance of providing young people from marginalised minority groups with opportunities to explore and develop positive cultural and sexual identities to assist with their health and wellbeing (DiFulvio, 2011; Gale, Bolzan, & Momartin, 2010; Wexler, DiFulvio, & Burke, 2009). Others have centred on the role and potency of religion or spirituality in the lives of vulnerable young people (E. Crawford, Wright, O'Dougherty, & Masten, 2006; Diaz et al., 2011; Menon Mariano & Damon, 2008; Williams & Lindsey, 2006, 2010; Wilson, 2004; Yonker, Schnabelrauch, & DeHaan, 2012).

Resiliency and positive youth development researchers are amongst those who are endeavouring to understand how these issues may impact and even coalesce in vulnerable young people's lives. Over the last few decades, research in these fields has confirmed that the presence of positive identity, purpose and meaning in young people's lives protect against risk factors (Drapeau et al., 2007; Sullivan et al., 2008), and are amongst the core factors that promote thriving (Benson, Roehlkepartain, et al., 2004; Lerner et al., 2008)

In doing so, many researchers in these fields, have moved away from predominantly secular social-science traditions, to identify values, moral perspectives and religious and spiritual worldviews as being constructive developmental resources (Benson et al., 2006). This has also coincided with the emergence of a new field of study known as 'spiritual youth development' (Roehlkepartain, Benson, Ebstyn King, & Wagener, 2006; Roehlkepartain et al., 2008).

Research from all of these fields are increasing the levels of knowledge, debate and momentum across a number of disciplines in regard to how identity, meaning, and in particular, spirituality can be utilised to provide deeper, more holistic and sustainable levels of support to young people (Carrington, 2010; Daughtry, 2011; Ebstyn King & Benson, 2006; Kimball, 2008; National Collaboration for Youth and Search Institute, 2007; Williams & Lindsey, 2010). However, this field is very much in its infancy and very little is currently known about how support services, particularly in the Australian context, incorporate or are willing to facilitate, an exploration of identity and meaning issues with vulnerable young people.

Despite these advances, definitive answers on exactly why and how issues of identity and meaning have the potential to act as such potent forces in young people's lives remains largely elusive. As such, the extant literature on identity and meaning tends to provide more questions than answers. This is why it is imperative that those who are the subject of study (in this case vulnerable young people) are included in research that aims to provide a deeper and more holistic understanding of these fundamental issues.

Methodology

This qualitative research project, conducted with the approval of Australian Catholic University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), was informed by a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is primarily concerned with the study of experience and aims to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation (Lester, 1999). This approach was particularly useful for this study, in that it allowed researchers to explore the subjective and complex concepts of identity and meaning directly with vulnerable young people; a group that are often without a voice or ability to challenge structural or normative assumptions in regards to their lived experience.

The core qualitative method employed in this study included semi-structured interviews that were conducted with 24 vulnerable young people. The interview schedule was informed by a comprehensive literature review and developed in consultation with our Young Person's Reference Group (see Appendix 1 for the interview schedule). The interview format encouraged young people to engage in a narrative life-story account, which included reflecting on past events (McLean & Breen, 2009).

Highlighting our commitment to a participatory approach, the formation of a Young Person's Reference Group (YPRG) was critical to the study. The YPRG advised on the language to use in regard to 'identity' and 'meaning' with vulnerable young people, the proposed interview schedule and accompanying interview tools (See Appendix 2, 3 & 4 for interview tools developed in consultation with the YPRG). The YPRG was then involved in piloting the interview schedules and providing feedback on how they could be further adapted to ensure that all young people felt adequately supported and safe and able to tell their own story in a manner that was appropriate to them (See Appendix 5 for feedback questions asked after the pilot interviews).

The interviews were followed by a focus group held with workers from the ACT youth service sector. The aim of this focus group was to gain an insight into how they perceived their role as youth workers, especially in assisting young people with the challenges related to the concepts of identity and meaning, and to provide researchers with a more detailed understanding of the context they operated within. Eight workers participated in this group (see Appendix 6 for the full outline of questions used in the focus group). Data analysis was assisted by the use of NVIVO and was conducted as an iterative process, involving each member of the research team. With permission from participants, each of the interviews was fully transcribed and the interviewing researcher conducted a thematic analysis.

Themes were developed deductively, through knowledge gained from the literature review and using the interview schedule as a reference point, and inductively as themes emerged from the interviews with

young people within the study (Boyatzis, 1998). Another member of the research team checked the validity of these themes by also individually coding a random selection of interview transcripts.

Consistent with the participatory and reflexive approach embedded within the study, the YPRG also provided an important role in the data analysis process. Upon completion of the initial NVIVO data analysis, a meeting was held with nine members of the YPRG who had participated in interviews. The group confirmed the interpretation of the findings and ensured that the language used, and the conclusions, were consistent with their views and experiences. This added another level of robustness to the findings and ensured that the views of young people remained central right up to the conclusion of the research process.

The YPRG also discussed how they would like the findings to be reported. This report, which uses quotes from young people to illustrate the main findings from the analysis, is consistent with the YPRG's recommendations.

Participants

Twenty four interviews were conducted with vulnerable young people. These young people were accessed through, or referred by, a variety of youth support services within Canberra, including: youth crisis accommodation services; a supported youth accommodation service; a youth mental health service; a supported youth education program; a young carers program; and various out-of-home care services. One young person who was involved in the YPRG also referred young people to participate in the study. Seventeen females and seven males participated in interviews for the project. Of the sample, twelve were aged 15-18 years and twelve were aged 19-25 years. Three young people who participated in interviews were Aboriginal, and a further six young people were from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Although coming from diverse backgrounds, the young people in the study shared some similar experiences and challenges. Many had lived chaotic and unstable lives from an early age. Family conflict was present in the majority of their lives, with over half of the young people experiencing serious physical, sexual or emotional abuse within their family unit. Just under half of the young people had contact with Care and Protection Services over the course of their lives.

Almost all of the young people had left school early and had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives. Half of them talked about the challenges they faced in coping with their own alcohol or other drug abuse and a similar number identified as having a mental health issue.

Findings

The central and interrelated role of identity and meaning

It quickly became apparent in the study that although many of the young people had not discussed issues of identity or meaning at any length before, these concepts were central and interrelated in their lives.

I just want my life to be meaningful I guess. (17 year old female)

I think it's easier for vulnerable young people to question their place in the world, you know why am I here, what's my purpose. (24 year old female)

Everyone will question who they are and what their identity is, even if they are not going through a tough or like a vulnerable period or however you want to say it... Everyone questions it. (25 year old male)

I don't really see much point in the rest of my life. I'm not really sure why I was put here. I have actually been contemplating suicide... I'm in a pretty dark place and don't really see my place in the world, or where I fit in or why I'm supposed to be here. (24 year old female)

Although limited in their past opportunities or willingness to discuss these issues with others, the young people were clearly engaged in the process of identity and meaning making, in diverse ways and to varying degrees.

At the time of their interview, some young people were clearly more actively engaged with the process of searching for identity and meaning in their lives than others. The young people themselves indicated that this was to be expected, as these concepts and the role that they play in their lives are not static, but are dynamic and constantly evolving.

I think some of the questions, if I had been asked years ago I think that I could not have answered them...this point in my life was probably a good time do it...even though things in my life were a bit messy at the time. (24 year old female)

Some attributed their sometimes limited engagement with identity and meaning making with their age:

I don't do much and I don't really know who I am yet, not completely. I'm only 22, I figure I'll find it out later when I find my place in the world. (22 year old female)

In this study, age was shown to have little bearing on how actively participants were engaged with identity and meaning making or how much they were willing or able to discuss these issues. For example, one of the participants who had claimed to have found her meaning and purpose in life was 16 years of age. There were also no clear differences noted in the way that males or females conceptualised or talked about these issues.

The potency of 'experience' in shaping identity and meaning making

The significant relationships and experiences that had occurred over the course of young people's lives emerged as having a strong influence on how they constructed their identity and meaning.

Your past is who you are. (21 year old female)

I think that the past does affect our present and our future. It affects our present state of mind and for me it also helped determine what I think of my future... Those past things ... still come back to me, haunt me and hurt me and all of that. (22 year old female)

My experiences with my family and what happened to me as a child ... that has helped to shape me as to who I am, whether it be negative or positive. (24 year old female)

The influence of past experiences and relationships was apparent in how young people discussed their ideas of 'how they see themselves, the world and their place in it'. They constantly interwove notions of their sense of self and the world, throughout their accounts of the significant experiences or events that had occurred during their lives. It became increasingly evident that the young people's experiences and how they made sense of them, impacted on how they were able to cope with challenges and difficulties in their life, how they lived out their day to day lives (including how they interacted with others around them), and how they thought about their future.

The impact of these experiences and relationships on identity and meaning constructions was most evident when the young people spoke about how they had struggled with the more challenging

experiences they had endured. It was here that the pervasive and interrelated nature of identity and meaning became apparent.

Many young people described how they had forged lasting, strong and positive identities and meaning for themselves based on their experiences:

I do feel like I am meant to be here and that I had to go through all this shit that I've gone through so that I can help other people that need to be helped... These things have to happen to me in order for me to be able to be who I need to be. (18 year old female)

That is sad... Looking back it's hard to see that my childhood was taken from me, and it's not that I regret that. It's not that I feel bad about it because that has made me the person I am today. (17 year old female)

A lot of people tell me that I must be really strong, and I don't really believe that or take it on. But then I think maybe I must be because I've gone through all that and I'm still here, still trying. (24 year old female)

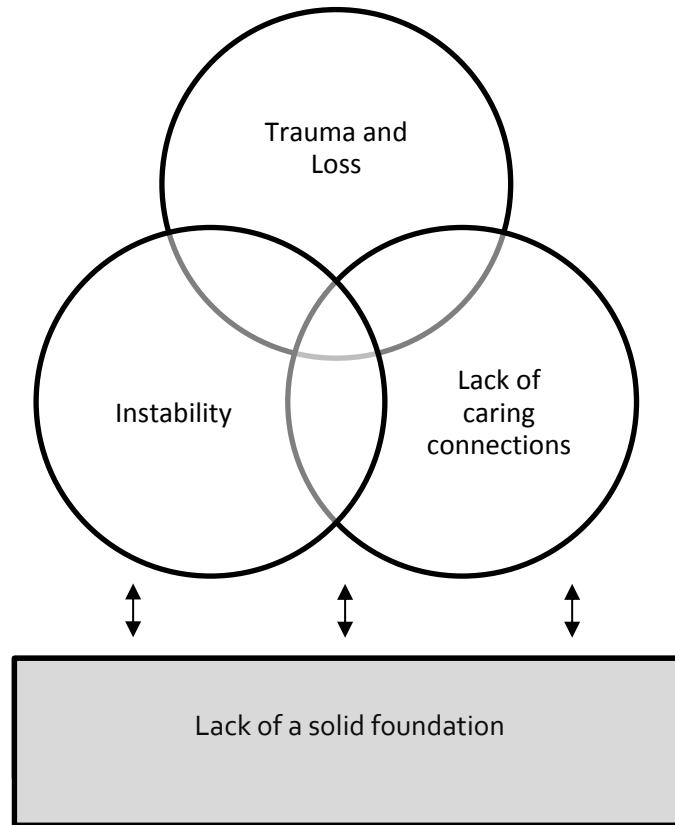
These quotes demonstrate how some of the young people were able to seize on opportunities to locate meaning through their pain and suffering and had constructed an identity around 'survivor pride'. However, other young people continued to struggle with sustained periods of meaninglessness and low feelings of self-worth and self-esteem, following their painful or challenging experiences.

The common themes that dominated the narratives and the lives of the young people and which seemed to characterise their meaning and identity constructions were experiences of:

- Trauma and loss;
- Instability; and,
- Lack of caring connections.

Underpinning and implicit to these experiences was the overall lack of any solid foundation which had been available to the young people throughout their lives (see Figure 1). This underlying and pervasive lack of any external institution which provided support or enduring relationships, that they could trust in and seek guidance and solace from, compounded their day-to-day struggles with these experiences.

Figure 1: Relationship of experiences to a lack of solid foundation



Existing together, these issues appeared to intensify the need for young people to construct meaning and a positive and secure identity. They desperately needed to find a way to cope with and make sense of their ongoing struggles, and they wanted to develop an understanding of who they were and what their place in the world might be. At the same time, the same set of issues made constructing any sense of positive or secure identity and meaning extremely difficult.

One young person in the study did not share, to some degree, the characteristic experiences outlined above. Despite having to work through some challenges, such as caring for her younger brother and experiencing school difficulties, this young person felt secure and happy with who she was and where she was going in life. Although she had not particularly attained or realised a 'purpose in life', she had a positive and purposeful life path envisaged for herself. This young woman recognised that having a solid foundation in life had helped her to be secure and confident in herself and her future:

Well I guess my family's really just my Mum, my Dad, my brother. We don't have much to do with my extended family, but they've always been supportive and they've always been together. So I guess that's been quite stable throughout and that's helped me grow up fairly easily. In that respect I haven't had any sort of unstable home life. (16 year old female)

Trauma and loss

Experiences of trauma and loss were pivotal for many of young people in the study. These experiences had an enormous impact on shaping how they felt about themselves, the world around them and their place in it.

Experiences of loss were common and appeared to be the most potent in their identity and meaning constructions. Half of the young people spoke about experiencing the death of someone close to them. They talked about long lasting grief issues that had permeated their lives and resulted in changes in the way they viewed themselves and the world around them. For some, losing the only person that they felt they had a real caring or loving connection with was devastating:

When I was about seven years old my grandmother died and when she died something happened to me and I didn't know what... I saw her as the only person in my family who actually cared... I've come to realise that that's why I've been depressed all these years. I'm still not over her death, I will never get over her death. (19 year old male)

The way I see it was that, well, I'm losing my dad, my step-dad, and he's raised me since I was two years old. I just went, well, there's nothing can fix this. I'm losing one of the people that I love most and there's just no point... It's just, it got too much and I was like, 'no, I just I don't want to do it anymore, It hurts too much.' I just didn't see a way out, or a way to fix it. (17 year old female)

This last quote demonstrates that loss may be felt just as deeply by young people in circumstances that are not related to death. This young woman was discussing the separation of her parents and the effect this had on her view of herself and the world around her and her place in it.

For others participants, losing someone shook their whole world view and made the world seem like a cruel and unpredictable place. It shook any notions of security and stability they may have had and gave them a negative view of the world:

It made me feel alone. To this day if something happens... I feel like everything has deserted me. (18 year old female)

A search for meaning was explicit in many young people's responses to their grief and loss, although few were able to find a meaning that gave them any comfort or hope for their future.

Now, since my father's passed away, I feel so alone, and I just, I don't see any purpose for the rest of my life. (24 year old female)

This was often complicated by notions or feelings of cumulative loss and of not having experienced an 'ideal' or 'preferred' or 'normal' family life. Therefore, they were not only *missing someone*, they also felt like they were *missing out* on something:

Just like honestly, I always to this day I still think the wrong parent died... I was like everything was perfect and then now he's gone and so now everything's shit, and that's kind of what gave me a really bad perspective on the world because I was a little kid [six years of age], why did he have to go? (16 year old female)

Knowing my father passed away after I just met him has killed me. (17 year old female)

Loss and grief were often compounded by other experiences of emotional, physical or sexual abuse, which had most often occurred within their families. Over half (14) of the young people in the study disclosed experiences of serious physical, sexual or emotional abuse that had occurred within their family unit. Eleven of these young people had been involved in the child protection system. A quarter of the participants spoke of experiences of being sexually abused (two had experienced this outside of their family unit).

The result of these various forms of abuse most often appeared to be long-lasting emotional pain, disillusionment and a negative view of the world, which sometimes resulted in shutting oneself off from the world. It was not uncommon for these young people to talk about experiencing feeling alone, or even suffering from agoraphobia (to varying degrees throughout their lives).

I don't trust people... Some days I won't leave the house... I have a feeling something bad is going to happen and I won't leave the house. (17 year old female)

Young people also disclosed how they had engaged in sustained periods of self-harming, dangerous levels of alcohol or other drug use or suicide attempts.

I felt so worthless after it happened, and it took me a while to realise that I basically lost my life from this assault; I lost my job... Lost my partner, and then just had no self-esteem and all that kind of thing. And then... I started realising all the things in the world that were going wrong. (24 year old female)

I contemplated suicide and self-harmed for a while... I felt like I was a slab of meat that could have and I had no power, no self-control, no one was listening to me. I felt very invisible and alone. (18 year old female)

Coping with current or past abuse was often an isolating experience for the young people, and one which made them retreat within, leaving them alone to overcome very negative perceptions of themselves and the world around them.

Instability

Instability was also a common experience that appeared to have negative ramifications on how young people felt about themselves. This instability began with issues such as conflict and abuse in their families and often led to precarious out of home care experiences, early school leaving, homelessness and high levels of mobility. It especially affected how they were able to connect with the world around them and locate a place within it for themselves.

Family

The majority of the young people spoke about the importance of family and identified feeling a close connection to at least one family member. This was despite most of them experiencing high levels of family conflict, and over half being victims of serious physical, sexual or emotional abuse from within their families. Eleven of the young people had also been involved with the child protection system.

Once within the child protection system, the lives of these young people continued to be unstable. One of the participants stated that she had been in seventeen different care placements, running away from many. Others, who had gone into care as teenagers, had not been placed in out-of-home care placements, and they reported they were left to navigate their own way through long periods of homelessness. Six of the young people had also been involved with the Juvenile Justice system, with two spending time in youth detention centres.

I was in foster care for a little bit, for most of my life as well and I think I only had two great foster parents. I went to 17 different foster homes and I only had two really good ones. So that was really hard... About 13, 14 I started bolting from situations instead of staying there trying to handle it. I just decided to bolt. It was quite hard at times and stuff like that... I ended up on the streets. (23 year old female)

I didn't have anyone looking out for my interests or my health or anything like that, or where I was going to be next. So it was basically up to the refuges when they kept me or kicked me out, and then where I went to next. (24 year old female)

Homelessness

For other participants, hostile or unstable family relationships led them to leave home earlier than would be expected. However, they rarely had anywhere stable to go, which led to homelessness, often for prolonged periods of time.

Mobility

The high level of mobility experienced by the young people heightened the instability in their lives. Moving in and out of Canberra was a common experience, with each move having the potential impact of losing significant caring connections or feelings of belonging that they may have attained in their previous place of residence.

This widespread and entrenched instability had strong effects on how young people perceived themselves and the world around them. Many struggled to have a positive world-view and to understand how they could find a place for themselves within this world that they were not connected to:

You just feel like a lost soul, you feel like you don't belong, you feel like you don't even know who you are, what your real name actually is. (23 year old female)

There was a stage when I just felt like there was an edge and every time I focused on the bad, I just stepped closer to it and there seemed to be nobody around. (17 year old female)

Happiness and stability

The overriding theme that appeared to emerge from the interviews was that many of the young people equated stability with the attainment of happiness. Unfortunately, for many, this stability and consequent happiness had remained elusive:

I just want a home, I don't care about personal belongings or cars or anything like that, I just want to be stable. (23 year old male)

I could get kicked out. My stay here could be jeopardised and that doesn't make me feel very secure or happy like stable. (18 year old female)

Instability and the future

In the absence of stability and any form of life-security the young people found it very difficult to be free of worry and to be happy. Their focus was often on day-to-day survival and trying to cope with the many challenges in their life, instead of thinking about or making plans for themselves into the future. At certain points in their life, some young people said they had not been able to envisage a future. This was often epitomised by thoughts of suicide:

I wanted to kill myself because I felt like I wasn't worthy, that my life was too hard for myself, I didn't want to go forward anymore, sick of getting hurt and stuff like that. (23 year old female)

I mean a lot of the time it was just suicidal thoughts, constantly suicidal thoughts, I was like the world is shit, everything is shit, everything is bad, nothing good ever happens to me. (16 year old female)

My self-esteem got that low that I did get really bad depression and there was times that I went, "Well, there's no point. I'm just going to end it. (17 year old female)

This pervasive instability and insecurity also meant that the young people had very few connections with the wider community and struggled to locate a place in the world for themselves in the 'here and now' or into the future. They did not know where they 'fitted' and therefore questioned whether they should even be here:

I'm in a pretty dark place and don't really see my place in the world, or where I fit in or why I'm supposed to be here. (24 year old female)

I had a lot of social issues, like finding where I fit in. (16 year old female)

Lack of caring connections

Of all of the young people's experiences, the one that appeared to be the most potent was their lack of positive, caring relationships with others. Given the backdrop of their experiences, including the high level of disconnection from family, feeling alone was one the central themes to come out of the study.

Forming caring connections within their communities was difficult for the participants. They perceived that they were different to others around them, and believed that other people also saw them as being different. They also believed they were viewed in a negative light by people within mainstream society.

For many, this was too much to bear and they retreated into a life of solitude and reclusiveness, or relied on their relationships with animals:

I guess I like being around things that don't judge you, which is why I like hanging out with little kids... You just be yourself and have fun and laugh, like the same thing with animals. I find adults boring and pretentious and whiney and annoying really. (23 year old male)

If I don't have my animals around me I am a lost soul... Just having something that needs me... It's just doing things for them which helps them, makes them happy as well as it makes me happy. (23 year old female)

My cat. She's – I don't know. It sounds funny but she's inspired me to still want to be here on this earth, to not kill myself... She's like my best friend... She's always been there for me, and she never talks shit. She never puts me down. She loves me unconditionally and same with her. (24 year old female)

Peer relationships

Young people who did not retreat into isolation talked about craving the need for attachment and connection to others. These young people most often sought 'a place' for themselves with other young people who were experiencing similar circumstances to their own, who were struggling with similar challenges or long lasting emotional pain.

I kept on trying to be someone I wasn't... I grew up without a Mum. I needed someone to attach to. I was like a little leech following everyone around so I never really learnt to be that independent confident person. I was always that shy little sheep. (18 year old female)

I just started hanging out with all the kids from there. I'm a pretty easily-led person, so when they said "come do this" I was boom, straight at it... and because you're young and you're dumb you just follow on... I was always a sheep. (21 year old female)

It was through connections with these peers that young people were able to embrace their difference, and assert for themselves an identity that was linked with the peer group or based on their experience or difference. For some, this identity became so potent that they felt they could only legitimately relate to, or interact with, others who were also in this group, or with others who had experienced the same pain and

suffering that they had and who viewed the world in a similar way. The following two quotes summarise the disconnection that some of the young people felt towards others within 'mainstream' society:

Well obviously I identify with people and are drawn to people who have been through the same experiences like me... Yeah I just find a lot of people to be just yeah like you talk to them and they all – just things that they worry about are just irrational to me basically. Like "oh my bus was late today" ... And I'm like "fucking grow up and yeah if that's the worst thing that's happened to you this fucking week then you can all" – so yeah I tend to come across as very hostile and standoffish but when in fact, I'm actually a pretty nice social guy. (23 year old male)

I wasn't very socially accepted and didn't really fit in, I thought that it's okay for me not to fit in so I'm going to be myself and I don't want to be like someone else in a crowd, I don't want to be normal, I want to look the way I feel, so mentally. I just wouldn't be able to survive without them [body piercings]. Honestly if I took all of my piercings out and just went straight edge I would not survive at all... If I see a group of mainstream kids I'm like none of them have souls they're not even there. (16 year old female)

Another young man declared that what set him apart from the 'mainstream community' was being a 'foster kid' and he had firmly entrenched his identity in his experience of being involved in the out-of-home care system:

I've been teased my whole life for being that foster kid who was just left to fend for himself, pretty much. I've always been looked at differently by everybody, or so I think... [But] I can't not tell people that I'm a foster kid. They have to know if they're going to know who I am, because I don't want to lie to people... It's who I am. It's who I've always been. It's who I always will be. (19 year old male)

This young man now found meaning in trying to change the system for the better and assisting other young people who are or had been in the out-of-home care system, or who may be struggling with drug and alcohol issues.

Constructing an identity and meaning, based around 'difference' and traumatic experiences, sometimes meant that young people placed themselves in peer groups that were entrenched with problematic or risk-taking behaviours. For example, many of the young people spoke about forming strong connections with peers who were heavily involved in crime, self-harming or alcohol or other drug use.

They often realised that these relationships were harmful to them. However, for some, this realisation came later than they would have liked. These relationships were complex because they fulfilled the young people's need to have connections with others and to care for and about others, but at the same time they encouraged and enabled risk taking and self-harming behaviours.

I've had to get off things slowly one by one myself without any help, and it's really hard when all my friends still use... You can't choose your family but you can choose your friends. So I put my friends before me because they're practically my family... Yeah. I want to keep my current friends, because I need to help them too. They're doing worse than I am. I need to help them too... I've got this group of five or six friends who, if I'm not friends with in 10 years and they're not clean with me, I'm not going to feel good about myself because I failed in helping them... I don't care if they're my friends, as long as I'm theirs and I'm helping them. (19 year old male)

I was 15 when I first dropped out of school and I've only just recently, maybe 18 months ago, pulled my life back together and come to school here and decided, no, I'm doing the wrong thing. I need to pull my head in and wake up to myself. Got away from that crowd. (17 year old female)

As this last quote demonstrates, young people perceived that it was not possible to reduce or cease their own risk-taking or harmful behaviours without disconnecting from the group. However, if they did disconnect from their group of peers they were often left isolated.

This left the young people in a particularly difficult situation. Disconnecting from their peers assisted them to conquer addictions or reduce crime related activity, but could result in them feeling worse about themselves, the world around them and their place in it:

I saw that my friends from College were getting worse and worse. They were getting to the point where they were just taking any drug they could get their hands on and I didn't want to go down that route either... So I got out of contact with those friends, kind of fell apart and then I had no friends because I kind of turned my back on all my drug friends and where am I going to meet more people so I basically turned into a recluse. (23 year old male)

Because I guess I was changing my lifestyle. It was completely different and because I didn't have that close relationship with them either... I guess it left me feeling down and depressed, only for the simple fact, like, I wasn't socialising with the people I knew as well. Which, like, I look at it now and I guess it was a good thing, because, they were idiots. (21 year old female)

Intimate relationships

Similar to their peer relationships, young people often found themselves in very intense, sometimes 'unhealthy', intimate relationships. These intimate relationships were potent in young people's lives, often the first real loving and caring attachment they felt they had formed with another person. At times, these relationships were abusive and often encouraged or increased young people's risk-taking or harmful behaviours. However, others stated that "just to be loved" and "having a new perspective on life" were some of the more positive life-changing things that these relationships brought to them.

I got a new boyfriend and he hated drugs, like hated drugs so if I touched them he'd get really angry so I never, ever, like for the whole six months we were together didn't touch pot, didn't do anything... So the relationship with him sort of really changed my perspective on things. (16 year old female)

My partner so she obviously affects my life greatly... I guess my partner is the emotional support for me. (21 year old male)

I know that when I got my first boyfriend after my psych ward, after the hospital, he is my first, no he is my second, but he was my first serious relationship and I promised him that I won't cut myself and I kept up that promise for heaps long. So I guess everything must have started to feel okay. (18 year old female)

Regardless, of the positive or negative impacts whilst in the relationship, it was when these relationships ended that young people's sense of self could often dramatically decrease, sometimes to the point that they contemplated suicide:

Because thinking back, and it wasn't necessarily a traditional suicide attempt. It was – and it wasn't necessarily a cry for help, it was a way of saying... yes I wanted to die, to me at that point in time I was already dead inside, because of being rejected by my best mate. And that pain's not going to go away, whether or not you're going to – I don't know what would've made me want to live. (25 year old male)

I just feel like I have nothing... I was pretty down after my breakup, I felt really low and I just felt like I couldn't bear being in my house alone all the time and it was just really wearing on me. I stopped taking care of myself, I stopped eating really, and I forgot how to look after everything. (17 year old female)

Lack of solid foundation

The clear picture to emerge from the young people's accounts of their lives was one of overwhelming isolation. This was apparent not only in their day-to-day lives, but also through a deeper lack of meaningful and enduring relationships in their lives. The result was that young people felt alone and as though they had to cope with all of the challenges they were facing in life by themselves, without any help from others.

I've felt alone for a very, very long time. (23 year old female)

I had no-one. Like I've pretty much been on my own the whole time... It is, it is so hard. (21 year old female)

In all honesty I feel like I have nobody. (22 year old female)

Everything has been me and myself. (19 year old male)

Family, school, youth support services or the church, were the social institutions that young people relied on to provide some form of solid foundation in their life. However, numerous participants talked about having no, or only a very fragile foundation or base to trust in or fall back on for support or guidance. For many of the young people their relationships with these institutions remained inconsistent and fractured. Some were considering joining, or had already joined church communities, the military or youth services in an effort to build a secure base in their lives.

This lack of, and longing for, a solid foundation was so potent in the young people's identity and meaning constructions that it was *explicitly* named and discussed by more than half (13 of the 24) of the participants. Some of the young people talked about the struggle to build any purpose in life due to their lack of enduring trusted supports:

I am not focused anymore... I just don't have a base to put my foundations in anymore. (19 year old male)

Others said that they felt ill-equipped to construct identity and meaning because they had no-one to help make sense of their experiences or to assist them to acquire the skills they needed to complete this task for themselves:

I didn't have a father or a proper mother, like I never got raised properly... I mean I never grew up. I still haven't grown up. I've grown up in some ways but in a lot of ways I'm still very immature. (23 year old male)

No one ever told me what was right [or wrong]. (21 year old female)

Being kicked out at such a young age, I didn't really have anyone to teach me how to grow up properly so it's weird, I'm like highly intelligent in some ways and yet emotionally I'm, yeah, useless really. (23 year old male)

One young woman shared her story of how she had entered the out-of-home care system in her early teenage years and had since been homeless and highly mobile. Despite her own ambivalence in the existence of a God, she takes her 7 month old baby to church each Sunday so that she can pass onto him "the capability to believe in something". This was how she felt she could provide him with some form of solid foundation that she felt was a vital, yet missing, component in her own life. She stated:

I have had no faith and no hope in anything and it's just taken me a very long time to believe in myself. I believe if you grow up believing in something, anything, you have that capability to believe. Where I wasn't given a capability, I had to make it myself. Does that make sense? (18 year old female)

Others had started their life with some foundation of faith in their lives, but through despair at their experience, had rejected this foundation of faith. However, in rejecting faith, they were left without a solid foundation, in which they could trust and make sense of their experiences.

I remember laying in bed and just thinking, 'Why would God do this to me? Why would God want to do this to a little innocent girl...' And then I just stopped believing. (24 year old female)

I kind of wanted to know if there was a God, why the fuck does he treat people so badly sometimes... When I couldn't find my answer I turned to atheism. (22 year old female)

Identity formation and meaning construction

Young people's experiences and the lack of other people around them appeared to leave many receiving little assistance to make sense of, or cope with, their emotional pain or other challenges they faced in life.

This, along with their feelings of being detached to the world around them, appeared to have some distinct ramifications on the way that many constructed their identity and meaning.

Who influences 'me'?

Table 1 provides the data from the following question in each interview: 'Who or what has been the biggest influence in shaping how you feel about yourself, the world around you and your place in it?' Young people were presented with a selection of cards from which they could choose their three top 'influencers'. A blank card was one of the options allowing them to choose something that was not explicitly named (See Appendix 4 for the cards used).

Table 1: Who or what influences how young people feel about themselves, the world and their place within it?

Influencer	Number of participants who nominated it in their top three
Family	17
Friends	15
School	9
Services	7
Experiences	5
Internet or other information technology	4
Me	3
Sport	2
Church	2
Music	2
TV	2
Partner	1
Culture	1

In responding to this question, young people talked about the negative and positive influences that these people and things had on their lives. For example, it was unlikely that 'family' was seen as having a solely negative influence, although this was the case for a few of the young people.

For the most part, the young people were involved in dynamic and complex relationships within their social environments (of family, school, peer and service systems) that had both negative and positive influences. However, it is important to note, that very rarely was one single person, institution or social group within these environments able to provide a constant, stable and supportive base in the lives of the participants.

Although only 5 young people rated 'experiences' in the top three influencers (seemingly putting it at odds with what has been outlined in the section above), it should be noted that this category was not one of the cards presented to the young people to choose from. 'Me' was also not an option to choose from, but was identified by three of the participants. That participants chose to nominate these other things reinforces just how much the young people felt that they were on their own in the world.

I can do it all myself!

Despite acknowledging that their experiences and relationships influenced their identity and meaning constructions, it became apparent that the young people in the study felt that their identity and meaning making constructions could and should be all up to them. Perhaps this had come from feeling and being so isolated for much of their lives. Wherever it stemmed from, it left young people thinking that they could and should be the author of their own identity and that they should do this alone, without seeking or accepting any help from others.

There's no-one that going to end up supporting you more than yourself. (25 year old male)

Generally it isn't someone else who helps you, it's you who helps yourself, and that's how it's going to be for the rest of your life. (16 year old female)

It's always been me, myself and I, you know, and it's stupid you know because in a way, I am the one who refused all the help but at the same time I wanted it that way because I had to learn. (18 year old male)

Me personally, I think that if I'm not a strong enough person to deal with it without medication, then I just need to be a stronger person so I keep trying to make myself a stronger person. (19 year old male)

This steadfast determination to not rely on anyone around them often led to disastrous consequences, as young people tried to manage serious drug addictions and/or mental health issues without the support of others. Most of the young people had come to the realisation that this was unworkable:

I'm trying to do it on my own, but it is so fucking hard, you can't. So you do need people. (17 year old female)

I don't want to be dependent on other people, but occasionally you need to be dependent on other people, which sucks. (22 year old female)

If you want to change your life, you're the only one that can do it, but you need to take in support, you cannot do it all on your own. I've tried for ages now to do everything on my own and just making a mess. (23 year old female)

Others were still caught in a cycle of self-blame and shame for not being able to 'get over' or manage things on their own.

The data from Table 2 provides another example of how young people thought that their identity and meaning constructions should be of their own making. When asked what it was that defines who they are (See Appendix 3), young people overwhelmingly selected the dynamic factors in their lives, such as their values, morals, ideas and personality; rather than static things such as culture, age or gender, which for the most part are defined by things outside of their control. In short, young people selected the things that they felt they had control over, as defining them.

Table 2: What young people said 'defines them'

What defines who they are?	Number of participants
Values / morals	9
Personality / character	9
Caring or parental role	6
Ideas / beliefs	5
Occupation	3
Culture	3
Experiences (of abuse)	3
Nothing defines me	2

The fact that two young people said 'nothing defines me' (which was not provided as an option on the activity sheet used for this question but suggested independently by the participants) is a further testament to the determination of young people to control their own lives.

The desire to exert control over their own lives manifested itself in various ways. One particularly potent example came from a young woman, who after being sexually assaulted in a public park, stated that:

It made me want to take control of my sexuality, so I think a week and a half, two weeks later I lost my virginity on purpose, I didn't want anybody else to take it and I wanted to do this... So I have a tendency to want to take control of things, when bad things happen I want to just take control. (22 year old female)

This young woman also talked about struggling with an eating disorder. She also associated this with her tendency to react to challenges in her life by trying to take control.

The way that young people thought about these concepts provided another example of just how pervasive and interrelated the role of identity and meaning were in the lives of the young people in the study. The things that the young people nominated as helping to define who they are (which were in most cases their values/beliefs/morals, their personality and less often their relational roles they had as a mother or a carer), were also the things that gave them meaning in their life and helped them to make sense of the world around them.

Identity and meaning constructed from loss and longing

Values, morals, ideas and beliefs seemed to be central to most young people's notions of who they were. They spoke about the importance of values such as respect for others, the importance of family, and of important characteristics such as being caring and helpful, and having loyalty and determination.

These were the characteristics that young people felt were missing from their own life experiences. Consequently they seemed to be deliberately building their own identity and meaning around the things that they were lacking, or that they had longed for in their own lives. They wanted to be 'good people', to contribute and care for others and to be the things that were absent from, or opposite of, the experiences they had in their own lives.

I think it also came from the bad and seeing that's not what I want to do. (17 year old female)

I didn't want to be nothing like my mum and dad and stuff like that, I actually wanted to be a better person than them. (23 year old female)

I think one of the biggest things was... I've always really, really tried to be the opposite of my mum, I never wanted to be like her. (24 year old female)

Yeah, being able to go, "That is not where I want to be. What's the opposite of that like?" (17 year old female)

I try to do things right, or that I consider right, so not being a bad person. (21 year old male)

Living up to their 'ideal self'

The morals, values and ideas that the young people wanted to live their lives by, proved to be difficult for them to attain. They were also trying to be something that they had not actually seen or experienced in their own lives, but which existed as an ideal. Some young people had made connections with supportive

adults from their extended family networks, sporting or church groups or support services, that could role-model these virtues, but these experiences were rare and often short-lived.

The result of not being able to live up to these high expectations of themselves meant that the young people were often left feeling conflicted between who they thought they were or wanted to be, and the actual life they were living. This internal conflict perpetuated their underlying feelings of shame, and again caused them to remove themselves from the world around them. For example, the following quote comes from a young man struggling with drug addiction. He stated that his long-term foster family had disconnected with him due to his problematic drug use, and he had chosen to disconnect from his church and biological family because of the shame he felt due to his drug use. This left him feeling totally alone and trying to overcome his drug addiction by himself.

I haven't lived with my dad for so long, and then I didn't want his opinion of me to be misdirected through what I was doing. I want my Dad to see me for who I am, not who I am acting up as, at the moment... I really just want to be who I know I am. (19 year old male)

Forming an 'ideal self' based on the morals and values identified (respect for others, the importance of family, being caring and loyal) did not always have negative consequences for the young people. Often the 'ideal self' that they had constructed served as a motivating force for them to make positive change in their lives and feel better about themselves and their place in the world:

Yeah, I just sort of went, 'this isn't me, this isn't who I am', so just went 'no, enough's enough'. (17 year old female)

I'm always thinking what the fuck am I... I'm not going to be a drug addict all my life, I want to be this. So that's why I'm trying to work at it. (17 year old female)

If I didn't stand up for what I believed in and stand up for myself, stood up for my values. If I didn't say 'Hey, this actually isn't right' then I don't think I'd look at myself the same way that I'd be the same person. (17 year old female)

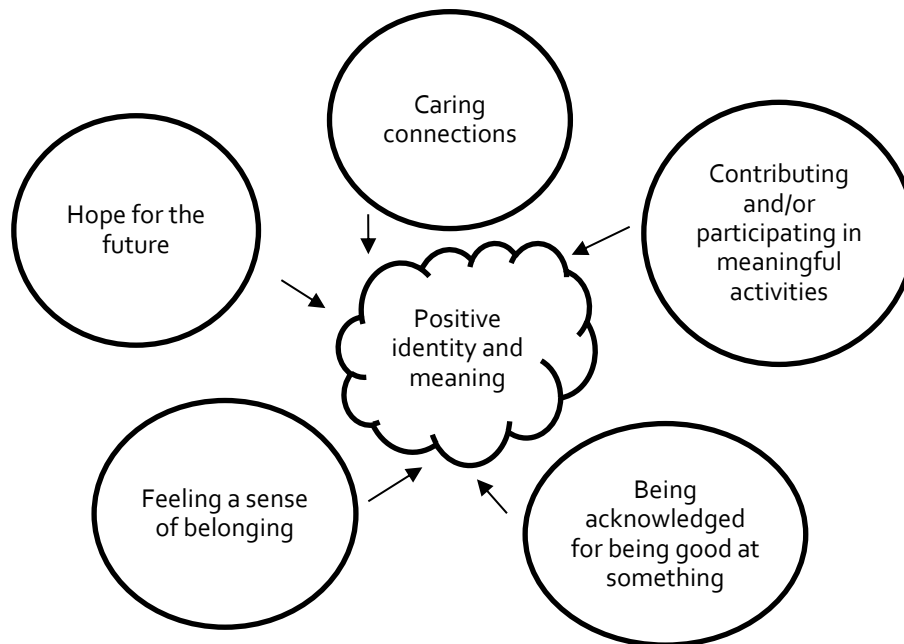
Factors contributing to positive identity and meaning

The findings have illuminated that young people's negative experiences and the isolation they felt are key in how they construct their identity and meaning. However, the detrimental effects of these experiences and their sense of isolation could be mitigated by the interplay between a number of internal and external

factors present in the lives of the young people and their environment. When present, these factors had the ability to make a powerful and positive difference to how they felt about themselves, the world and their place in it.

These factors, which are not mutually exclusive, are outlined in the diagram below and explained throughout this section of the report.

Figure 2: Factors contributing to positive identity and meaning



Caring connections

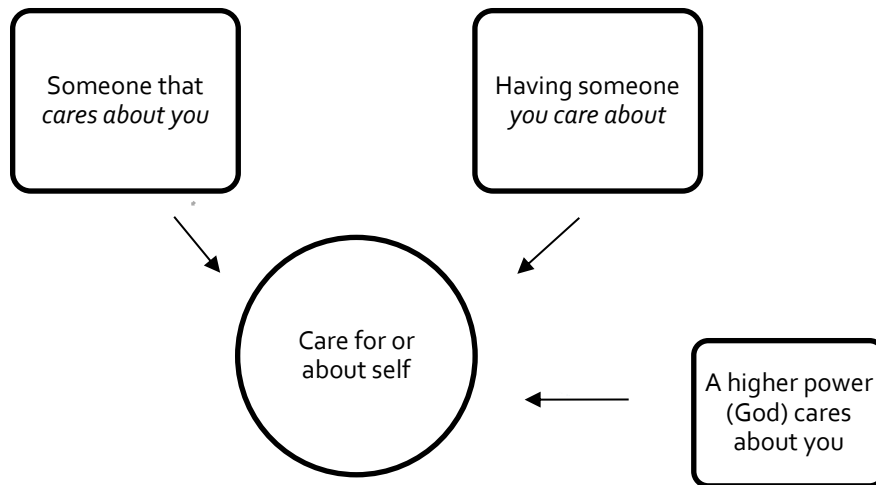
The existence, or lack thereof, of caring connections with others appeared to have the largest influence on how young people felt about themselves, the world and their place in it.

Many of the participants were so care-starved that they did not feel that they had either:

1. Anyone who cared about them; or
2. Anyone they were able to care for or about.

The young people who appeared to have a more positive sense of self and the world had both of these caring connections in their lives. For others, attaining just one of these caring connections for even a small window of time in their life may have been enough to make a substantial difference to their sense of self. For some this was with a pet, rather than another human being, and for a couple of participants a relationship with a higher power was enough to make substantial change in their sense of self. This is reflected in the diagram (figure 3) below.

Figure 3: Centrality of caring connections



The participants were engaged in a number of dynamic and complex relationships throughout the course of their lives. Therefore, whilst Figure 3 is simplistic, it does reflect a clear and simple message that emerged from the young people’s accounts of these relationships.

Someone who cares about you

A number of young people highlighted the strong potency of having someone in their life that cares about them:

If I didn't have that relationship with her, or she just didn't care, I don't think I would be where I am, like, yeah, now. (21 year old female)

Then I started thinking about those people that do like me and would miss me, and I would miss myself too, I really would. (23 year old female)

Actually having someone actually care about you is a good feeling and I hadn't had that for years... It was actually a big shock and a wakeup call to me that by hurting myself I wasn't just hurting myself, I was hurting someone else and so that kind of hit me. It was like, wow, it actually happens someone that actually cares about you and what you do with your life is a huge thing. (23 year old male)

This was often potent in young people’s lives because it ensured that there was someone around that could help them to make sense of their experiences. The emergence of this was often talked about as a ‘turning point’ for young people, allowing them to form a positive sense of self and the world around them.

So [my boyfriend] definitely gave me a different perspective. That's what I needed really was I was stuck on the perspective that [my ex-boyfriend] gave me saying the world is shit, ra-ra-ra and [my new boyfriend] was something different. (16 year old female)

Someone to care about

It was evident from the stories from the young people that having someone that they cared about could be equally potent:

A lot of people said to me, you can't look after things until you look after yourself. I say to people, 'No, that's not true for me. I need to look after something to help me look after myself.' If I don't have my animals around me I am a lost soul... Just having something that needs me... It's just doing things for them which helps them, makes them happy as well as it makes me happy. (23 year old female)

50 billion people can't do the job of one person you love. (18 year old female)

When you have no love for yourself, you've got to find it somewhere. You've got to find that motivation to do stuff and it doesn't matter if you are doing it for your little sister or somebody else... There's no taking care of me or doing it for my own wellbeing, it's so I don't hurt other people. (23 year old male)

This was also demonstrated by the six young people that stated that their relational roles to others (in being a parent or carer) defined who they were. Having a child to care for was the impetus that changed some young people's perspective on life and made them determined to care for themselves and make positive changes in their lives.

However, it should not go unstated that without adequate support this caring role could also result in some negative consequences. Young people often took on board sole responsibility for the health and welfare of the person they were caring for. Thus, when this person became unwell, they would blame themselves and spiral downwards into negative feelings towards themselves.

Connection to a higher power

As stated above, being cared about by a higher power was a significant factor in the lives of two young people in the study. These young people were only able to feel at peace once a caring connection had been

made with God, in one instance, and with Guardian Angels, in the other. The presence of these entities in their lives seemed to give the young people a sense of purpose and reassurance that things would be okay.

Every day I would think, "I want to kill myself, I shouldn't be here" and no one wants me here anyway because all I do is make trouble in people's life without knowing it. But like that's gone, it's not me, it's not - like I'm living through God now, yeah... I was born again, and ever since that day when I got out of that church, I was like happy... Because I have a purpose. (16 year old female)

It makes me realise that I have a purpose and I'm here for a reason... Now I don't want to kill myself and even if I do get into those really bad depressed states I sit there and I know that it's just a state and I can get over it. (18 year old female)

Contributing and/or participating in meaningful activities

Contributing and participating in meaningful activities allowed young people to connect with the world around them. This included activities such as work, study, sport, volunteering, church group activities, youth group activities or music; which often provided them with a sense of purpose for their daily lives and made them feel like they had a legitimate place within the world.

Volunteering or other care-based activities appeared to be particularly potent. Just over half of the young people had been involved in one or more of these activities at some time throughout their lives. These activities provided the young people with an opportunity to act out their values, morals and beliefs that they had said were at the core of what defined them.

Yeah I find it really good [being a church youth leader] because... I get to be the person that there wasn't for me. (17 year old female)

These activities also acted as a pathway for young people to care for themselves, improve their self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy, and create for themselves a more positive world-view.

I got into volunteering... full on, almost volunteering full time, because I just felt it was really beneficial for myself. (24 year old female)

Winning a hockey game just made my self-esteem level go up and made me feel really good about myself. Yeah, hockey's just always been something I've really loved. I consider hockey as part of who I am. (17 year old female)

For others, the benefit was in having a routine or something positive or meaningful to do with their time.

I love being busy simply because when I'm busy I don't get bored and when I'm bored it makes me think, and when I think I just dig myself a hole and it's like I get stuck in it and I feel really shit. (16 year old female)

Feeling a sense of belonging

Forming a connection with the community in which they live was important in increasing how young people felt about themselves, the world and their place in it. However, some people felt connected to nothing at all:

Your identity is a really big thing to have. It took me four years to get a birth certificate... You just feel like a lost soul, you feel like you don't belong, you feel like you don't even know who you are, what your real name actually is. (23 year old female)

Others were searching for a deeper, more potent connection with other people that would provide them with a community where they were fully accepted, that they could trust in and have reciprocal care and support relationships with. In essence, they were looking for the 'solid foundation', which they had previously outlined as being critical to their identity and meaning making.

With family

Some of the young people were striving to maintain or build this sense of connection or belonging with their family.

Your family is your base, that's where you come from, so to be solidly connected that's probably one of my values. (18 year old female)

With church

Five of the young people talked about important connections to a church community. However, for all but one of the participants, this was not about their belief in or relationship with God. Rather, the young people talked about the potency of having a caring and supportive community where they were accepted and included:

It's like a community in my church. It's amazing, like I've never found anyone in my whole life is like thoughtful and as caring, like we call each other brother and sister. (16 year old female)

I think sometimes I believe; sometimes I don't. Sometimes I just like the values. But I find that what keeps me going back is the people because I've got people that look out for me. (17 year old female)

With culture

Four of the young people discussed the importance of a trying to form or maintain a deep connection to their past through a cultural group:

I don't know a lot about my history and I'm trying to find that out, like now... Because, I don't have any knowledge, so I think it – yeah, everyone should know a bit about their background. (21 year old female)

Because if they don't know [about where they come from] then it's just a part of them missing that they're never going to know about. (15 year old female)

With services

A few of the young people had also found a place for themselves with youth programs:

I've been to every refuge in Canberra, and I absconded from probably every single one. The only one I ever stayed in was Oasis because they were just... It was a home to me, like it was... the people, the environment, it was home. (21 year old female)

With the military

Many of the young people were still without a community in which they could feel this sense of belonging. Two were hoping to find this in the military. When asked what they hoped to get out of joining the army, one young woman answered:

I think just a bit of a family there... A place in the world. (17 year old female)

Being good at something and having this recognised by others

Being recognised by others as being good at something was another potent precursor for young people to form a more positive view of themselves, the world and their place in it. Achievement provided young people with a purpose or direction in their lives. It provided another avenue by which they could connect

with others and assisted them to carve out a place for themselves in the world, doing something they felt they could succeed in and to make a contribution. Importantly, it also allowed them to feel some sense of pride in themselves. This sense of pride could start to replace the sense of shame that many of them felt and experienced.

To live a life where you don't think you're going to achieve anything, don't think you're going to become anything, don't think that you're ever going to get out of your situation. I think that's probably the most horrible thing I can ever think of. (17 year old female)

The following quotes speak of a desire to be recognised or affirmed as having done something valuable or done a task well:

I never got praised for the things I was doing well. I just got punished for the things I was doing wrong. (23 year old male)

I only had one teacher at that school that actually encouraged me in a positive way and told me I was actually good at something, which is why I'm doing English right now. It was my thing, my English teacher was the only one who ever actually said anything good or told me I could actually achieve something in this field. (23 year old male)

A clear example of the potency of achievement came with the stories of just under half (eleven) of the participants, who had reconnected with adult or supported education systems, despite previous negative experiences at school:

I managed to do my Year 12 and stuff which really bought my spirits up more because I was the only one in the family that did it as well. I just think that there's got to be something out there in life that's for me. There's got to be something, I may not know it now, but there's got to be something. (23 year old female)

The reason school itself has influenced me so much is because it is my second chance. This is my second chance at making life better and with the people here supporting me and basically going 'Look, you can do this, just bloody do it', where every other time I've tried it, it's 'you can't do it, you're not good enough' ... It gives you the satisfaction, the pride to be able to go, I did this and I'm proud I did this. Very rarely I say I'm proud of something. In my life I've never really gone, 'I'm proud of doing that'. (19 year old male)

Hope for the future

I think hope is, yeah, very important in someone's life. (21 year old female)

When the young people who participated in the study could not find any sense of direction or purpose in their life through those pathways, opportunities and connections outlined above, it became apparent that they at least needed to have some hope for their future. When young people struggled to find any purpose or hope in their lives they often talked about being suicidal:

If you have nothing to look forward to, it's just going to put you down every day. I know what it's like to have nothing to look forward to. (18 year old male)

What's the point in seeing a future if it's not going to happen? ... I didn't think it was a crisis of meaning [my last suicide attempt]. I think that it was a crisis of future in general. (22 year old female)

I mean a lot of the time it was just suicidal thoughts, constantly suicidal thoughts, I was like the world is shit, everything is shit, everything is bad, nothing good ever happens to me, and to this day I still do have suicidal thoughts but it's like now I'm able to be able to like okay so I do have suicidal thoughts but when I get older I will be able to move out and I'll be able to have my own life and I'll be able to be more in control of my own life and then things will get better. (17 year old female)

Having some hope or belief that things might improve in the future, gave those young people who were still struggling to cope with past trauma the impetus to keep going:

What keeps me going now is the thought of the future. (19 year old male)

Well that's one of the things that kept me alive, okay, I guess, is hope. I learned that hope, that my life can be a better place to live... Yeah it's just always been no matter how much I've hated myself, there's always been, I know I can be a better person. I know I can achieve more. I know I am a smart guy. I know I can do these things. (23 year old male)

I wanted to kill myself because I felt like I wasn't worthy, that my life was too hard for myself, I didn't want to go forward anymore, sick of getting hurt and stuff like that... But then I started

thinking... I don't know, there's just something about life that it can't be all bad. There's got to be a lot of positives out there, you've just got to find it but there's got to be. (23 year old female)

How young people want to be supported

These factors provide important insights into how support could and should be provided to young people. Participants were also quick to highlight areas where they believed support services could be improved. Above all else, they said that they wanted to be engaged in genuine caring relationships that were based around notions of respect. They needed and wanted to be given opportunities to care for others; and they needed and wanted others to care for and about them. They were clearly seeking these relationships within their natural environments and they also wanted these from their interactions with the service system.

Just small things like you're looking well today, just enquiring about your personal life, like what have you been up to lately and where they can give them compliments and encouragement because like what we were talking about earlier, I'd never really had someone that actually really does care about me to that level where when I'm hurting myself, it hurts them. (23 year old male)

[We need] people that care more about the connection that they have with the young people than they do about the outcome of their work. Yes, please do get that good outcome from your work. I pray to God that you do, but please care about us more. (19 year old male)

They see in me that I'm changed, you know what I mean, they're really there for me, they're really there for me... And it's not even family so... It's a big wow because fuck, they don't even know me you know? ... Yeah, well there you go. It's mad, I like that aye. That's why I like coming to school because the workers here, they respect me and that's all I could ever ask for. (17 year old female)

Many of the young people had been involved in service systems from a young age, and emphasised the important potential these services had in helping to shape their lives and the lives of those around them:

I suppose yeah helping me keep my life on track with all the stuff I had going on at home as well so there's a big role that the services played in making my life successful or making it up to this point successful. (21 year old male)

She's probably helped shape me out to be the person I am today. (18 year old female)

She has been a major, major support in my life. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for her, absolutely 100%. They've cradled me from death... She's my rock. She's totally my rock. (21 year old female)

However, the influence of services was not always a positive one:

I felt like they needed a job and soon as I came happy and healthy within myself they would say or do something to bring me back down so then they'll have a job to deal with. (23 year old female)

Well, I wasn't really in any sort of form of care [when under Care and Protection Order]. I didn't have anyone looking out for my interests or my health or anything like that, or where I was going to be next. So it was basically up to the refuges when they kept me or kicked me out, and then where I went to next. (24 year old female)

Although the young people in the study did not say that they wanted support workers to explicitly discuss identity and meaning issues with them, they did want workers to listen carefully and be able to hear what they wanted and needed.

Listen and you can hear how they feel. (18 year old female)

Nobody listens... That's one thing I'd definitely like to have changed. (16 year old female)

Demonstrating attentiveness and being interested and curious about the issues that are at the core of young people's lives was appreciated and perceived by young people to be central in making a connection with them.

I think that knowing me as a person means that they know the practicalities I wish for and I hope for or what I hope to get from being here or anything like that. So I think that having knowledge about me on a personal level will help them help me. (22 year old female)

One thing that I've noticed throughout all these years, is no-one ever asks you what make you happy, ever. Throughout all those years, I've never been asked. Someone has never sat down and said; 'What makes you happy?'... When I got on anti-depressants, it was basically hey doc, I'm sad. Here, take these, like there was no have you tried meditation or what's your diet like or do you socialise on a regular basis? (23 year old male)

No one ever really asked me what the problem was [why I was using drugs, why I couldn't live at home]. (21 year old female)

Once a caring connection is made, young people stated that the provision of practical support, such as linking with options and pathways to participate in the world around them by locating stable housing, study or work, or obtaining a driver's licence, and which could assist them to realise their hopes and dreams, was also a vital component of support:

Having a case worker for a good amount of my youth was also useful. Someone to check in with you and see what are you doing, what's your goal, what do you want to do, how can I help you to get there kind of thing? That was very useful in my early days I suppose. (21 year old male)

A lot of young people, especially the vulnerable ones, they find it hard getting the motivation to do things, and need to be supported to do those things. So I think just basically finding out what young people want, where they want to be, what their ultimate goals are and getting people to help them achieve them. (24 year old female)

I know that I'm getting better and I'm moving further forward. But it's just I don't really know what I'm supposed to be doing. I just know where I want to be. I don't know how to get there. (19 year old male)

The majority of these points made by young people were echoed in the focus group held with youth workers. However youth workers also stated that they experienced a number of barriers that prohibited them from being able to provide the support that young people needed (see Appendix 7 for an overview of the findings from the youth worker focus group).

Implications for support

The findings of this study have outlined the various factors that contributed to vulnerable young people's identity and meaning development. The majority of the young people we interviewed led isolated lives, characterised by formative experiences of instability, trauma and loss and a distinct lack of caring connections.

It was clear that these young people required, and were often trying to find, individuals and groups to provide them with support and guidance, and that could act as a secure base in their lives. Despite this, many remained isolated and disconnected from the world around them.

The challenges that the young people faced were vast, but as many of them demonstrated, they were not insurmountable. The findings of the study lend support to the notion that the period from adolescence to adulthood, presents significant opportunities for positive change in people's life trajectories (Hawkins et al., 2011). Many of the young people had been able to establish a more positive sense of self and had found some purpose and meaning in their lives. However, resiliency research has demonstrated that when "growing up under adversity, the locus of change does not reside in either the child or environment alone, but in the processes by which environments provide resources for use by the child" (Ungar, 2011). The findings of this study echoed these sentiments, indicating that support services are ideally placed to assist young people with much needed self (re)evaluation and (re)connection.

This was evidenced by the stories told by young people. Some talked about how their interactions with support services had enhanced how they felt about themselves, the world and their place in it. However, this was not consistent across the life span of individuals or across participants in the study. There were many instances of young people stating that the support they received, or lack thereof, actively contributed to them feeling worse about themselves and resulted in them becoming more disconnected from the world around them.

The experiences and insights of the participants contribute valuable understandings to how support systems need to be more responsive to vulnerable young people, especially in relation to the issues that are at the core of their very being; how they feel about themselves, the world and their place in it. Support services can and should be assisting young people with all aspects of their lives, and working towards ensuring that the changes and connections they make can be sustainable.

This study confers with much of the existing resiliency and positive youth development research (Benson, Scales, Hawkins, Oesterle, & Hill, 2004; Brendtro & duToit, 2005; Lerner et al., 2008), by highlighting that

services should be concentrating their efforts in facilitating, building and promoting opportunities for young people to develop personal caring connections, meaningful connections to the community, a sense of belonging, mastery and hope. It is through these factors that young people may be able to achieve their ideal selves and become thriving members of their communities.

As these factors are not mutually exclusive, this does not necessitate widespread change and the creation of a raft of new and diverse support interventions. However, it emerged from the study that services may need to reconsider how they build and provide connections with and for young people. This would include ensuring that the support provided to young people meets their core and holistic needs.

Some of the more urgent and important considerations needed to achieve these ends include:

- Providing timely and effective support for trauma and loss;
- Recognising the important role of 'family' in young people's lives;
- Building and maintaining caring connections;
- Facilitating opportunities for participation in and contribution to community;
- Providing holistic support; and,
- Promoting and facilitating hope for the future.

Providing timely and effective support for trauma and loss

How we make sense of a crisis situation and endow it with meaning is crucial for resilience and can make the difference between coping and mastery or dysfunction and despair. (Walsh, 2006)

Timely and effective support is particularly crucial for young people who have experienced trauma and loss. Experiences of trauma and loss, and especially sexual abuse, were amongst the most potent and defining experiences for young people in the study. Whilst some had come to terms with their grief and loss, others had not, and were searching for meaning to explain and cope with what they perceived to be random and cruel periods of their lives.

However, making meaning out of such traumatic experiences is difficult (E. Crawford et al., 2006). Some of the young people identified that their mental health issues, such as depression, were inextricably linked with the impact of the death of significant others on their lives. Others told of the complete loss of self-worth they felt following experiences of sexual abuse.

Feeling unsupported and disconnected from the world around them, young people were forced to turn inward for solutions and coping mechanisms. There were some instances of young people using meditation or prayer as a source of comfort and coping. However, these strategies were rare, and the majority of the young people attempted to cope with their pain and suffering through drug and alcohol misuse, self-harm and even suicide attempts. This resulted in young people needing sustained support to address mental health issues and addiction.

Some young people were successful in (re)framing their negative experiences into more positive identity and meaning constructions. This was evident in the number of young people who had taken on an identity of 'survivor pride' (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). This 'survivor' identity emphasised positive character attributes such as determination and perseverance.

Some participants had also discovered meaning through their traumatic experiences, such as finding a purpose in life by helping others who had experienced similar trauma or abuse. Others found purpose in striving to change the system that they felt had let them down.

The possibility and significance of locating purpose and meaning from trauma, illness and loss has been widely acknowledged throughout the literature (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010; Raftopoulos & Bates, 2011). However, such identity and meaning is rarely enacted without complication or complexity. For example, post-traumatic growth researchers (Meyerson et al., 2011; Park & Folkman, 1997) caution that one cannot equate meaning with happiness. Therefore, even young people who are able to find some purpose or meaning through their pain and suffering, will most often still require support to cope with the long-term impacts of their trauma or loss. Consequently, the constant availability of someone or something, to support young people through the process of coping with and making sense of their pain, is critical in allowing young people to attain a positive sense of self and view of the world.

Recognising the important role of 'family' in young people's lives

Children and young people require a stable foundation from which they can develop their relationships, identity, values, and cultural awareness. (Department of Family and Community Services, 22 November 2012)

Family was selected as having the most influence on young people's notions of their self, the world and their place in it (see Table 1). Although often enduring high levels of abuse and conflict within their family unit, the majority of young people in the study also spoke about the importance of family. For many, the

values and morals that they said defined who they were included the importance of family. A happy family life also featured strongly in young people's future hopes and dreams.

This study contributes to the growing evidence acknowledging that a secure base of family is just as relevant and potent throughout adolescence, and even into early adulthood, as it is in early childhood (Robinson, Power, & Allan, 2010; Schofield & Beek, 2009; Wyn et al., 2011).

Along with other prominent researchers (Ungar, 2004) this study found that family relationships, particularly parental relationships, play an important role in young people's efforts to negotiate and forge a healthy identity. The expectation of what family could and should provide, and the realisation that they were largely not fulfilling this role, was highly influential in the young people's identity and meaning constructions. In many instances young people wanted to become the opposite of what their parents were.

Due to these tensions and the instability within their family relationships, many young people spoke about missing out on the crucial, solid foundation that family is supposed to provide to them. This was particularly evident for those who had been involved with the out-of-home care system. Young people who had involvement with the child protection system described how their care, safety, health and wellbeing were largely left to them to navigate. Some young people stated that they were not allocated a worker, or had very little individual contact with the worker they were allocated. This resulted in a battle for day-to-day survival, which led to them traversing between all available youth refuges in their geographical area. Young people were left feeling disempowered and further traumatised by a system that was supposed to be caring for them. This indicates that child protection systems need to re-evaluate how they respond to young people within their care.

A responsibility for family-focused practice does not lie solely with statutory services. Youth work practice has been founded on pervasive historical assumptions and frameworks of practice which enshrine the view that adolescence is a period for familial separation and autonomy (Moss, 2009). These frameworks must be challenged so that service systems can begin to recognise and address the role that family, or lack thereof, plays in the lives of young people. A new framework which privileges the role of family in therapeutic and support work with young people, and which recognises the impact that family relationships have had and continue to have on their lives, is required (Robinson et al., 2010).

The findings of this study highlighted that for some young people, strong family relationships and ties will remain elusive throughout their adolescence. In this case, the community needs to work together to provide a secure base for these young people. This should include the provision of safe, secure and stable

housing that family usually provides. However, just as important, support should also seek to provide the richness of emotional and psychological support that this secure base should also provide.

Building and maintaining caring connections

Love, is one of the most powerful sources of personal meaning that man can possess. The salvation of man is through love and in love. (Frankl, 1962)

One central component of the secure base needed by young people was care. Young people agreed that throughout their lives many had felt like they were care-starved. The lack of caring connections in the lives of young people impacted on their ability to find meaning in life and attain a positive sense of self. As described earlier, they often felt unable to care about themselves, unless they had others who cared about them or that they could care about.

This particular dynamic between caring connections and sense of self and meaning was also found by deSouza and colleagues in their Australian study (de Souza, Cartwright, & McGilp, 2004). They observed that when young people had found a place in their world where they had begun to recognise that someone cared, and that the caring brought with it an expectation that they would take responsibility for themselves and sometimes for others, they achieved a sense of belonging and a re-connection that helped them to get in touch with their inner life, and helped to shape their sense of self.

Devoid of consistent personal caring connections, young people struggled to remain connected to the world around them. This appeared to result in young people becoming resistant to seeking or receiving help from others. Young people were under the impression that they should be autonomous in all aspects of their lives (including their identity and meaning constructions). Therefore, encouraging and supporting young people to forge and maintain informal and formal support relationships is a critical component of youth work. This may often necessitate explicit dialogue which challenges deeply held notions of independence and assists young people to understand that *interdependence* is not only normal and healthy, but also the way in which meaningful lives can be best sustained (Walsh, 2006).

Facilitating opportunities for participation in and contribution to community

Social bonds foster the development of inner security. (Vornanen et al., 2009)

Our study suggests that when vulnerable young people are supported to participate in activities such as work, study, sport, cultural groups, church groups, youth services and volunteering, the results can be life-changing. For the young people in the study, impacts of these activities ranged from having 'something to

do', resulting in young people being less likely to engage in risk-taking or self-harming behaviours, to increasing young people's sense of self and purpose in life. This provided them with a more positive view of the world and cemented the notion that they did have a legitimate place within the world, and may be able to forge a positive future for themselves.

These opportunities also provided the prospect of being able to enjoy something, succeed at, or be good at something. This was also powerful in the lives of the young people who had developed a sense of shame about themselves. This was found in the eleven young people who had re-engaged positively with study after initial negative experiences within the mainstream schooling system. Support to engage in specialist schooling programs was often enough to tip the balance of young people's self-worth scales from shame to pride.

Activities that involved an element of contribution from young people seemed to be particularly potent in their identity and meaning constructions, and the ability to change their life-course. Previous research in the field of positive youth development found that "young people thrive when their moral and civic identities involve them in valuing and taking action that contributes to a world beyond themselves" (Ebstyne King & Benson, 2006). This was evident in this study when young people were given opportunities to care for others or to volunteer within their community.

Facilitating linkages with the mainstream community in which they live emerged as a strong theme for support of vulnerable young people. Young people highlighted that these linkages have to be through activities that are meaningful to them, and the study highlighted that the pathway to participation and contribution will be different for each unique individual. These opportunities often appeared to be overlooked by workers. One of the workers in the focus group commented that they probably had not spent as much time as would be desirable in linking people with 'mainstream community organisations', such as sporting clubs. Often this was because they thought that young people would not be interested. However, they were surprised to find, when they introduced sporting activities as a new initiative in their service, young people had grasped the opportunity and it had become a success.

Many of the young people in the study developed links with sporting clubs or church groups by themselves. One young person was interested in pursuing a career in writing or music, but was again having to find and navigate their own connections to making this a reality.

The literature is full of accounts of how connection to cultural groups, especially for Indigenous Australians, can have powerful positive effects on identity and meaning constructions (Moss, 2009; Wexler

et al., 2009). Some of the young people in the study were also independently pursuing these cultural connections, with varying degrees of success.

This highlights that for some young people, workers may be required to think beyond usual frameworks (of study and work) and extend their common work practices or program 'outcomes' to invest in more creative and flexible linkages and solutions. This need not require significant additional resourcing, although more flexibility in spending and an increase in brokerage and program funds may certainly help. Rather, it would require forming and fostering new partnerships or relationships within the mainstream community, so that activities and opportunities that are often assumed to be either unwanted by, or out-of-reach of vulnerable young people can become available.

At the same time, it is also important that services realise that due to the young people's complex histories and present challenges, these connections can often breakdown and leave young people with a lower sense of self-esteem, self-worth and shame. One young man's sudden foray into the mainstream community via the higher education system proved to be too difficult to manage, and things quickly unravelled for him and he attempted suicide.

Consequently, for many, connections with other people or groups need to be built and maintained around an environment of persistent and consistent support from the significant adults in their lives and/or the service system. One of the ways to ensure that changes and connections can be sustainable is to invest time in fostering young people's relationships with adults in their community who could act as positive role models in their lives.

As the wider literature on youth work recognises (Costello & Thomson, 2011; Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010), and many of the young people in our study highlighted, significant adults that could be accorded the label of a 'role model' were instrumental in achieving and sustaining positive change and connection to the world for vulnerable young people. These 'role models' also assisted young people by modelling the morals and values that they stated were central to their identity. This appeared to be beneficial in bringing their possible or 'ideal self' to reality and giving them the confidence and resources to realise their potential.

Providing holistic support

What is needed on the part of professionals working with youth is a capacity to join with them as fellow seekers for meaning and wisdom in a confusing world. (M. Crawford & Rossiter, 2006)

This study and others (Dumas, Ellis, & Wolfe, 2012) have confirmed that it is imperative for support services to explore and develop a greater understanding of each young person's personal identity and meaning issues. These are core issues to young people, which not only impact on them personally, but also impact on the way in which they engage with others around them (including support services).

To ensure support can be effective, workers need to make time to get to know each individual young person and explore what avenues for growth, change or connection will work for each unique individual. Critical to this would be gaining an understanding of how young people may have constructed their particular sense of self and meaning in life. It may then become possible to support young people on a journey to explore possible selves and challenge, evaluate and achieve preferred or ideal selves that they have constructed for themselves.

A number of studies in the field of juvenile justice have found that the potency of challenging negative self-schemas and developing possible selves are beneficial to young people (Clinkinbeard & Murray, 2012; Stein, Roeser, & Markus, 1998). However, this will only be effective if young people are supported with well-developed strategies to facilitate the attainment of their possible selves (Abrams & Aguilar, 2005; Clinkinbeard & Murray, 2012; Stein et al., 1998). Such support requires strong and sustained resourcing and commitment. Unfortunately, youth workers who participated in the focus group stated they are often unable to provide the level of support that is required by young people. Due to high case loads and specific pre-determined program criteria and outcomes, youth workers stated that they are often unable to develop trusting and caring relationships with young people and provide an adequate level of meaningful one-on-one holistic support.

It became apparent that other more subtle tensions were also at play. It appears that there is a level of uncertainty within the youth work field as to what their role should include. For example, youth workers in the focus group acknowledged that some young people received solace and support through their connections to church, but workers felt it was not their job to facilitate or discuss these relationships.

These specific tensions of if, and how, spiritual or religious elements are built into support and therapeutic relationships with young people has been the issue of much debate throughout, the literature and is not

confined to the youth work field (Daughtry, 2011; Kimball, 2008; National Collaboration for Youth and Search Institute, 2007; Scott & Magnuson, 2006; Williams & Lindsey, 2010; Wilson, 2004).

Magaldi-Dopman & Park-Taylor's (2010) finding that "therapists may be so afraid of endorsing or excluding any religion, that clients' spiritual/religious identity is purposefully and artfully neglected in therapy" certainly seemed to resonate with the findings of this study. To some of the young people in the study, their spirituality or relationship with their church were central to their identity and meaning constructions and had been one of their main providers of a secure base of support and care. If workers are overtly or covertly ignoring spiritual or religious aspects of young people's lives, they may be missing unique opportunities to connect with and support these young people.

The argument for incorporating these elements into youth work practice appears to be growing. Spiritual endeavours (including meditation and yoga) are growing in popularity as coping strategies, and research is demonstrating that connection to spirituality and religion can be associated with increases in young people's physical health and wellbeing, self-esteem and resiliency and reductions in depression and the likelihood of engaging in risk behaviours (Ebstyne King & Benson, 2006; Williams & Lindsey, 2010; Wilson, 2004; Yonker et al., 2012).

Perhaps the most powerful argument for the incorporation of identity and meaning exploration comes from those who participated in the study. Most of the young people said that they had never talked to anyone else, let alone support workers, about any of these issues. However, as with other similar research (de Souza et al., 2004), they found their participation in the research project to be a positive experience. Therefore, it is imperative that vulnerable young people are provided with opportunities to address, express and explore these important aspects of their inner lives.

Promoting and facilitating hope for the future

What oxygen is to the lungs, such is hope to the meaning of life. (Walsh, 2006)

In the midst of what can often be a confusing and challenging time for vulnerable young people, the importance of maintaining a future focus and instilling hope was paramount. Hope is a powerful tool. Many studies over time have found that hope or optimism heavily influence physical and mental health, as well as coping with everyday life (Conversano et al., 2010; Hughes, Black, Bellamy, & Kaldor, 2004).

Young people in this study emphasised the role of formulating goals, or of having something in their future to look forward to. It did not seem to matter how small or insignificant these goals or future

aspirations were, but in the absence of little else that was positive in their lives, they provided the meaning to keep on going. Perhaps this is why Viktor Frankl, used the following quote from Nietzsche in his seminal book, 'Man's search for meaning':

He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how. (Nietzsche as cited by (Frankl, 1962)

Facilitating opportunities and supporting vulnerable young people to locate the 'why' or personal meaning in their own lives is a critical area of youth support work that for some young people in this study had been neglected. The findings of this study remind us that support for vulnerable young people would be enriched by a hopeful support culture that is willing to engage and enquire on issues relating to identity and meaning. It is only then that vulnerable young people can expect to receive genuine holistic support that encompasses the issues that are at the very core of their being.

Appendix 1: Interview schedule

Explain the project, Talk about rights, Sign consent form, Provide gift voucher

Collect demographics: Age, Gender and Cultural Background

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
2. Would you say that you have experienced anything that you would say was life changing, or significant events (positive or negative) that have shaped your life (how you see yourself or affected how you feel about yourself, the world and your place in it)?
 - What and/or who has helped you through these times?
 - a. Draw the people and things that are important to you and how close or far away they are from you (Bubble diagram)
3. After coming through those things what would you say are the important things about you that help you to now define who you are?
 - a. Important things that help define who you are sheet
 - Has this changed over time, why and when?
 - Do these things also help you to explain your place in the world or give you any sense of purpose or meaning as well?
4. So overall who or what things have had the most influence on who you are, how you feel about yourself and how you see the world?
 - a. Card activity: pick three cards that have had the most influence on who you are and how you see the world.
 - How did they influence you (and was this positive or negative)?
 - When were they the most influential (age/stage, actual experience)?
5. May I ask you if you see yourself as being spiritual or religious?
 - What impact does it have on your day to day life?
 - What does being 'spiritual' or 'religious' mean to you?
 - Can you foresee that this will ever be important in your life (when and why)?
6. What other ways do you use to provide a sense of meaning to your life and the world around you?

7. How do you see your place in the world? Or how would you describe your worldview or your approach to life?
 - a. May use "Picture This" cards.
 - What has been the place/role/impact of this on your day-to-day life or in responding to any of the challenges you have faced throughout your life?

8. Do you think that having a purpose in life is important?
 - What or who has helped to shape your purpose in life?

9. Who have you talked to about this stuff in the past or who do you talk to about this stuff now?
 - Do you think that it is important to have someone to talk to about these issues?

10. What role do you think support workers should play in helping you to talk about or sort through all these things we have talked about today?
 - Do you think it is important for workers to try and help young people to feel better about themselves (help them to find 'who they are') and help them to understand their place in the world and find some meaning or purpose or sense of hope in their lives?
 - Have any support workers tried to help you with this stuff?
 - How did they do it? What was that like? Was it helpful?
 - Where do these issues fit within the other issues that you are facing in your life right now?

11. What are your hopes and dreams for the future?

Appendix 2: Interview cheat sheet for participants

We want to talk to you about: 'How you see yourself, the world and your place in it'

This may include talking about:

- ❖ The things that help to explain 'who you are'
- ❖ Important people or things that have had an influence on 'who you are' and how you see the world
- ❖ Whether you see yourself as being 'spiritual' 'religious'
- ❖ Other ways that you may use to provide a sense of meaning to your life and the world around you
- ❖ Whether having a purpose in life is important
- ❖ Who you talk to about this stuff
- ❖ What role you think support worker should play in helping you to talk about or sort through these issues
- ❖ Your hopes and dreams for the future

If you need to talk to someone about
after the interview please talk to your support worker or
LIFELINE (Ph) 13 11 14

Remember your RIGHTS...

- To be **informed** about the project and your involvement in it
- To **choose** whether you get involved and how you get involved in the project and whether you want to **continue your involvement**
- To be **treated with respect** and to **not be harmed** or negatively affected because of your involvement
- To **not be discriminated against** because of who you are or your background
- To **confidentiality**
- To **benefit from the project** and **be compensated for your time.**
- To **STOP** at any time
- To **complain** if you are not happy about how you are treated:

You can complain to our boss:

Morag McArthur
Director of Institute of Child
Protection Studies
Australian Catholic
University
(ph) 6209 1225

OR

The Chairperson
Human Research Ethics
Committee
C/- Research Services
Australian Catholic University
North Sydney Campus
PO Box 968
NORTH SYDNEY NSW
2059
Tel: 02 9739 2105
Fax: 02 9739 2870

Appendix 4: What or who has influenced you?



School



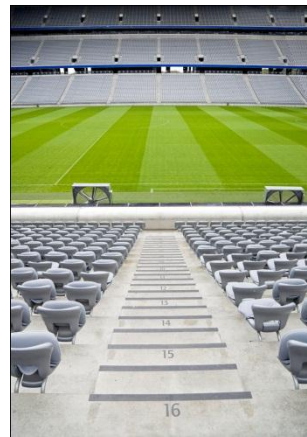
Friends



Family



Church



Sports Club



Internet



TV



Neighbours



Cultural Group



Support Service



???

Appendix 5: Feedback interview questions

- Do you remember the interviewer explaining what your rights were for the interview?
 - Did you understand what your rights were during and after the interview?
 - Can you give me a quick example or remember what some of your rights were?

- Did you like being given a page that explained what we were going to talk about in the interview before the interview started?
 - How or why was this useful for you?

- What was it like talking to someone about how you see yourself, the world and your place in it?
 - Do you feel that the interviewer was listening to you and understood what you were saying?
 - How do you know that they understood you?

- Do you think that you got to fully explain your ideas on the role of identity and meaning in your life?

- You probably talked about a lot of different things in your interview. Were there any particular questions that the interviewer asked that were harder to talk about than others? Would there be better or easier ways to ask this sort of question?

- Did you or the interviewer use any other strategies than just talking to you (like cards or drawing a diagram) – what was this like? Was it helpful?

- What did you like best about the interview?

- What would have made the interview better for you?

- What other questions should we have asked?

- How did you feel after the interview had finished?

Appendix 6: Worker focus group questions

Questions:

- What do you think we might mean when we talk about Identity and Meaning?
What does it mean to you?
 - a. What can it mean to other people (is this different)?

- What role does this have for vulnerable young people?
 - a. How potent/significant is it in their lives?

- Who is best placed in our community to talk to young people about these issues?

- Explain or describe your current role with the young people you work with (with particular reference to how you may or may not address these concepts with them).

- In a preferred world what do you think the role of youth workers should be (particularly in regard to addressing these issues with vulnerable young people)?

- What are your current barriers in being able to perform this role?

Debbie to report on preliminary findings from young people's interviews:

- Do you have any questions?

- Is there anything surprising, or what has it reinforced for you?

- What do you think needs to be done (from system wide down to individual practice) to respond to the key themes and issues brought up by the young people in the study?

Appendix 7: Major findings from worker focus group

- Workers felt that young people would have thought that identity and meaning was made up of their morals and values, what is important to them as individuals, 'who they are' and who they identify with (their parents/family or peers).
- Workers believed that young people are isolated from their family and the community. They talked about young people probably feeling like they do not fit in, and experiencing a lot of negative issues – they thought it was these things that influence the role of identity and meaning in their lives. They also spoke about an inner struggle that young people may have with their 'moral code' and their actions. They feel a lot of loyalty to their peers and family – but often this is incongruous to their actions.
- They often have no-one and can attach quickly to friends/partners/peers.
- When asked who is best placed to talk to young people about this issues the discussion centred on youth workers as being the most appropriate people. Workers stressed the importance of having time and commitment to build up a relationship with the young person. But also said that they often are not able to put this time in due to other work constraints. Also their role can sometimes be complicated by having to be landlord and worker. It is also complicated by a lack of trust in workers due to young people having bad experiences with other workers in the sector.
- Identity and meaning issues are important when helping young people with their relationships
- Experiences at home and with family and in being homeless would have a large impact on identity and meaning development.
- Part of the role of youth workers is to role model pro-social behaviours and skills. Also being a consistent and stable person in their life is important. Helping them to negotiate the practicalities of their everyday life is also important and can be really powerful in the life of the young person. Motivating them and pushing them to achieve something can be a big part of your role – setting and working on goals. Helping young people to examine the actions of themselves and others is also important.

- Youth workers have the potential to have a huge impact in the life of a young person. But they also need to maintain their professional boundaries.
- The workers said that we need more services that can provide one-on-one relationships with young people and good experienced workers who care and are committed and they also said that workers need to think more about how to link young people into the community. More specialist services that can see young people without having to go onto a waiting list was also needed.

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