

**WHAT DO
YOU NEED
TO**
#MAKEITGOOD?

Insight Topic 6: **DISTANCE**

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INTRODUCTION

NHS Tayside and partners want to adopt a positive approach to young people's sexual health. An insight gathering project has engaged young people in discussion of what they need to make relationships good. The purpose of the insight process is to bring detail to consideration of future services, particularly the possible use of social marketing or broader communication messages targeting young people.

This paper is one of a number of topic chapters published at www.makeitgoodtayside.org Each topic chapter presents:

- Insight from young people.
- Insight from other research, resources or services.
- A summary and discussion points.

For more about the insight gathering process please refer to **'About the Insight Gathering project'** also published at www.makeitgoodtayside.org

1. INSIGHT FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

In the initial focus groups, the topic of distance was raised and discussed by 5 of the 16 groups. In terms of online engagement, responses to the **DISTANCE** online survey came from 29 young people as follows:

Online engagement by Local Authority:

	Number of online submissions
Angus	4
Dundee	22
Perth and Kinross	1
Other area	2
Total by method	29

Online engagement by gender:

	Male	Female	Other gender identity
Number of participants	9	19	1

Online engagement by age:

	Under 16	16	17	18	19	20	21+
Number of participants	5	13	8	2	1	-	-

In addition to discussion in focus groups, young people completing the **DISTANCE** themed survey provided a response to the request: *Tell us about your experience of distance when it comes to sex or relationships*. Insight from young people points to several themes.

Positive and negative aspects of distance and relationships

Online and in focus groups young people identified that being farther apart can be both good and not so good for a relationship. For some young people such relationships might be a regular experience: "I've had several long distance and long-term relationships" (17/Dundee/Female). For some this has not always worked out well, particularly when younger and at school and there are prohibitive costs of travel.

About 4/5 years ago, I was in a relationship with somebody from Dunfermline. All was going really well to begin with but obviously because of the distance and us only being young teenagers, it was difficult for us to see each other, school

also made it difficult but we understood that school was necessary. As time when by, and the holidays came we managed to see each other quite a lot. Back to school after the holidays and now going into senior years and going to college, we wanted to see more of each other and we started meeting new people. Unfortunately, the more we wanted to see each other the worse our relationship became due to the fact we couldn't travel. After about 18 months the relationship fell apart and it then ended. We both went our own ways but still speaking to each other after realizing that it wouldn't work between us because of the distance and our lack of ability to travel so much. Time passed and we slowly stopped speaking to the point we have not heard from each other in about 2 years. I hope she moved onto a live she is enjoying, as for me, I moved on to another relationship, after a few others, with somebody who lived locally. (18/Angus/Female)

Not being able to make a relationship work because of the distance and money spent trying to see each other. Didn't work out and realised it was a mistake. (16/Angus/Female)

A common theme was that relationships over a distance can be difficult:

A very difficult thing. (16/Dundee/Female)

You can have a distance in a relationship, this can be hard for people in a relationship. (17/Dundee/Female)

A particular issue is a lack of intimacy.

Aye, if you are living far apart then it's just never going to work. You have to be near the person to share stuff and see each other. Physical stuff is important in a relationship. Like you need to be there to reassure each other. (Focus group 8/PK)

However, there are some positive aspects, particularly where an individual enjoys their personal space; the effort put into a relationship with someone living some distance away can be been rewarding.

Having time to think alone and reflect without input. Time to be your own person. (17/Angus/Female)

Distance can be good cause you don't want to be around the person like 100% of the time. (Focus group 4/PK)

Trust

An issue in the management of relationships across distance is that of trust; this has been a consistently important aspect of the discussions with young people in the insight gathering process and a dedicated topic chapter explores TRUST in more detail. However, in terms of distance young people have reported as follows in

response to the prompt *tell us about your experience of distance when it comes to sex or relationships*:

Easier to cheat. (16/Dundee/Male)

Not really sure, distance could affect trust. (18/PK/Male)

Stressful, hard, need a lot of trust. (16/Dundee/Female)

Trust, honesty and hard. (>16/Dundee/Female)

Friendships and feeling connected

While the intention of the insight process was to encourage consideration and discussion about romantic or intimate relationships with partners the topic of *distance* saw some young people reflect on broader issues of friendships and touched on aspects of isolation or mental health which are also of interest. Again, responding to the prompt *tell us about your experience of distance when it comes to sex or relationships*:

Feeling disconnected from those around you. (16/Dundee/Female)

Wanting to fit in but feeling left out. (17/Dundee/Female)

Distance and social media/technology

Young people expressed different views and experiences in terms of the role of social media. The topic chapter SOCIAL MEDIA explores related issues in more detail, but for these contributors there are different views on the role of technology/social media in the management of a relationship where there is some distance.

Mobile phones make it easier to know what people are doing, but when you are in a relationship you still want to be with people. (Focus group 1/Angus)

I had to move cities for University, and at first I was really scared in case a long distance relationship didn't work. But my boyfriend and I make it work by speaking on Facebook every day and seeing each other at least every two weeks. I miss him a lot, but your partner isn't your whole life. You can distract yourself by making new friends or taking up a hobby. (19/Dundee/Female)

Long distance relationships are only real if you were together in person and one or more has had to move away or leave for a bit, but they are intending on coming back. A long distance relationship IS NOT meeting someone over Facebook and Snapchat, messaging them and deciding you are "together" by speaking to them over a screen, and never having met in person. (16/Dundee/Female)

2. INSIGHT FROM RESEARCH, RESOURCES OR SERVICES

The purpose of identifying insight from other sources is to help locate young people's perceptions and lived experience in a broader context, and where possible to provide further evidence to support the stress which young people have given to an issue, in this section regarding the topic of distance in relationships.

In her blog Marie Hartwell-Walkerⁱ psychologist and counsellor recognises some of **the challenges of long distance relationships**; whether both partners are equally committed, the loss of everyday opportunities to "to connect, to reassure, to touch, to pick up a conversation that was too hard to finish an hour ago, to try again and again"; to be visibly a couple by being seen together, sharing friends and going home together. A Canadian studyⁱⁱ (Queens University Ontario, Department of Psychology) also explored differences between long-distance relationships and geographically close relationships to explore predictors of relationship quality. Researchers found that rather than distance or proximity **it is the relationship and individual characteristics of those involved that explain the quality of a relationship**, in other words those in distant relationships can have as good a relationship as those who are close, but that this means paying attention to **communication** (face-to-face or using technology) as well as making and expressing **commitment** to each other.

While academic research on the topic is sparse there is a plethora of conversations, blogs and reflections on long distance relationships and so clearly the insight from young people in Tayside is reflective what might be an increasing reality, perhaps also made more likely or possible by use of technology/social mediaⁱⁱⁱ.

3. DISTANCE: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION POINTS

When it comes to the insight offered by young people and other sources several important themes and issues have been highlighted. These are summarised below and discussion points are highlighted. Again, some attention is given to the use of insight from this project in terms of the use of social marketing to promote positive sexual health for young people.

Listening to young people and respecting their experiences

The theme of *distance* is not necessarily one which might be considered when service providers are considering response to young people's sexual health needs or improving outcomes. However, young people have highlighted how they experience and manage distance as an important aspect of some relationships and so a point of insight needs to be (considering social marketing requires a clear *customer orientation*) that young people need the space and time to talk about their broad experience of relationships, and not just about more obvious matters of contraception or condoms.

The benefits of communication

Across many of the topic areas explored in the insight gathering process the theme of interpersonal communication comes up. Whether looking at what little academic

work has been done, or the volume of interest in the subject online, the theme of meaningful, effective communication between partners arises. At the heart of long-distance relationships needs to be a strong sense of *building and keeping trust* (in a later chapter *trust* is explored specifically) but as the communication themed insight chapter also identifies if young people feel that communication is difficult they need support to practice and perhaps change the way they relate to a partner. In social marketing terms this points to the need to help more young people *exchange* current ways of behaving which are non-communicative and understand the benefits of behaving differently.

Social media

Long-distance relationships are likely more dependent on technology/social media. The assumption can be that as *digital natives* young people will adapt and use new and emerging means to keep in touch and sustain a relationship; but it may be wrong to assume they have the confidence and skills they need to manage and achieve positive and healthy relationships which are dependent on these means. The dedicated chapter on *social media* explores these issues further.

REFERENCES

ⁱ Marie Hartwell-Walker <http://psychcentral.com/lib/the-challenge-of-long-distance-relationships/>

ⁱⁱ Emma Dargie et al 'Go Long! Predictors of Positive Relationship Outcomes in Long-Distance Dating Relationships' Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy Volume 41 Issue 2 2015 <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0092623X.2013.864367>

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, exporting 'what age is too young to be in a long distance relationship?' https://www.reddit.com/r/LongDistance/comments/34lv4/question_what_age_is_too_young_to_be_in_a_long/ or 'The long distance relationship goes mainstream' <http://blog.penelopetrunk.com/2007/03/18/the-long-distance-relationship-goes-mainstream-3-tips-for-survival/>