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## Gaming community key to youth mental health

Article by: [Nicole Madigan](#) | Published: 18-09-2019

Photo: Health Times Magazine

The growing cohort of gamers have become a primary focus for mental health groups, with September's R U OK Day specifically focusing on the youth-based demographic.

Katherine Newton, CEO of the national event says the gaming community was a crucial piece of the puzzle, when it came to reaching out to those with a mental illness.

Despite its reputation as an isolating activity, gamers in fact have a high level of social connectedness, providing a sense of belonging to those involved.



“This social connectedness can help gamers look out for each other both online and offline, and trust their gut-instinct when they notice signs that someone might be struggling with life,” says Ms Newton.

She says the signs can be subtle changes in both verbal or non-verbal behaviour.



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“Someone might tell you they’re having difficulty switching off, or a mate might not be turning up to social events,” she says.

“We’re encouraging people to look out for those cues.

“We can also make a conscious effort when we know someone is going through a significant life change such as job loss, relationship breakdown, study pressure or perhaps becoming a parent.”

Gaming has also proven to be a worthy respite for those experiencing mental health problems, with recent research suggested it improves mental wellbeing for those who take part.

According to the Digital Australia 2020 Report from Bond University and the Interactive Games and Entertainment Association, 74 per cent of gamers say they have experienced mental health benefits through gaming.



The study revealed gaming was an inclusive group, which helped with loneliness and social anxiety.

It also provided a refuge from external pressures and bullying, the research showed.

Conversely, research conducted by R U OK? Revealed that less than half of 18 – 34-year-olds believed they knew what signs to look for that might indicate a person was struggling in life.

With more than 12 million Australians playing video games regularly, psychotherapist Karen Phillip says the gaming community is a great place to focus on educating youth about mental health.

“Gaming can provide an outlet and release from reality for many young people struggling with mental health issues.

“While it isn’t the best choice for support it enables the teen to connect with others with similar interests and as a temporary escape.”

Dr Phillip says a gamer may be in need of support if they are spending considerable time online thereby forgoing normal life activities.

“Also, if the gamer starts speaking very negatively about their life and future, this is a cause of concern.

“Any gamer not making forward plans for life can provide a hint of worry. Continual negative talk about life, connecting with others and further aspirations all give us a sign or concern.”

Dr Phillip says mental health professionals and organisations may benefit from connection with gamers.

“Games are where our young people are congregating and communicating therefore, it is wise to become part of that community as a way to stay connected with so many of our kids.

“This way professionals can understand what their conversations and concerns are about which allows us to help and offer support they may need.”

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