



Kids quizzed about loneliness

A new mental health promotion program in schools aims to help pupils overcome feelings of disconnection from peers. CATHY SAUNDERS reports.

Lonely or alone? An innovative program to help children and teenagers who feel lonely in this hyper-connected world will be introduced into WA schools next month.

Co-researcher Lisa Wood, of the school of population health at the University of WA, said although young people used social media such as Facebook, Twitter, texting and email as never before, many still felt disconnected from their peers.

“About 80 per cent of adolescents report feeling lonely at some time, and, of these, 20 per cent become pathologically lonely,” she said.

The new mental health promotion program will be student self-directed, online, interactive and multimedia driven and can be used in schools, by school psychologists and teachers, or at home.

It was developed by Winthrop Professor Stephen Houghton of UWA's graduate school of education, Associate Professor Annemaree Carroll of the University of Queensland, Professor John Hattie of the University of Melbourne and Associate Professor Wood.

It will be implemented in metropolitan and rural schools, with students aged nine to 18 in Years 5-12, and delivered over four to eight sessions of 20-30 minutes each.

The program has three modules — Take Charge, Chill Out and Think Again. The third module aims to change negative thinking and encourage a more positive approach to situations.

And for an extra dimension, a mobile phone app may be available to help support young people when they are feeling particularly lonely and vulnerable. It will involve a 10-15 minute exercise aimed at reducing their negative thinking at the time.

“The adverse physical, psychological, social and mental health outcomes of loneliness during adolescence are well documented and are a major concern during this peak period of development,” Associate Professor Wood said. However, most of the previous measures were developed for adults.

Professor Houghton said the intervention program also would teach students to recognise others who might be alone and not dealing effectively with it.

The program was developed as the final stage of a social connectedness and loneliness study by the researchers.

It was prompted by increasing numbers of mainstream students being referred to the Centre for Child and Adolescent Related Disorders for assessment.

As part of the study, the researchers developed a new instrument to measure multidimensional loneliness, based on feedback from surveys of more than 2000 primary and high school students from 16 schools. The study received \$276,750 in funding from Healthway.

The researchers studied differences in positive mental health, perceived social isolation, perceptions of school environment,

regulation of emotions and protective factors across states of loneliness.

The surveys were administered at several times in schools of varying socioeconomic status and in metropolitan and country areas.

The results identified four common factors — friendship, isolation, positive attitude to solitude, and negative attitude to solitude.

For the measurement tool, 24 statements relating to the four factors were used to elicit the degree of connectedness or loneliness experienced by the child.

Examples of the statements are: “I feel part of a group of friends” or “I feel like I do not have a friend in the world” and “I feel calm and relaxed when I am by myself” or “I am unhappy being so isolated from others”.

Professor Houghton said the surveys found that adolescents in rural and remote schools reported higher levels of negative attitude to solitude — that is, negative aspects of being alone such as boredom, unhappiness and aloneness — compared with those in metropolitan schools and district schools.

“It may be that individuals in remote and rural areas have far fewer opportunities to interact with groups of friends, which in turn leads to the negative attitude to solitude,” Professor Houghton said.

Girls scored higher than boys with regard to friendship, which related to having reliable, trustworthy and supportive friends.

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LISA WOOD