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There are growing concerns about current rates of adolescent depression and youth suicide. This article discusses the work of the Centre for Adolescent Health's Gatehouse Project which highlights the significance of social environments on young people's mental health and outlines school-based approaches to the promotion of emotional wellbeing. The framework proposed has relevance to other settings and challenges us to consider how we might extend preventive action across the community.

## Social Environments and the Emotional Wellbeing of Young People

In the last two decades, adolescent mental health has become a major public health focus. Mental health problems in adolescence can have a profound impact on the development of social relationships, educational attainment, subsequent employment and health risk behaviours (Zubrick et al. 1997). Depression is the most frequently reported mental health problem in adolescents and consistently emerges as the largest single risk factor for suicide and suicidal behaviour (Shaffer et al. 1996; Patton et al. 1997). Evidence from North America suggests that rates of adolescent depression may have risen ten-fold (Burke et al. 1991).

While similar data on depression are not yet available in Australia, suicide rates in young Australians aged between 15 and 24 years have trebled for males and doubled for females over the last 30 years. In 1995, male suicide represented 25 per cent of all deaths in the 15–24 year old age group (Harrison et al. 1997).

Current rates of adolescent onset depression and youth suicide are certainly of concern. However, it is important to recognise that suicide and clinical depression are relatively rare in young people. More common, in young people as in adults, are depressive symptoms such as boredom, fatigue, worry, irritability, loss of appetite, low mood, sleep problems, and poor concentration.

Recent reports indicate that between 15 per cent and 40 per cent of young people report some depressive symptoms, with higher rates in 15–24-year-olds than in any other age group (NH&MRC 1997). Many of these adolescents will fall short of meeting criteria for depressive disorder, but their symptoms will adversely affect their enjoyment of life and are indicators of risk for major depression, substance abuse and self-harming behaviours (Patton et al. 1997).

Prevention efforts should therefore aim to reduce depressive symptoms for all young people, not just those at highest risk. Furthermore, a growing body of literature highlights the importance of developmental appropriateness for prevention programs and point to early adolescence for the introduction of preventive interventions (Patton 1997; Sawyer and Kosky 1996).

### Enhancing the Social Environment in Secondary Schools

Recently, attention has been given to the importance of a young person's sense of attachment or belonging in their social environments. A sense of connectedness to family is central to emotional

wellbeing, but it is also clear that the school social environment can directly influence emotional wellbeing and health. For example, Resnick and associates (1997) found that a sense of belonging to both family and school are the major protective factors against health risk behaviours in young people.

The social environment of the secondary school assumes importance, not just because young people spend so much time there, but also because it provides the major setting in which young people develop new and different relationships with peers and adults. In an extensive study examining the effects of schools on emotional wellbeing and behaviour, Rutter (1979) confirmed that the quality of a school as a *social* institution was of paramount importance. Resnick and associates (1997) found that what mattered most to young adolescents was a school environment in which they felt that they were treated fairly, were close to others, and were part of the school.

The Gatehouse Project is a school-based study which addresses this need for prevention programs in early adolescence. It brings together a team of professionals with backgrounds in education, health promotion, welfare,

psychology, psychiatry and public health, managed by the Centre for Adolescent Health. A primary aim is to prevent or delay the onset of depression through the enhancement of the emotional wellbeing of young people. This aim is being pursued through the development and evaluation of a comprehensive whole school strategy to promote social environments in which young people feel secure, have a sense of belonging, and feel positively regarded. This strategy is being trialled and evaluated in 12 Victorian secondary schools.

This article outlines the Gatehouse Project's school-based approach to the prevention of depression and promotion of emotional wellbeing. We begin with an overview of the social environments of adolescents and consider their impact on emotional wellbeing. Data from the Gatehouse Project Survey are used to highlight young people's perceptions of their social worlds and the relationship between these and emotional wellbeing. The project's progress in the schools is described with a view to presenting a framework for school communities to work together to promote emotional wellbeing. We present an overview of the environmental and individual approaches to prevention and intervention, and conclude by discussing some of the

challenges faced by teachers, parents and young people in promoting emotional wellbeing.

## Social Environments of Adolescents

Throughout life, an individual's social, family and work relationships provide a framework for the development of emotional security and wellbeing. During adolescence, young people contend with expanding social, financial and academic demands. Important changes occur in the nature of personal relationships both within and beyond the family which result in experiences of enjoyment and pleasure as well as times of unhappiness, anxiety and anger. Peer relationships become more intimate and young people spend more time sharing activities with peers and less time in the company of their parents. While parents continue to be important sources of confiding and supportive relationships for young people, differing expectations can arise between parents and their children. For example, expectations may differ around issues of school work, jobs at home, money and time with friends and this can be a source of conflict, tension and stress for all concerned.

The stresses and supports that are experienced during early adolescence may have considerable significance for the degree to which young people are able to handle the multiple challenges associated with this period. Young people who experience difficulty in their social interactions *and* are exposed to adverse environmental conditions are at increased risk of emotional problems (Felner and Felner 1989). Understanding these changes in social relationships and environments are among the most challenging and important tasks for young people, their families, teachers and friends.

## Gatehouse Project Survey

To assess important health outcomes and measure adolescents' perceptions of the quality of their social environment, Year 8 students were administered a questionnaire, using laptop computers. Health outcomes addressed included measures of depression, deliberate self-harm, substance use and abuse, and smoking. Depression was measured using a branched questionnaire which provides an indication of both clinical depression and subclinical depressive symptoms (Lewis et al. 1992). Measures of the social environment covered perceptions of security and victimisation in the school setting, communication with peers, family and teachers, and level of participation in school life.

The first survey wave comprised 2,678 Year 8 students (13–14 years old) from 26 schools. Further surveys of the same students will be conducted annually until the students are in Year 11. The following examples, drawn from the first wave of data collection, illustrate the associations between students' perceptions of the social environment and depressive symptoms.

## Security and emotional wellbeing

A sense of security includes feeling safe from physical harm or threats of physical harm. Less obvious, but no less important, is feeling able to express a point of view without being belittled or ridiculed, and feeling able to take part in school and class activities without being left out or isolated.

There are good reasons to expect that feelings of security are related to emotional wellbeing. Rigby (1996) found that the consequences of any type and any degree of victimisation can be damaging, although the emotional response of victimised or bullied individuals differs according to their resilience and the degree to which they are able to access support. A section of the Gatehouse Project Survey was particularly designed to measure victimisation.

Figure 1

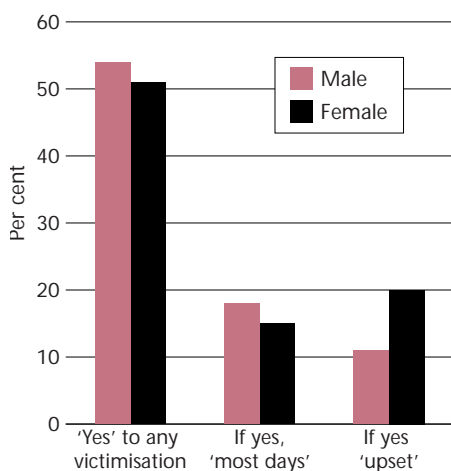
### Security and victimisation



Source: Gatehouse Project, Centre for Adolescent Health, Victoria.

Figure 2

### Students reporting 'yes' to: any victimisation; victimisation occurring most days; and finding victimisation upsetting



Source: Gatehouse Project, Centre for Adolescent Health, Victoria.

Students were asked whether, and if so how often, they had recently experienced teasing, having rumours spread about them, being left out, being threatened or physically harmed at school. Fifty-two per cent of young people reported that they had recently been victimised in some form at school, with 16 per cent reporting that they were experiencing this daily (Figures 1 and 2).

Furthermore, students who report being victimised were three times more likely to be at risk of having depressive symptoms when compared with those not reporting such experiences (Figure 3). Results suggest that there is a marked association between a young person's perception of a secure and supportive social environment and emotional wellbeing.

### Social connectedness and emotional wellbeing

To gain an understanding of young people's feelings of connectedness or belonging to important others, students were asked several questions about the relationships in their lives, not just those within school but including relationships with family and friends. It is noteworthy that more than 40 per cent of students felt that they did not have anyone who knows them very well (that is, understands just how they think or feel). In addition, nearly a quarter of all young people surveyed reported that they had no one to talk to if they were upset, no-one they could trust, and no-one to depend on (Figure 4). Of particular interest is the difference between the responses of males and females to these questions.

Students reporting poor social connectedness (that is, having no-one to talk to, no-one to trust, no-one to depend on, and no-one who knows them well) are between two and three times more likely to experience depressive symptoms when compared with peers who reported the availability of more confiding relationships. The findings also revealed that 8 per cent of young people reported recent arguments with two or more people who were close to them, and these students were five times more likely to report depressive symptoms. The results suggest that the presence or absence of a sense of social connectedness may be associated with a young person's mental health and emotional wellbeing.

### Positive regard and emotional wellbeing

A sense of being valued is related to a young person's perceptions of the opportunities they have to make a contribution to the day-to-day activities of the school and to what extent their contributions are recognised, valued and acknowledged. While nearly 80 per cent of students perceived that they had opportunities to help plan things like school activities, events and policies, students reported that they were not always acknowledged for their contribution.

Students were asked whether 'teachers notice when I am doing a good job and let me know about it'. Twenty-eight per cent of students reported that teachers didn't notice them and gave no positive feedback; these students were twice as likely to report depressive symptoms.

In addition, positive regard was reflected in how young people perceived they were treated at school. While over 90 per cent of students reported that they were generally treated in a friendly way at school, those who perceived that they were not treated in a friendly way at school were four times as likely to report depressive symptoms.

It is possible that experiencing depressive symptoms may cause young people to perceive their interactions with others in negative ways. However, the results suggest that it is important for schools to continue to develop ways of making young people feel that they can participate in the life of the school and that their efforts are acknowledged.

## Addressing Social Environments of Young People

Preliminary analysis of the first wave of data collection for the Gatehouse Project Adolescent Health Survey has clearly illustrated important associations between different aspects of young people's social environment and their emotional health. While it is not possible to attribute cause and effect, the data strongly suggest that promoting a greater sense of security, social connectedness and positive regard within the school environment may lead to enhanced emotional health. The possible benefits to be gained from successfully addressing school victimisation alone appear to be substantial. The Health Promoting Schools framework offers the opportunity to examine all aspects of a school environment for promoting and protecting young people's health. These include the school's curriculum and teaching, its organisational structures, its policies and practices, and its links with the wider community (NH&MRC 1996).

Within a health promoting schools framework, the Gatehouse Project operates at three levels of the school environment: the classroom; the whole school; and school-community partnerships. It uses both an environment-focused and an individual-focused approach in each school setting. This design is supported by evidence from health programs which suggests that simultaneous attention be given to reducing risk factors and building protective factors in different social domains over an extended period (McBride et al. 1995; Hawkins and Catalano 1993). Extensive programs addressing a range of skills and environmental conditions have the potential to bring substantial long-term gains.

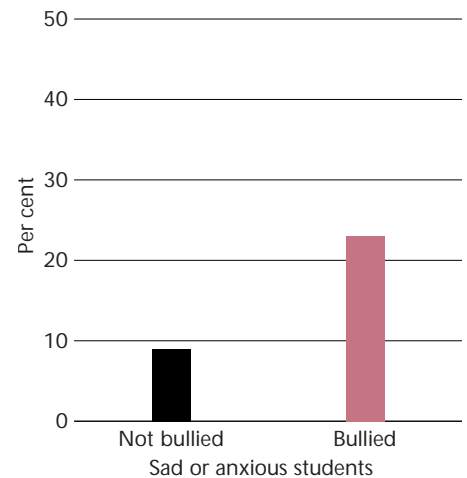
### Environment-focused Approach

A team of staff has been established in each school to review existing practices, policies, organisational structures, and community links which influence the social environment of the school. The school-based teams, in partnership with the Centre for Adolescent Health personnel, are developing ways of enhancing the quality of their school's social environment and interactions within their school community.

There are three key areas for action: reduction of victimisation; enhancement of social connectedness; promotion of positive regard.

Figure 3

### Victimisation and emotional wellbeing: any form of victimisation

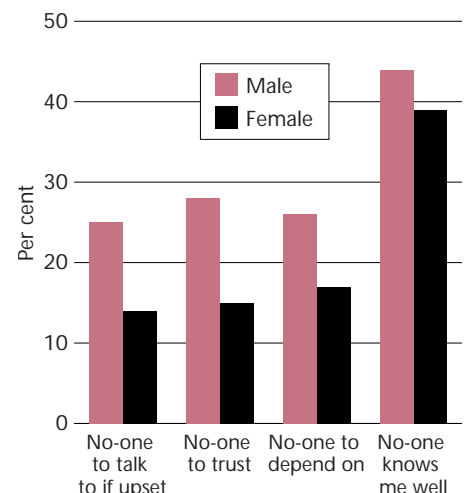


Note: 52 per cent reported being bullied in any way. Students in the 'bullied' group are three times more likely to have depressive symptoms than those not reported being bullied.

Source: Gatehouse Project, Centre for Adolescent Health, Victoria.

Figure 4

### Social connectedness: perceptions of young people



Source: Gatehouse Project, Centre for Adolescent Health, Victoria.

### **Reduction of victimisation**

Victimisation of any form is recognised as harmful to young people. In reality, tackling harassment, victimisation and bullying in schools is a difficult and complex task. While many people feel that it is their responsibility to do something about this, many lack the confidence to act and feel that they may make the situation worse for the victim (Boulton 1997).

Importantly, studies have demonstrated that violence and bullying in schools is preventable. They stress the need for a systematic whole school approach involving parents, students and teachers in recognising victimisation and developing prevention and intervention strategies which are used consistently by all members of the school community. (Olweus 1993; Rigby 1996; Sharp and Smith 1994).

In recent years, schools have recognised that they have an important task of creating classroom and recreational environments which are safe from victimisation and harassment. Increasingly, schools have taken a pro-active stance on developing bullying and harassment policies and a range of strategies for dealing with incidents of this nature. It is clear from the present survey that a large number of young people still experience subtle, hurtful and damaging abuse in the school setting and, for some, the abuse is systematic and frequent. In response to these findings, schools are working to create a particular *ethos* or *climate* where subtle verbal abuse, ridicule and exclusionary practices are not only detected but are also not tolerated.

A focus for schools is therefore to reduce and, if possible, eliminate victimisation and actively promote practices and interactions which are inclusive, collaborative and supportive. Schools are exploring ways to involve all members of the school community in the development, dissemination and monitoring of bullying policies. They are also exploring teaching and learning strategies, organisational structures, extra-curricular activities and opportunities for communication which will contribute to a safe and supportive school environment.

### **Enhancing social connectedness**

The number of young people reporting that, both within and outside school, they have no-one to talk to if they are upset, no-one to depend on, and no-one to trust is a startling survey finding. For young adolescents, the challenges of building, maintaining and changing friendships are consuming features of school life. These can be a source of great pleasure but may also contribute to a great deal of anxiety.

Security and a sense of belonging with peers underpin emotional wellbeing. A feature of the project's classroom approach is the use of small groups, class discussions and cooperative learning activities which enable students to interact with other members of the class in different combinations. Schools are developing strategies to recognise those students whose sense of belonging appears low, and to make special efforts to ensure their inclusion by creating opportunities and enhancing skills.

Positive teacher-student relationships are essential for adolescents' academic motivation and achievement (Roeser et al. 1996). Goodenow (1993) suggests that adolescents derive much of their academic motivation from perceived support from others in the school environment. Teachers and school-based student welfare staff also play an essential role in caring for young people, particularly young people who have family relationships which are perceived as difficult and unsupportive. It is important not only to have support available to the young

person in times of difficulty, but also to ensure that the young person perceives the support to be confidential, accessible and non-stigmatising. This has implications not only for the training of school-based personnel but also for the organisational structures within schools and between schools and their communities.

Schools are examining organisation and structures which support adolescents in developing a sense of belonging and engagement at school. This has been the subject of much recent research and educational reform (Hargreaves and Earl 1994; Jackson et al. 1993; National Advisory Committee on Student Alienation 1996). The findings from these studies highlight the benefits of reorganising and restructuring aspects of the social, physical and learning environments in the early secondary school so that practices match more closely the needs of young adolescents.

Some of the ways schools in the Gatehouse Project are addressing these findings include:

- using small teams of teachers working with groups of students to enhance student-teacher and student-student relationships;
- providing a wide range of learning strategies, especially using small group teaching and learning strategies;
- involving students in practical learning experiences relevant to their own lives;
- making better links between school subjects, and particularly locating pastoral care issues within the curriculum to ensure that the academic and social needs of young people are met at the same time;
- providing opportunities and encouragement for student participation in school decision making processes;
- ensuring parent and community participation to provide encouragement for students and support for teachers.

Schools are developing structures which facilitate communication between students, between students and teachers, between teachers and parents, and between students and parents.

Given the higher reported absence of close and confiding relationships for boys than girls in the findings of the survey, a particular challenge for schools is the development of accessible and supportive relationships for young males.

### **Promoting positive regard**

Active participation in school or community-based activities is protective against health risk behaviours (Hawkins et al. 1992). Perhaps this is best illustrated in studies of disengagement or alienation where absenteeism and school drop-out are major risk factors for lifelong health damaging behaviours such as smoking, regular alcohol consumption and other drug use (Zubrick et al. 1997; McBride et al. 1995; Nutbeam 1993). Schools do offer many opportunities for students to participate, but as Holdsworth (1996) suggests, for these to make a difference, they need to involve activities which are valuable, academically legitimate and make sense to the participants and to the community.

In classrooms and school communities, many opportunities exist for students to contribute to activities. However, students do not always have the encouragement, time, confidence or skills to take up these opportunities. As Resnick and associates (1993) have pointed out, for students who may not be academically proficient and for whom there is little room for improvement, it is particularly important that schools provide opportunities for them to develop and demonstrate a range of competencies and experience a sense of success and achievement in other contexts.



This challenge has been addressed in a range of ways in schools. The approaches outlined in the previous section, such as the use of a wide range of learning strategies, small group work, and practical learning experiences, create opportunities for participation and recognition. Co-curricular activities can provide opportunities for students to experience a sense of achievement. Schools have also developed a range of opportunities for students to celebrate their work and present it in different ways to different audiences.

Many opportunities exist for teachers to notice students and make them feel that they and their contributions are valued. Most schools provide awards for notable achievements, for example in the academic, sporting or arts fields. While such recognition is valuable, smaller and more frequent rewards and recognition for everyday achievements and contributions can be more effective in creating a sense of worth and belonging. Roeser et al. (1996) noted that when students perceived that only the most able students were acknowledged they also perceived their relationships with teachers were less responsive.

In schools, as in the workplace and the home, pressure of time often prevents us from providing the sort of everyday recognition that is valued. In the environment-centred approach of the Gatehouse Project, teachers and students are encouraged to be on the lookout for opportunities to recognise efforts and achievements, especially through simple and frequent feedback. The power of simple feedback – like a smile, a verbal thank you, or note of thanks – should not be discounted. Public recognition through displays of work or photographs of students engaged in activities, class or school magazines or newsletters, anthologies of students' writing, opportunities to present performances to community audiences, are some opportunities being used by schools to show students that they are noticed and valued.

### Individual-focused Approach

While the creation of a positive school environment can enhance young people's sense of security, belonging and feeling valued, individual students often need support in dealing with their everyday difficulties.

At an individual level, the curriculum element of the Gatehouse Project involves students in acquiring an understanding about common challenges and stresses many will face across the teenage years. A close relationship (and its break up), managing school work, experiences of academic performance through grading or examinations, arguments with parents, brothers or sisters, conflict with friends or teachers, and having enough money, represent just some examples of the day-to-day concerns of young adolescents. How these experiences are clustered, perceived and dealt with or reacted to by the young person and others, and the context in which they occur, will determine the impact and outcome on the emotional wellbeing of the young person.

Young people experiencing depressed mood or long periods of unhappiness tend to develop a set of negative thinking about themselves, their world and their future. Distress, insecurity and isolation will have an adverse effect on a whole range of aspects of a young person's life, including their daily interactions with others, their work and other activities, and their sense of self. Effects such as loss of confidence, difficulty in trusting others, and loneliness not only make it difficult to deal with many of the demands of a changing social context, but also make it difficult to access and derive practical and emotional support from others.

DuBois and associates (1992) noted the reciprocal pattern of effects involving what they called 'daily hassles' and emotional distress and found that not only were daily hassles predictive of subsequent adolescent emotional

distress but also that emotional distress was predictive of increased hassles and difficult interactions. They suggest that the cycle of effects may, once started and left uninterrupted, be self-sustaining, and they stress the critical importance of prevention strategies which focus on changing the environmental conditions in the lives of young adolescents and the development of skills to deal with difficult situations.

The Gatehouse Project curriculum program uses 'triggers' from novels, short stories, vignettes, poems, music, videos, and cartoons depicting day-to-day hassles young people experience. The principal focus is on how these situations can evoke common emotions (for example, anxiety, unhappiness and anger) and how students can learn to manage these.

Often young people interpret information about situations, themselves and the world in negative, pessimistic and self-disapproving ways. They may interpret situations in ways which over-generalise, personalise, and 'catastrophise'. These patterns of negative thinking in turn affect their responses or actions to situations and their interactions with others. The aim of the classroom program is to assist young people to: recognise that these feelings are normal; understand the links between thoughts and feelings; look for alternative possibilities for viewing a situation; and consider and practise alternative possibilities for action.

Small group work, classroom discussions, role-plays and debates provide opportunities for interaction and group inquiry, and encourage the development of a positive classroom climate which contribute to a sense of belonging. The program is designed to be integrated into the learning goals and curriculum foci of both the English and Health and Physical Education Key Learning Areas.

While the classroom program is individual-focused in that it aims to help individuals to develop understandings, strategies and skills with which to negotiate life's ups and downs, it is important to stress that the individual approach works *in conjunction with* the whole school approach to creating and maintaining an environment in which young people feel secure, connected and positively regarded.

### Conclusion

Schools as social institutions constitute a large portion of a young person's social world and as such the school's potential for social support should be strengthened. We need to pay greater attention to the support for teachers and other school personnel who play a key role in creating nurturing classrooms and schools and in helping young people deal with day to day difficulties.

The Gatehouse Project's framework for the promotion of emotional wellbeing highlights the importance of the social environment of schools and demonstrates that adolescent health promotion should not only be concerned with individual approaches, but also should consider the total school environment to which young people are exposed each day.

We have begun to examine those aspects of the social environment that promote risk or enhance protection for emotional wellbeing. Prospective research will enhance our understanding of the risk and protective factors for emotional wellbeing. The data from this study demonstrate associations between a sense of security, social connectedness and positive regard and emotional wellbeing, and highlight the potential benefits for all young people, not just those deemed to be 'at risk'. Schools



which attend to the quality of social interactions and environments will provide benefits for all students, not only in enhancing emotional wellbeing but also in improving academic motivation and achievements and obtaining diverse health gains.

Our work with schools to date has indicated great scope for the promotion of security, social connectedness and positive regard within the core activities of everyday school life. The direction of our continuing work is to conduct ongoing examination of those aspects of young people's social worlds which affect emotional wellbeing and, in partnership with schools, use this knowledge to further develop appropriate strategies.

The differing responses of boys and girls to various aspects of the survey suggest that we need to consider the implications of this on the development of health promotion strategies. The provision of support structures and practices which are readily accessible, non-stigmatising and supportive (such as mentoring and peer programs) need further development. Moreover, these need to occur alongside teaching and learning programs which encourage young people to understand common emotional responses to social situations, and the effects that different emotional states will have on their social interactions.

While we acknowledge that schools play an important role in fostering the emotional wellbeing of young people, schools cannot be expected to do this alone or without adequate resources. Involving the broader school community, especially families, and linking health services are essential next steps. Many of these aspects remain a challenge at this stage of the Gatehouse Project. However, the relevance and applicability of the constructs of security, social connectedness and positive regard should be extended beyond the school setting – to home, workplaces, sports clubs, youth organisations, and other social settings.

Meeting the challenge of improving adolescent mental health will involve preventive action and support for families, schools, youth and community organisations in the creation of supportive social environments.

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