

Helping Others and Youth Mental Health: A Qualitative Study Exploring Perspectives of Youth Engaging in Prosocial Activities

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Abstract—Mental health challenges that begin during the youth age period may continue across the entire life course. One way to support youth mental health is to encourage youth engagement in prosocial activities. This study aimed to explore youth's perceptions about helping others and mental wellbeing, barriers, and enablers for youth to initiate and continue prosocial activities, and strategies for developing the attribute of helping others in youth. We conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured, virtual interviews with 18 young individuals (aged 16-24 years) living in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Youth perceived helping others as a source of feeling peace and calm, finding meaning in life, experiencing social connection and promoting self-care, and relieving stress. Participants reported opportunities to learn new skills, the role of religion, social connections, previous positive experiences, and role modeling as enablers for their prosocial behavior. Heavy time commitment, negative behavior from others, self-doubt, and late exposure to such activities were considered barriers by youth when participating in prosocial activities. Youth also brought forward key recommendations for engaging youth in helping others. The findings of this study support the notion that youth have positive experiences when engaging in helping others and that involving young people in prosocial activities could be used as a protective intervention for promoting youth mental health and overall wellbeing.

Keywords—Helping others, prosocial behavior, youth, mental wellbeing.

I. INTRODUCTION

POSITIVE emotional and social development are key elements for promoting youth mental wellbeing. Youth mental wellbeing is deeply rooted in their social environment. The social contexts in which youth live and function, critically affect the pathways in which social influences translate into their ability to control their lives [1]. Globally, the burden of mental health and substance use disorders among youth is remarkably high [2] and they are considered the leading cause of disability-adjusted life years in children and youth in high income countries [3]. In Canada, according to recent statistics, nearly 20% i.e., 1.2 million of youth are affected with mental health challenges, and suicide among Canadian youth (15 to 24-year-old) is the third highest in the developed world [4]. This situation becomes further challenging, when only 1 in 5 youth receive timely support to address their mental health needs [5].

Childhood and adolescence are crucial periods of mental development. Lasting mental health issues can cause challenges

for individuals and their social relationships with friends, family satisfaction, and school performance [6]. Mental and emotional challenges in this developmental phase not only affect their youth but many of them continue into adulthood [7]. With this growing burden of mental illness in this phase of life, it is significantly essential to implement measures that increase youth's resilience and capacity so they could productively function now and throughout their life.

One way to support mental health promotion for young people is to implement positive youth development strategies. These strategies aim to help youth develop a sense of competence, self-efficacy, identity, and empowerment, thus, encouraging positive behavior and minimizing risky behavior [8]. The phenomenon of helping others, whether through a small social act, regular civic engagement or volunteering in social contexts by sharing time, energy, skills or knowledge has demonstrated positive effects on individuals' wellbeing [9]. Interventions that promote prosocial behavior have been shown to subsequently increase prosocial actions, perceptions of self-efficacy, being agreeable, academic achievement, decrease physical aggression [10], [11], improved social connectedness i.e. interpersonal relationships of youth with other youth and adults [12], and increase in responsiveness in the affective domain [13]. Factors such as warmth from parents, sympathy and prosocial moral reasoning have been found associated with prosocial behaviors among youth [14]. Evidence also shows benefits of civic engagement beyond youth, it can improve community vitality, oppose injustices and work to dismantle social challenges [15].

In Canada, young individuals are also involved in act of helping others in various social contexts such as religious, educational, and other community settings. The findings of a General Social Survey indicated that in 2013, 53% of Canadian youth aged 15-24 years were involved in volunteering activities than any other age group [16]. Findings from a Pan Canadian study that involved 79 youth participants highlighted that youth who participated in volunteering activities have reported themselves as focused, open-minded, enthusiastic, and socially active [17]. Evidence also suggests some unfavorable outcomes linked with youth prosocial behavior, especially in the context of complex settings and situations such as severe mental illness [18] and helping in disaster or conflicted areas [19].

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Despite the multifactorial benefits associated with youth developmental strategies, there still exists a gap regarding the perceptions that young people have on the idea of helping others and how their experiences of helping others influence their mental wellbeing [20]. Most of the literature showcases the experiences of people living with mental illness who engage in prosocial behavior; however, a paucity of research remains on the experiences of youth who engage in prosocial behaviors regardless of whether or not they have mental health conditions, specifically in the Canadian context. Given this gap, this study aimed to explore the perceptions that youth have on helping others and its association with their mental wellbeing, the barriers and enablers that youth face to initiate and continue prosocial activities, and strategies that can help youth to develop this attribute of helping others.

II. METHODS

A. Participants and Recruitment

This study employed an exploratory descriptive qualitative design to answer the research questions. Young individuals aged between 15 and 24 years, who are identified as engaging in volunteer activities (at least 10 hours over the past month prior to the interview), speaking English, and living in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada were recruited for this study. Following approval from the University of British Columbia ethics board, flyers and posters were placed in community spaces where youth volunteers, such as the local crisis line, university campus, and community organizations. We also emailed study flyers to community-based organizations that offer volunteer opportunities to youth and asked them to share our recruitment poster with their youth volunteers. Youth who expressed interest in participating in the study, contacted the research assistant, who undertook initial screening to ensure that the prospective youth met the study's inclusion criteria. Participants were finally recruited after signing a voluntary written informed consent form.

B. Data Collection

A comprehensive semi-structured interview guide was created prior to the study to address study questions. Given the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (during March and August 2021), all individual interviews were conducted by our research assistant via the university licensed Zoom communication platform at a time of participants' convenience. Participants were asked to use a pseudo name or research code given ahead of time by the research assistant. They were also given a choice to turn off the camera if they were not comfortable. Each interview lasted about one to one and half hours long. The purpose of the study and the interview were discussed with the participants again at the time of interview. All interviews were recorded for data analysis purposes. The recorded interviews were then transcribed using a software, manually double-checked for transcription errors and any identifying data were removed to ensure participant anonymity.

C. Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were manually analyzed by the research

team. Codes were generated based on analytic interests. Following this, the entire research team met several times to review and link codes into sub-themes and cluster sub-themes to form key themes [21], [22]. Ultimately, the themes were organized into four major sections: youth's perceptions of helping others and mental wellbeing; perceptions about influence of helping others on their mental wellbeing; factors affecting initiating and continuing to help others; and, youth recommendations for developing the virtue of helping others.

III. RESULTS

We interviewed a total of 18 participants. The study participants were aged between 16-24 years. Table I presents the detailed sociodemographic profile of the participants. We constructed three key overarching themes emerging on a) perceptions of youth about the concept of 'helping others', (b) youth's perception of mental wellbeing and (c) association of helping others on youth mental wellbeing from youth's perspectives (Fig. 1).

TABLE I
 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

Demographics	n (%)
Age	
16-19	5 (27.7)
20-24	13 (72.2)
Gender	
Female	8 (44.4)
Male	10 (55.5)
Areas of volunteering	
School	3 (16.6)
Community safety	1 (5.5)
Sports	1 (5.5)
Healthcare	5 (27.7)
Foodbank	2 (11.1)
Religious events	2 (11.1)
Research	4 (22.2)
Employment	
Not working	4 (22.2)
Working	14 (77.7)

A. Youth's Perceptions of Helping Others and Mental Wellbeing

1. Helping Others

Youth identified 'feeling positive' as a common theme about engaging in helping others. One participant suggested "I feel good about what I do. I like being there." (P7). Another participant mentioned: "I realized that I was, being able to actually make some sort of change with accurate listening to callers, sometimes being able to even help us resolve the situation then, after volunteering there for some time, really being passionate about that role and being able to help others and to contribute whatever little part that I could" (P10).

Youth also described engaging in helping others as 'rewarding', 'fulfilling' and leading to joy and happiness as one participant shared: "when the texter responds back saying that like, Oh, you know, you really helped me tonight, I really feel calm, like it is really, really fulfilling" (P4). For many

participants, a sense of gratitude for helping others and the ability to give back through helping others was another key theme in this domain.

In terms of human values, some youth suggested that helping others is an essential human value. Youth also regarded this virtue as a guiding source for others to learn new things. Many participants discussed the ability to help others as being transformational in developing themselves. One participant stated: "I think helping others teaches me daily things about life and everything" (P5). Another participant suggested:

"Anything small you can do. It's like a step in the right direction, and you're ultimately helping everyone in the world overall" (P6).

Youth also shared the religious connection they felt while helping others. Having the opportunity to help others through religious connection felt fulfilling and rewarding for some young individuals as indicated by one participant: "I feel happy. It's also part of my religion. So, it really brings me it's like a soft place in my heart, and I really enjoy doing the work" (P5).

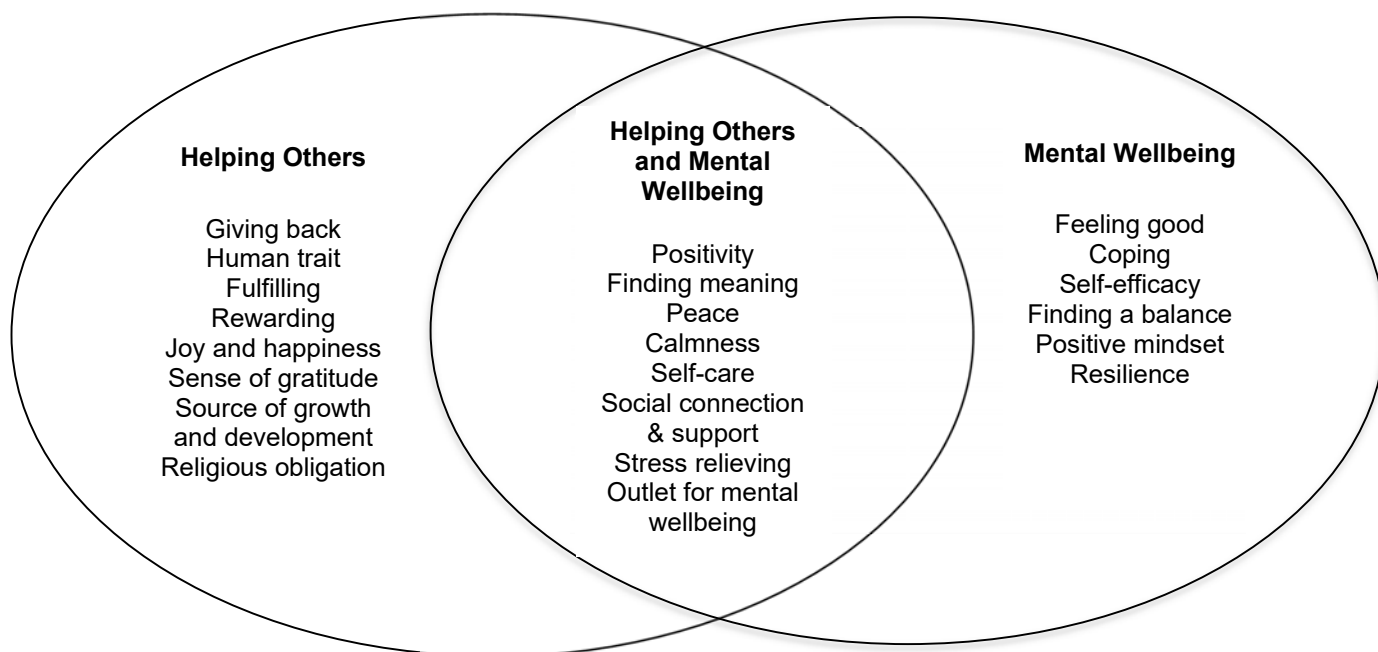


Fig. 1 Key themes describing youth perceptions

2. Mental Wellbeing

We also asked participants to share their perceptions about mental wellbeing. One participant equated mental wellbeing to coping, self-efficacy and resiliency in the face of life's struggles. In describing their current mental state, the majority of youth explained their mental wellbeing as "good". Also, the idea of finding a balance and managing the demands of life, such as pressures from school, work and volunteering was quite prominent amongst youth. Youth also defined mental wellbeing as a positive mind set and resilience to deal with life challenges. For example, one participant mentioned: "Mental wellbeing is just really being like equilibrium, being at peace with itself and also being able to have be in the right state of mind to withstand external pressures, or internal pressures. So being able to be in a state where, even though you may have stressors in your life but you're able to withstand that" (P10).

B. Youth' Perceptions about Influence of Helping Others on Their Mental Wellbeing

The connections between helping others and mental wellbeing were made apparent throughout the course of the participant's interviews. Nearly all the youth participants highlighted that helping others was associated with a positive

impact and positivity for themselves. For example, one participant shared: "With my volunteering experience, we can hopefully make the future better and easier for others" (P16). Engaging in prosocial behaviors also helped young people find meaning. One participant affirmed: "... as I progressed more with it and got more used to it, I saw the value in giving back more so than just trying to learn a couple of... valuable skills" (P15).

Youth perceive prosocial behavior as a key aspect of being human, in other words humanity. It was suggested by one participant: "I think helping others is kind of like an innate human mechanism. Like we have it in ourselves to want to help others and want to help those around us" (P4). Participants also expressed feeling a sense of peace and calmness as a result of helping others. For example, one participant stated that volunteering "helped put my mind to ease" (P5). Feeling of appreciation towards being able to help others came out of many of the discussions we had with youth participants. One participant acknowledged: "just like seeing the smile on seniors' faces, and like how you are making such an impact on their lives and being there for them" (P6).

Youth observed "helping others" as a form of self-care and social support strategy. As one participant described: "I feel like

helping people is rewarding, like I'm helping someone else and I'm also helping myself when I'm looking out for other people. And eventually, that same energy will be shared back towards me" (P7). Further, helping others gave young people an outlet or a space from their regular busy routine. Participant further buttressed that such outlets are important to mental wellbeing. One participant responded: "it's like an outlet for me, from schoolwork, from work, from stress... it's like a safe place" (P5). Some participants also acknowledged involving in helping others as a source of stress reliever as mentioned by one participant: "... it really helped my mental wellbeing... it was like a stress reliever" (P5).

Some youth also highlighted the undesirable impacts associated with COVID-19 on their motivation and satisfaction related to implementing practices related to helping others. In their opinion, the recent pandemic has led to lack of opportunities and connections and satisfaction for performing prosocial practices.

C. Factors Affecting Initiating and Continuing to Help Others

1. Facilitators

In terms of the intrinsic enablers of prosocial engagement, believing in volunteering and the opportunity to learn people skills were widely suggested themes by our youth participants. One participant highlighted: "It really opened my eyes to just such diverse lived experiences and perspectives in the world. And I think that will definitely help me be a better physician" (P11). Another interviewee acknowledged: "What motivates me would probably be like self-betterment, ... I'm getting communication experience and skills to interact with new people and building my network" (P16). An important intrinsic factor to also consider is the role of religion and how helping others can offer an opportunity to strengthen one's religious connection as one participant said: "especially because it's a religious event, a religious type of work... because in my personal view, I was attached to it" (P5).

Considering the extrinsic facilitators of volunteering, one of the most common themes was the social connectedness associated with helping others. One participant emphasized: "I would say the first thing is all the people that I meet through it. I have met some incredible people through it and seeing and being able to create new relationships and meet up with people and discuss things is super valuable to me" (P14). Additionally, the potential impact through making a difference in another person's life was another important aspect of helping others that young people appreciated. For example, one participant suggested: "helping others gave me some self fulfillment" (P17). Participants also suggested that there were important roles their close adults played through role modelling. For example, one participant said: "In the beginning, it was probably following my father and my parents' footsteps, just because I was exposed to it at a young age, but it came to a point where I was able to choose" (P5). Almost half of the participants acknowledged their previous positive experience with engaging in helping others and recognized it as a key facilitator in continuing prosocial activities. One participant

mentioned: "I met a bunch of nice people, and then kind of finally got that sense..., I'm actually with the right group of people. And it's a positive environment" (P8). Another participant advised: "I think it constantly pushes me to be a better version of myself. And that better version doesn't necessarily have to be static or one particular goal. It's more like a constant evolution of myself" (P18). Similarly, helping others as part of a familiar experience was an additional consideration for young people.

2. Barriers

It is also important to consider some of the barriers that young people might face when engaging in prosocial behaviors. One of the most common themes was the notion of the time commitment involved with helping others. One participant stated: "volunteering right now has almost become something that I'm less inclined to just because it takes away more time given how the stress with the university increased so much" (P1). Another participant commented: "... during the school year, obviously, it was a lot more difficult to make time" (P4). Some youth highlighted the negative comments and behaviors from others take away their intentions to help others. For example, one participant said: "When I was volunteering, I very often got kind of figuratively pushed around with the demands of people" (P11). Additionally, some youth pointed to a lack of team support as another challenge associated with helping others. Youth also mentioned about self-doubt on abilities as another barrier to helping others: "it's nobody else's fault, like nobody else has ever said mean things, it's just me... a bit of self doubt" (P9). Moving onto the medium of where helping others occurred, being online and Zoom fatigue related to volunteering was something brought up as well. In terms of organizational aspects, one participant suggested that communication channels in the organization were also a challenge: "communication is always a huge barrier in terms of getting things done" (P17).

Some other factors that youth suggested include having late exposure in life to prosocial behaviors. Also, a lack of a variety of extrinsic factors such as monetary constraints or an extra push was well-cited by the youth we spoke to. One participant stated: "I think if someone didn't have that extra push to do something, then they would just not do it and they'd be missing out on a lot" (P2).

D. Youth Recommendations for Developing the Virtue of Helping Others

One of the key recommendations made by youth for developing and continuing prosocial behavior was the importance of being genuine and encouraging for the right reason. One participant stated: "I think a big part of it is just doing it yourself first and then leading by example" (P1). Another participant reaffirmed: "I think that being able to show people like look, here's a way to give back to the community, here is a way for you to not only grow, but also to help others and being able to really use your skills to be a benefit to society" (P10).

Our participants also mentioned the importance of having a

balanced exposure at a young age to engage in prosocial behaviors without it being imposing. Along these lines, youth reiterated the importance of raising awareness and boosting empowerment from a young age on the action of helping others. One participant suggested: "I guess it all comes down to your past experiences and how it influenced who you are now" (P16). Within prosocial roles, some youth felt it was important that they were provided with feedback: "I have gotten feedback directly from my clients. Like sometimes they'll tell me like, ... you did a good job" (P2).

Additionally, having a role model was highlighted as an important aspect of engaging in prosocial behaviors. One participant said: "encouraging each other to help others... just encouraging your friends to be like... we should go do that together" (P1). Specific avenues, such as social media were suggested by some youth as spaces to connect with young people. The most common recommendation suggested by our youth participants was the notion of having attractive and relevant opportunities. Considering the impact that youth can have on one and other, the suggestion of peer encouragement was also popular. One participant specified: "... the support that you have from your coaches and from other volunteers to kind of give you a sense of the community" (P4). Finally, youth valued having acknowledgement of their efforts to volunteer. For example, one interviewee suggested: "acknowledging the position that you're in is a pretty lucky position, and you should try to give back just because it's kind of the right thing to do" (P15).

IV. DISCUSSION

Our study showcases the experiences of young people who practice the virtue of helping others, specifically the perceptions they have about helping others and mental wellbeing facilitators and barriers for engaging in such activities and suggestions to develop this virtue in young people.

Participants overwhelmingly expressed positive emotions towards the idea of helping others. Being able to have a positive impact on someone else's life was something that youth greatly appreciate, for example by volunteering at the Crisis Hotline. Moreover, being able to exercise autonomy and take actions, allowed youth to have a direct impact on other human beings was something that youth found fulfilling. Youth may have perceptions of powerlessness [23] and these feelings of powerlessness are associated with negative mental health outcomes [24] and substance use challenges [25]. Thus, opportunities to engage in prosocial behaviors may help young people feel empowered and may also act as protective factors for their better mental health.

Helping others was also viewed in association with fundamental human values. Moreover, some youth considered helping others as a guiding source or transformational role. The adolescence age period is a critical time for development [26]. Thus, the virtue of helping others may play an important role in the healthy development of young people. The benefits of promoting youth wellbeing are not limited to youth themselves, but are also associated with notable public health benefits as well [27]. Hence, it is critical that the benefits associated with

helping others are shared in a meaningful way that highlights the positive outcomes, which occur at different levels.

Engaging in prosocial behaviors allowed some young people to find meaning in their life. The act of finding meaning is an important aspect of the adolescence period [28]. Moreover, finding meaning is fundamental to resilience and integral for mental wellbeing as well [29]. From this study, one of the coping strategies that arose was acts of kindness and helping others. Hence, future interventional studies may seek to evaluate the impact that education on kindness and helping others has on the ability to cope. Feelings of appreciation towards opportunities to volunteer were also highly expressed by participants. Thus, this once again highlights the opportunity that helping others provides youth in terms of growth and empowerment and the ability for them to exercise their autonomy [28]. Most findings of this study resonate with the findings of our recently conducted review [9] that reported the similar positive mental health outcomes associated with youth prosocial behavior such as positive emotions, empowerment, increased trust, social interactions, coping and resilience, academic achievements, decreased depression and anxiety, and low health risk behaviors. However, unlike the review findings, the youth in the present study did not report any negative influences of helping others on their mental health.

In terms of enablers for promoting prosocial behavior among youth, one of the most salient facilitators of prosocial behavior among youth was their previous positive experiences, with community engagement activities. This underscores the significance of providing positive and safe environment to youth where they could engage in activities to help others and also gain confidence that they are doing right thing. Youth also appreciated the opportunity for social interaction especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and recognized this as another key facilitator to promote the practice of helping others. This finding aligns with several studies that emphasized the association of social connection with better mental health of adolescents [30], [31]. One of the key challenges identified by youth was the time demand associated with helping others. Much of the time demand was connected directly to having to engage in volunteer work on top of academic work. Considerations around flexible volunteer hours and hybrid volunteer opportunities may potentially alleviate some of the time-related challenges that youth face.

Some of the key recommendations that our youth participants shared could add a critical value to parenting practices. Most of the youth emphasized the importance of exposing young children to prosocial activities and showing them role modeling of prosocial attitudes. Youth also suggested having attractive and engaging volunteer opportunities and using social media for developing awareness of these opportunities to help others.

Given that this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, we wanted to understand how the pandemic impacted the wellbeing of young people. The majority of youth suggested that their mental wellbeing was good. However, some youth did suggest that volunteering during the pandemic was associated with lower levels of volunteer satisfaction; these youth pointed to the public health guidelines that limited certain

social activities and volunteering opportunities. Moreover, they highlighted that the pandemic made it challenging to participate in activities that promote mental wellbeing. The literature highlights other changes that youth experienced during the pandemic, such as lower levels of physical activity and increased screen time [32]. These various factors may also play a role in the way that youth participate in activities that promote wellbeing. Although, there have been many challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps engaging in prosocial activities have given youth opportunities and outlets to participate in activities that are beneficial for their wellbeing.

As our study only focused on youth residing in one geographic setting, we acknowledge possible limitations to interpret the findings to other youths living in other geographic settings, given differences in culture, environment and demographic. Also, all of our recruited youths identified as cisgender and 88% mentioned they were living with their parents. This may further limit the transferability of our study findings to youth of varying gender identities and socio-economic status. We also acknowledge that there are many different conceptualizations for youth's age range within the literature, and our study focused on youths between the ages of 16-24 years. While this age range excludes a number of younger teens, we appreciate the diversity in the educational attainment, and the different levels of development and maturity of youths within this age range. This diversity of youth, from ages 16-24 years allowed us to capture the experiences of participants from different time points of their youth, some were in high school, while others were enrolled or had completed some form of post-secondary education.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study showcases the experiences that young people have when engaging in prosocial behaviors. The youth we spoke to provided us with a rich understanding of their perceptions of prosocial activities and their association with mental health. Given the plethora of benefits associated with engaging in prosocial behavior, we believe that this study will provide additional insight to support youth in engaging in prosocial behavior. The key findings of this study such as elements of positivity, social connectedness, social support, finding meaning in life, and satisfaction are all essential contributors and protective factors to better mental health. We also discussed practical challenges that youth face when helping others, such as competing demands on time and bring forward strategies discussed by youth to mitigate these aforementioned difficulties. Future research is needed to study the long-term outcomes associated with prosocial behavior and test interventions that include these themes to improve mental health and reduce mental distress in youth who live in vulnerable conditions.

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ETHICAL INFORMATION

This research was approved by the University of British Columbia, Behavioral Research Ethics Board (H21-00003). All participants completed written consent forms.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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