



kooth

# Enhancing Peer Support on Kooth

## A Progress Report

Charlotte Mindel & Crystal Oppong



# Introduction

## **Kooth is an online mental health service for children and young people.**

Since its inception in 2004 the focus has been on providing both professional and online community based support. The community element has been built around the magazine, a space for users to submit content such as poems, creative writing, helpful tips and life stories, and the discussion boards, a more integrative approach where individuals can ask questions to the community or engage in responding to others' questions.

A recent addition to this community space includes mini-activities, a series of step-by-step activities whose purpose it is to support and enhance children and young people's wellbeing. All community content on

Kooth is moderated prior to publication by an internal team of moderators. A focus on enhancing the peer support offer, and measuring it's value, over the past 18-months has resulted in some exciting outcomes. Research and development takes time to come to fruition and is on-going, so in the meantime we've produced this report hoping to provide a useful update on what we're working on.

In 2019 an in-depth piece of research explored the mechanisms of change within Kooth ([toc.xenzone.com](http://toc.xenzone.com)). An analysis of the discussion board content suggested that users were having helpful, potentially therapeutic, experiences as a result of engaging in this community space, similar to those of other peer support models. The peer support model on Kooth is quite different to a traditional model, reflecting more of a content-based social

community space rather than dedicated mentors, peer support 'workers', or groups. Having identified positive outcomes in this part of Kooth which weren't specifically being measured, we took on the task of developing a measure to capture these experiences.

In the first six months after launching the measure in December 2019 we received over 50,000 responses from users. This report shares the story from the theory behind the measure to what we learned about the peer community experience, and what the future holds for peer support on Kooth.

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**Research Lead**

## **Acknowledgements**

With thanks to Crystal Oppong for her analysis of this data and co-authorship of this report, and to the product, design and technology teams at Kooth for their hard work on transforming a theory into a functional measure.

# The Measure & The Theory

## Stage 1: The helpfulness rating

Before delving into more detailed aspects of their experience, we were curious about whether young people find engaging with peer support content helpful. The first stage of the measure asks “Did you find this part of Kooth helpful?”, with four options from No to Loads! or a fifth option of Don’t know, which we do not count as a negative or positive experience.

## Stage 2: What type of therapeutic experience made this a helpful?

The purpose of stage 2 was to understand with more depth the ‘type’ of experience a young person was having. There were four types of experience identified through the work which developed the theory for this stage, based on two core papers:

1. The findings from Prescott’s analysis<sup>1</sup> of Kooth peer support content (2017) which found that largely the type of support users engaged with was either **informational** or **emotional**.



2. Hanley’s analysis that found that two of the distinct categories of goals young people set within online counselling<sup>2</sup> are **Intrapersonal** goals and **Interpersonal** goals.

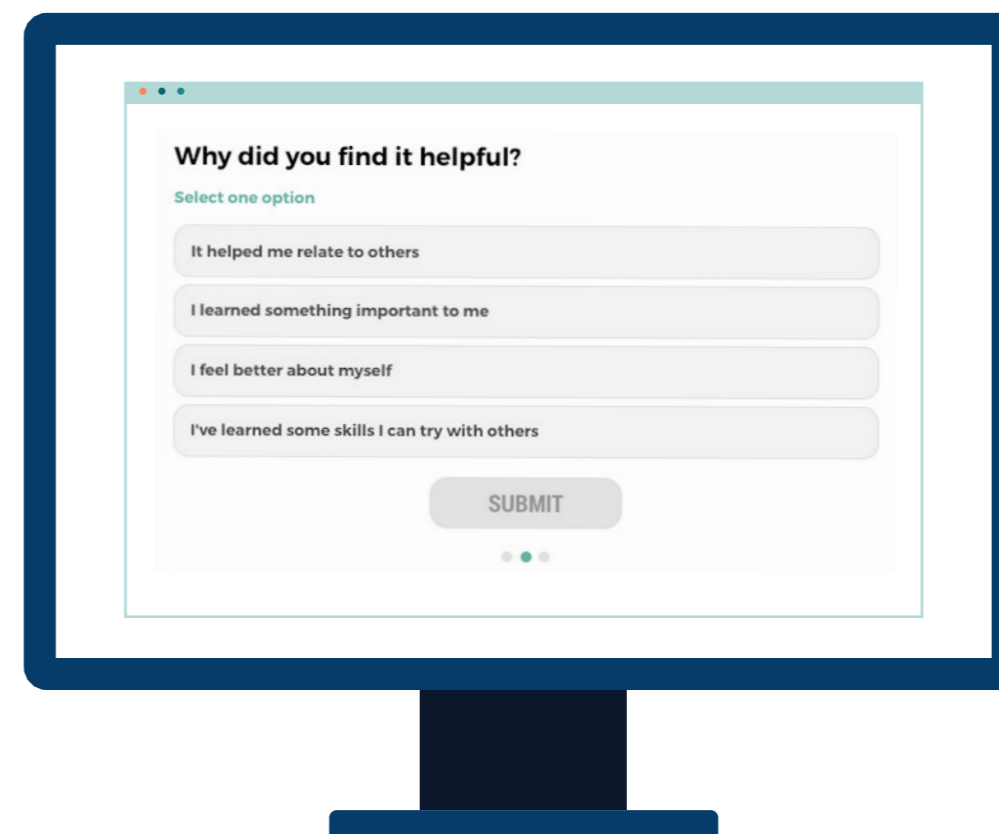
<sup>1</sup>Prescott, J., Hanley, T., Ujheyli. (2017) Directional and non-directional peer support in online mental health forums for young people. JMIR Mental Health 2017, 4(3):e29 DOI: 10.2196/mental.6921

<sup>2</sup>Hanley, T, Ersahin, Z, Sefi, A et al. (2017) Comparing online and face-to-face student counselling: what therapeutic goals are identified and what are the implications for educational providers? Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools, 27(1):37-54. ISSN 2055-6365 <https://doi.org/10.1017/jgc.2016.20>

From these formative findings about the experience of young people who engage in therapeutic and peer support work online, we developed a matrix which broadly defines the experience a young person might encounter when using content-based peer support on Kooth.

	Emotional Support	Informational Support
Intrapersonal	<p>Relates to <b>emotional support</b> in <b>relation to one's self</b>.</p> <p>Support refers to: inner feelings, personal growth, inner resources, and emotional awareness and regulation.</p>	<p>Relates to <b>informational support</b> in <b>relation to one's self</b>.</p> <p>Support refers to: the provision of knowledge, facts, advice or feedback associated with self-improvement, and personal development.</p>
Interpersonal	<p>Relates to <b>emotional support</b> in <b>relation to others</b> (e.g. family, friends, teachers, therapists, etc.)</p> <p>Support refers to: relational feelings, forming relationships, interacting with others, and opening up.</p>	<p>Related to <b>informational support</b> in <b>relation to others</b>.</p> <p>Support refers to: the provision of knowledge, facts, advice or feedback associated with relationship processes, interactions or conflict.</p>

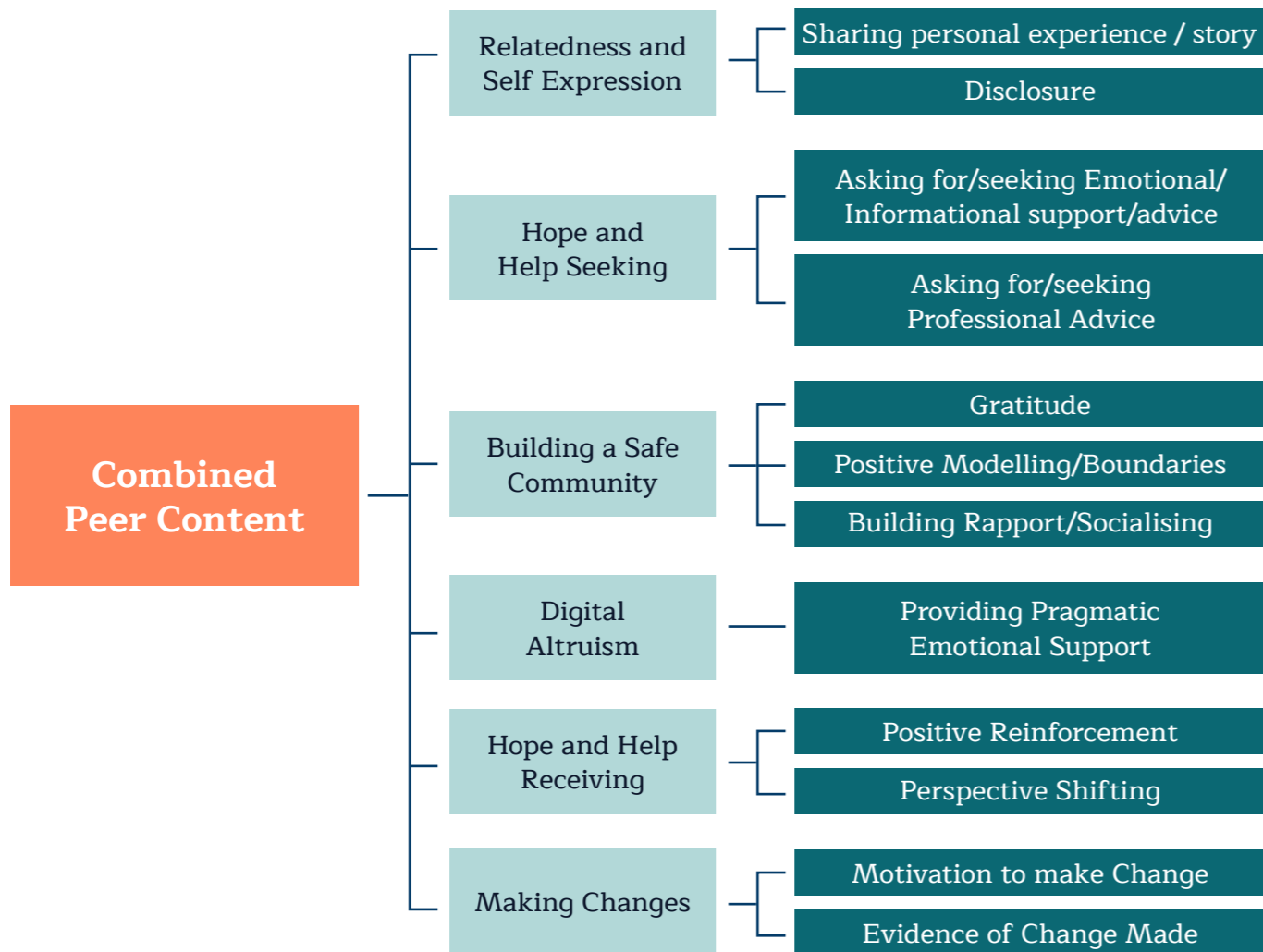
In the second stage of the measure, a young person is asked to select one statement that best describes why they are having a helpful experience. There is one statement referring to each quadrant of the matrix.



### Stage 3: Tell us more about your experience

The final stage of the measure adds one more element to the depth of the experience. We ask an individual to select further statements in relation to the one they selected in stage 2. These are based on the peer support outcomes identified through the Theory of Change<sup>3</sup> work conducted by XenZone in 2019, which were developed into statements to align with the different quadrants of the matrix.

#### Peer support outcomes identified which informed the statements:



### Key points:

- Individuals who select **no or don't know** have a different journey through the measure than that which is described here.
- This measure is perhaps best described as a helpfulness rating with additional information on why the thing it is measuring was helpful. It doesn't measure any therapeutic distance travelled by an individual.
- It is challenging to distinguish whether the outcome is referring to an experience of the community offering of the platform as a whole or a specific article. Either way it provides a rich picture of the momentary experience for a user and the value of the content being consumed.



<sup>3</sup>Hanley, T., Sefi, A., Grauberg, J., & Prescott, J. (2019) A positive virtual ecosystem: The Theory of Change for Kooth. London.

## 21,000 responses to helpfulness rating within 3 months

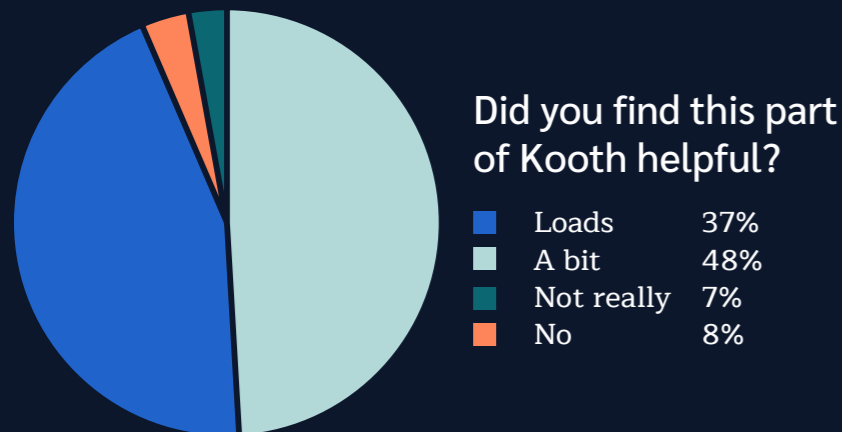
Between March and May 2020 there were just over 45,000 views of our articles and discussions on Kooth. Almost 50% of these visits resulted in a measure completion. Young people appeared keen to share their

experiences with unique users completing the measure an average of three times. As explained within the introduction, the first question young people were asked is whether they found the part of Kooth they were currently

accessing helpful, followed by why they found it helpful and how in particular it was able to help them. Depending on the response to the first question the user might only be shown one follow up question or none at all.

*“Of those who did follow the typical journey through the measure 84% of young people completed all questions.”*

## 85% of young people find peer support and content helpful



The majority of young people who completed the measure showed satisfaction with the content they were engaging in, with 85% expressing that the content helped them “loads” and “a bit”.

Although 85% of young people in this sample found peer support content helpful, there were a small number of young people who did not. 8% of young people who filled out the measure said that they did not find the particular

content they were engaging with helpful. These individuals had the opportunity to provide further feedback through free text. There were a number of themes that emerged through these responses; a few people expressed that the content they engaged with made them feel worse, others felt as though the content was not what they were looking for or they did not understand the post they were reading.

This measure was completed over a wide range of articles and discussions spanning a variety of categories, such as mental health, bullying, family, drugs and relationships. Scores across

different categories of content varied, which has allowed us to use the measure as a useful indicator of the quality of our content. For example, if we see particular content receiving low scores across multiple users we can use this feedback to find ways to improve it. From the feedback given by the young people we are able to see what content was helpful and in what way, as users were able to disclose their specific therapeutic experience of the content through the quadrant statements.

## Young people on Kooth who find peer support helpful say it's because they are able to relate to others

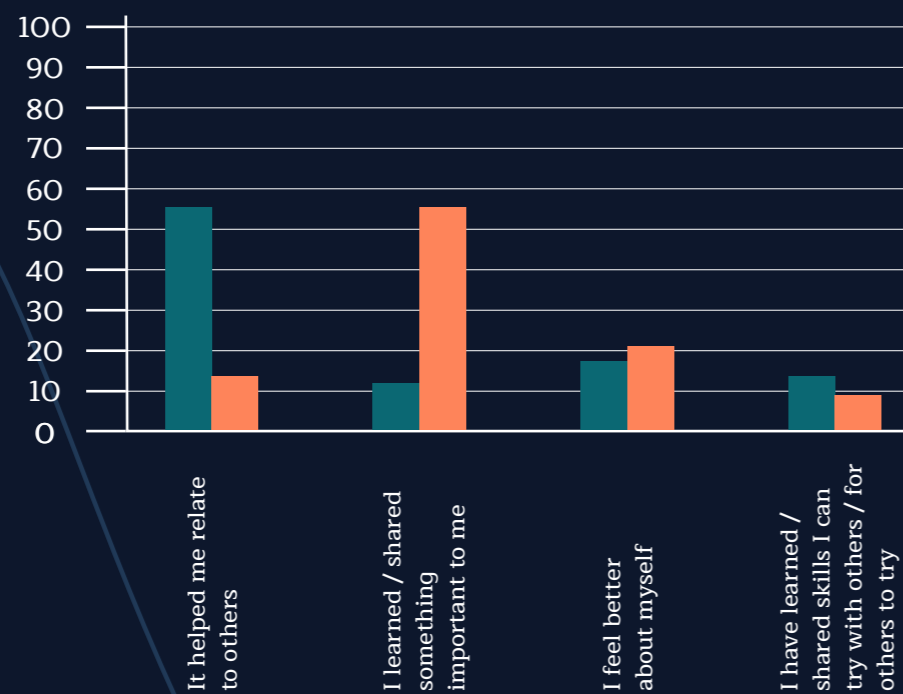
On the whole, we saw that our service users value the ability to relate to others through engaging in peer support, as 44% of users chose this matrix statement ‘**It helped me relate to others**’ over the other three options. Young people were able to connect with others

based on the understanding that their peers may be going through similar experiences to them, a process which has been identified as promoting empowerment, increased self-esteem and self-management of difficulties<sup>4</sup> within other peer support research.

## Young people who help others on Kooth report feeling that they've been able to share something important to them

Readers vs. Contributors.  
The experience of each demonstrated by the % each statement was chosen for the different users.

Readers  
Contributors



Despite a large number of the population expressing that they are able to relate to others, we found that when looking deeper into the type of content-based peer support user who fills out the measure, there were differences between readers and those who contribute more actively. Readers, classified as those who solely browse content, had a different experience to contributors, classified as those who write and or comment on posts.

In comparison to the 57% of 'readers' who said they were able to relate to others, contributors felt as though their experience of contributing content to Kooth helped them share something important to themselves. It was clear that the process of sharing experiences and advice with others as an act of self-improvement was something that resonated with a lot of our contributors. Therefore, giving young people a space in which they can not only read but share their thoughts in the form of peer support reinforced the assertion that digital altruism<sup>5</sup> is an experienced outcome for young people on Kooth. This is particularly pertinent as the very act of helping others online has been found to decrease symptoms of depression within individuals who have been facilitated in doing so<sup>6</sup>.

## Sharing personal experience is a fundamental outcome for young people engaging with peer support on Kooth

Understanding the mechanisms of change for young people who use Kooth was a major focus of the research team at XenZone through 2019. One of the main takeaways from this work was the identification of outcomes young people experienced through using the content-based peer support within the service. We were keen to further validate these findings through this measure, and in doing so it was clear that there were three outcomes which young people tend to experience more regularly.

Sharing personal experiences was the most common theme chosen by individuals within the final stage of the

measure, closely followed by socialising or building rapport and positive modelling and boundaries.

These three outcomes demonstrate the areas of greatest value to young people. They're mostly conducive with interpersonal experiences which you would expect to see when focusing on peer support. Additionally this asserts that the virtual community within Kooth fosters a sense of connection in a way that is beneficial to the individual.

<sup>4</sup>Julie Repper & Tim: Carter (2011) A review of the literature on peer support in mental health services, Journal of Mental Health, 20(4)392-411, DOI: 10.3109/09638237.2011.583947

<sup>5</sup>Hanley, T., Sefi, A., Grauberg, J., & Prescott, J. (2019) A positive virtual ecosystem: The Theory of Change for Kooth. London.

<sup>6</sup>Doré, B., Morris, R., Burr, D., Picard, R., & Ochsner, K. (2017). Helping Others Regulate Emotion Predicts Increased Regulation of One's Own Emotions and Decreased Symptoms of Depression. Personality And Social Psychology Bulletin, 43(5): 729-739. doi: 10.1177/0146167217695558

## Young people ask for 'I feel less alone' option to be added to Kooth measurement

Within the first four months of the measure being live we gave an option for young people to feed back to us their suggestions for statements that could be used in the third stage. Out of just over 400 individuals who submitted alternative statements, 46 of these were related to feeling "less alone". This was by far the most repeated statement of those which were submitted.



The repetition and desire to share this with us was quite significant. It suggests that feeling less alone is an impactful outcome of using the content-driven peer support within the service. Loneliness has been shown to have a correlation with suicide<sup>7</sup>, therefore, the implication that Kooth helps users feel less alone is a powerful one.

This engagement also demonstrated high levels of interest by users and provided a platform for users to be a part of its development by suggesting additional statements. Based on this feedback we have since implemented "I no longer feel alone" as a stage three statement within the emotional interpersonal quadrant, the quadrant where it was suggested most frequently and which most aligns with the statement.

<sup>7</sup>Stravynski A, Boyer R. Loneliness in relation to suicide ideation and parasuicide: a population-wide study. *Suicide Life Threat Behav.* 2001;31(1):32-40.





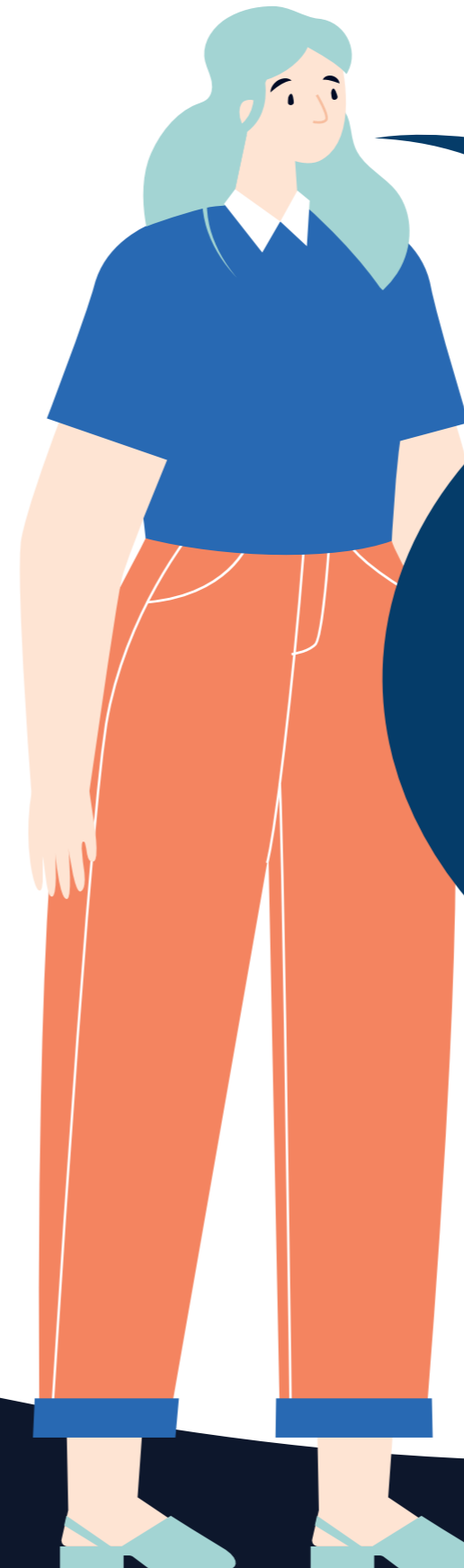
# Future Developments

Content-based peer support on Kooth has always had very traditional methods at its heart, such as discussion forums. In 2018 a grant was awarded by the Small Business Research Initiative Healthcare programme to fund a proposed enhancement of the peer support 'offer' within Kooth. From this, the new feature of mini-activities was launched, enabling both individual and peer support.

In the autumn of 2020, the Care Policy and Evaluation Centre at the London School of Economics will evaluate the impact of this enhanced peer support model on the wellbeing of Kooth users. Findings from this work will be shared in the Spring of 2021.

A collaboration with the University of Bristol is also underway to understand

how to ensure accessibility for those individuals who are hardly reached. The primary focus is on Black, Asian and Minority ethnic communities. This work will include co-design with young people from diverse communities, and provide further insight into the value of peer support and it's potential.



## Final words

As long as users find online content helpful, and experience value from being able to engage with and support one another, we feel that there is value in dedicating time to improving quality and accessibility for all.

As the first of several measures being implemented within Kooth, this one not only taught us a lot but yielded results that enable service improvement, as well as a greater understanding of our users. We look forward to sharing further on the work being done around both peer support and outcomes measures for Kooth users.

# Research at Kooth

Kooth is committed to developing the evidence base for our services and online therapy as a whole. We work with leading academic partners, and have a team of in-house researchers and data scientists overseen by Chief Research Officer building research strategies to meet corporate and policy objectives in mental health.

We are skilled in developing strong relationships between academia, industry, policy and commissioners, and

driven by aligning user needs and wants with an evidence base to ensure meaningful research and data. Uniquely positioned to undertake real-world research, we have the opportunity to close the research-to-practice gap from 17 years to a matter of months in some cases.

Since the research team formed in 2018 we have innovated outcome measures, developing ground-breaking evidence for measuring outcomes online; reacted to

Covid-19 to understand the impact on Kooth users and mental health within our populations; and continue to demonstrate the impact of online services on the health and social care ecosystems across England.

If you want to find out more or work with us, we'd love to hear from you. You can contact us at [research@kooth.com](mailto:research@kooth.com)

# About Kooth

We create a welcoming space for effective personalised digital mental health care, available to all.

At Kooth we provide easy to access, high quality, online mental health support by eliminating obstacles to accessibility. Kooth offers comprehensive mental health services, with anonymity and confidentiality at the heart of what we do and that connects people to peers, clinicians and activities as and when they need it.

We believe in evidence based mental health services that are effective in recovery, reduce stigma and connect people to peers and clinicians - our Kooth communities are at the heart of our service and we work with them to develop new and effective ways of providing early support, intervention and risk support.

## Anonymous Platform

Kooth is an anonymous site which helps children and young people to feel safe and confident in exploring their concerns and seeking professional support

## Self Help Tools

Our suite of self help tools are unique as they are pre-moderated allowing us to work with young people if we have concerns over safeguarding or clinical risks.

## Therapeutic Content

Over 100,000 pieces of therapeutic content created by our service users and professional content team. Based on what matters to you rather than condition based advice.

## Messaging

Our instant messaging function allows young people to talk directly to a professional and allows our professionals to reach out to a young person to provide additional support if required.

## Peer to Peer Support

Our peer to peer forums are pre-moderated to maximise safety and allow children and young people to discuss issues together in a facilitated environment

## Live Counselling

Our live counselling functionality allows children and young people to receive professional support through either booked or drop in sessions as and when a session is required.

## Activity Centre

Our activity centre allows children and young people to work collaboratively on key activities and our therapists to advise on key activities between sessions.

## 94% Recommend

On every part of our platform we ask for feedback on functionality and measure outcomes. 95% of our children and young people would recommend Kooth to a friend.

We believe that by using technology to facilitate peer to peer and professional conversations mental health services can be accessed by anyone.

We are passionate about creating accessible, safe, approachable and effective mental health services, with our service users at the centre of our decision making.





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about kooth?

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