



## A Conversation About... The Importance of Belonging for Young People

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Dr Lyn O'Grady, Community Psychologist

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**Host (00:01):**

Hi there. Welcome to Mental Health Professionals Network podcast series. MHPN's aim is to promote and celebrate interdisciplinary collaborative mental health care.

**Dr Lyn O'Grady (00:17):**

Welcome to this episode of MHPN Presents a conversation about, my name is Lyn O'Grady. I'm a psychologist based in Melbourne, Australia, and I'm delighted to be joined by Kelly-Ann Allen, also a Melbourne based psychologist. Hi Kelly-Ann, thanks for joining me.

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (00:31):**

Hi Lyn. It's such a delight to be with you today after all these years of hearing your name everywhere. It's a great honor. Thanks,

**Dr Lyn O'Grady (00:39):**

Thanks Kelly-Ann. I'm really pleased you agreed to join me. When I thought about belonging and young people, I automatically thought of you as I'm sure a lot of people in Australia and probably internationally would be obviously following your work for a really long time in school belonging. And I've always enjoyed the prolific research that you've done, but also the way that you share it. This idea of translating the research into practice is what I really, really do appreciate. So let's get started. Where did all that begin for you? When did you begin this journey with the idea of belonging?

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (01:09):**

That is probably the hardest question you could actually ask me or perhaps even any belonging researcher, because I think the thing about belonging research is that it does make you reflect upon your own sense of belonging as well. But aside from my own sense of belonging, I did have a bit of a pivotal moment, and for anyone listening at home, sorry if you might've heard this story before, but my pivotal moment was when I was training for Kokoda and it was over 10 years ago, and I was really fit



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back then and I was doing a lot of night time hikes and I was living in an area southeast of Melbourne and I was walking at night and I just remember seeing a car parked in a really unusual spot every night. There was a glow coming out of the car as well, like emitting from the car, like somebody was living in there.

**(02:02):**

Anyway, I finally struck up the courage to knock on the car window just to see if the person was okay or if I could help with accommodation or food. And I remember the night so clearly it was dark and late, and I remember the window just wound down just a tiny little bit inch by inch. And the poor woman behind the window was so terrified by me knocking, she screamed. I screamed. And so once we'd sort of finished all our screaming, we introduced ourselves and had this opportunity to meet the most articulate, intelligent woman who was living in her car. She'd fled from domestic violence and she was so empowered to be in her particular situation. But it turns out she had actually driven to that complete other side of town to park where she went to school, where she spent her years growing and where she went to school because that was the place she felt the most safest and she belonged. So even though it was 20 years since she'd left school, she came back to that area because that's where she felt safe. And it was that moment that I thought, wow, the way she talked about school and her sense of affiliation and her connection, even all these years after attending school, I thought, I really want to take or discover those ingredients that make people feel like they belong to school, identify them, and then share them so that all schools can have an opportunity to create a sense of belonging with their students.

**Dr Lyn O'Grady (03:36):**

What a fabulous story and what a great opportunity to then go on and really reinforce that and to build on that. But having that as your driver, I suppose, because I guess this work is often quite hard. So having something to hold back, like a touchstone of reminding yourself about that I guess has been part of holding that together. And we've both worked as school psychologists, so I guess we've seen that in day-to-day work, but then I imagine seeing it 20 years later, it just reinforces the long-term impact of this, which we can talk about.

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (04:07):**

Oh, absolutely. And as a school cycling, you would've seen by the time students come to you saying they don't belong to school often, it's too late or they've come to you when they've made that decision to leave and change schools. So yeah, understanding what are the predictors of belonging so that schools can foster them, but also identifying early when students don't belong. I think that's really important.

**Dr Lyn O'Grady (04:30):**

Yeah, absolutely. So let's talk about that then. So when we think about belonging, and I know with probably various definitions and ways people have described it, but what's your favorite way of understanding belonging, or how do you use it in terms of that idea of making sense of it? Because it's one of those terms that people, it's probably something that's banded around quite a lot and maybe tangled with other connectedness or engagement, probably tangled with a lot of those words around bound kids' experiences in schools. So what's your favourite way of defining it, describing it to people?

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (05:01):**



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Absolutely. And I think you've just hit the nail on the head with one of the biggest problems, the research in the field of belonging and school belonging in that there's lots of different ways that it's defined and lots of terms that are used instead of belonging, but the researchers might've used a belonging measure. So it's actually sometimes really about belonging that they've actually identified, even though they might not be using that word. So they might use the word engagement or school membership or school connectedness. So that's a really important one. So definitions are so important, but if I was to describe what general belonging means, I'd say that it's the subjective feeling. So it's something that we perceive and feel, but it's that sense that we're a part of other systems or other groups. And those groups might include families or friends or school, like specific context.

(05:54):

In some ways, defining general belonging can be quite tricky because belonging can be quite contextual. But I will say that for a lot of people, a sense of belonging for them is quite relational and it's based on the connections they have with other people. But I also think it's important to mention that it's not simply the number of friends or people that you might have around you. It's more how you might draw perceptions or understandings about your sense of belonging from the different cues and events and experiences that you might have in different groups and systems that you might be interacting with,

**Dr Lyn O'Grady** (06:35):

Which is also what makes it difficult, isn't it for teachers or psychologists or other mental health professionals or parents to sort of understand it. Because it could be that they think, well, that student looks like they belong, they've got lots of friends, but the student themselves might not feel that they might not have that essence. So that's where that subjective nature gets really tricky, doesn't it, for other people to kind of see that and know what to do about it.

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen** (06:56):

Absolutely. And for all the schools and organisations, prioritising belonging, I think the other part of how we define belonging is that we often see it described as a fundamental human need, but I think the important part of that is that need can really vary between people to people. So somebody might have a really strong need to belong and another person might have a low need to belong. It's the people that have the high need to belong and are not feeling a sense of belonging. They're the ones that we need to work with and target and make sure that they're travelling. Okay. But you talked about the complexity. It does get really complex because the other complexity about this lean is that belonging is so dynamic and variable and ephemeral in that it can change. So say if you were thinking about sense of belonging to school or your workplace, it might change throughout the course of an hour. I'd say you might have an interaction or there might be something on your computer that's not working well and you feel frustrated. So you might even question your sense of belonging to a particular space so rapidly. And that might change depending on the different cues and your perceptions that are all happening.

**Dr Lyn O'Grady** (08:16):

So it's really, really complex and children, young people are very aware of being included or excluded as well. So where does that fit with all of this, that sense of being included or what schools could be doing to promote inclusion? Because we do hear that as well, don't we, the importance of school inclusion. So how does that all fit with this?



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**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (08:36):**

Look, it fits in. I think inclusion and belonging are almost like best friends that go side by side with each other. And I'd even go as far as to say, I think with inclusion, I wonder if inclusion is at the forefront or in the middle of an evolution in similar way that we saw with equality and equity and our understanding, we were all wanting equality, but actually it was more equity, everybody getting what they needed. And there was a bit of an evolution with those terms. And I wonder if we're seeing that with inclusion where organisations and people are seeing that it's more than just these policies and inclusive practises and making sure there's diversity represented and representation. It's more than that. And perhaps that evolution will have a sense of belonging at the forefront of that. When people feel a sense of belonging, then perhaps those goals around inclusion are achieved. What's

**Dr Lyn O'Grady (09:36):**

Your best advice then, if you're thinking about schools and various people working in schools, what are the sort of top tips that you then say to make sense of all of these, but to actually operationalize it, I suppose, to actually put in practise. And you mentioned policies is one of those things perhaps to start with.

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (09:51):**

Yeah. Well actually now that you mention it, Lynn, I'll just say I've written a policy on school belonging, and it is actually one I'm extremely proud of because it's free. So we had a whole bunch of really generous sponsors, a homeless project and the Black Dog Institute, the Australian Psychological Society, psychologists in Schools, interest group communities that care, and I really hope I haven't forgotten anybody, any of our sponsors, but they had made this book of school policies completely free to download. And there is a school belonging policy within that. But back to your point about what schools can do and with a research lens, back in 2018, I did a meta analysis, which is a type of research strategy or technique where you take a bunch of other people's research screen them. I think I might've started off with over 2000 papers and identified which ones will fit the criteria for my meta-analysis and ended up with 51 different studies.

**(10:56):**

And from that, one of the most powerful factors identified in this body of research was teacher support. So teachers were the most influential factor in determining student belonging. So it was things along the lines of how approachable they were, how likeable they were, whether they were available for emotional support as well as academic support. And it was these kind of factors that relationship, the rapport they had with their students that really determined how much a student would feel a sense of belonging to school. But that was the top one, but there were other factors. So it wasn't just about what the teacher can do because I think in this day and age and context, teachers are doing a lot, and they'd probably say that they don't have time to necessarily build those relationships. And I think that's something we need to look at as a society. But there's also things that students can do for themselves as well in terms of building their belonging. And schools can aid in equipping them to do this. But things like building their coping skills, their resiliency, their ability to be psychologically flexible, their self-efficacy, these are things that actually help build their sense of school belonging.

**Dr Lyn O'Grady (12:11):**



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Fantastic. And I really like the idea of thinking about what students can do themselves, but they can't do it on their own either. They do need the adults, they do need the school system to support them. And I know your work, looking at that ecological model is really important in that. And I really like that. I'm a community psychologist, so that's kind of the way that I like to think. But I also like the idea that we're sort of supporting students, but we're not putting the full responsibility on them. And even when I do my private practise work, it's kind of like, well, what can we realistically expect a young person to do? But what is it we also need to say to the adults in their lives, in schools and families, we really need you to do this part of it, or we need this to happen in the system that will actually support them. So I think that's really nice and also fits with what we would suggest for schools to do in other topics too. Mental health, drug and alcohol use, violence, all of those things. Are we sort of saying the same thing, do you think

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (13:05):**

Sometimes I joke with colleagues and I wish I was clever enough to actually operationalize this idea, but sometimes I think when it comes to school belonging, you could say it's related to all the good stuff and it's negatively related to all the bad stuff. So the stuff that helps promote wellbeing does go alongside things that help promote school belonging. And then we also see the same kind of outcomes as well around when students have a high sense of school belonging. We see reduced mental health and improved wellbeing, even improved physical health, better school experiences, the benefits of a sense of school belonging are really quite compelling. Probably another reason why I'm so interested in this area

**Dr Lyn O'Grady (13:49):**

Certainly sounds like it's a really empowering approach as well. And we were talking the other day about the ideas around loneliness, and I've certainly had young people talk to me about loneliness in recent times, particularly since Covid, but I never used to hear young people talking about loneliness back when I was working in schools over a decade ago. And I guess that's gained a bit of momentum as well. Hasn't the loneliness movement as opposed to the belonging focus?

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (14:13):**

Absolutely. And I've done some work with the amazing Michelle Liam, who's a loneliness researcher with an international profile, but she's Australia's own, and I know she's done a lot of work with the Australian Psychological Society as well, and she has the Loneliness Together organisation. So she's doing some amazing advocacy work there. And we've done some work together around loneliness and belonging and looking at them as two constructs side by side. The difference between belonging and loneliness is that loneliness is really about those interpersonal relationships or the people around you, whereas belonging the way it's defined, it's more broad. You might have a sense of belonging to a particular space, or if we look at indigenous understandings of belonging, it's about connection and belonging to land. That sense of belonging can be more than just people, whereas the stricter definition of loneliness is that it's more about others. For instance, if you were working with a young person that wanted to feel as made a sense of belonging to their religion or heritage or cultural groups or ancestry, building cultural competencies, for instance, might be an important way of building their sense of belonging. Yeah,



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**Dr Lyn O'Grady (15:27):**

It's interesting. And again, the importance of definitions, isn't it? We're talking about similar concepts, but what are the slight differences? Would the approaches be pretty similar though if you're thinking about reducing loneliness and increasing sense of belonging to improve wellbeing? Would it be actually doing the same kinds of things for both of those concepts?

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (15:46):**

That's a really interesting question because I'm not a loneliness researcher, but I do think that some of the interventions and strategies that are around to promote a sense of belonging could be a solution in part to addressing loneliness. I think loneliness, and again, not being a loneliness researcher, I hope I'm speaking in turn, it's about the difference or the discrepancy between your desired number of relationships around you, so your perception and your satisfaction from those relationships when that is out of kilter. And then that can make you feel lonely. For instance, if you desired more friends and then you might perceive that you didn't have perhaps those friendships that you are aspiring to have or really desire, then that's when loneliness might arise. I'd say the interventions are different though. And I've done work around belonging interventions and belonging strategies really specifically with a psychologist lens on, and I did what's called an integrative framework of belonging, and that's where I, again, it's another meta synthesis, went into the research to identify what are the core ways that we can increase belonging?

**(17:04):**

And I found four main things that the research is telling us. One is building competencies, because when we think about ostracism and rejection and isolation, sometimes we're seeing people get rejected as a part of that. They might need those relational skills, the social skills, the ability to be able to make relationships and keep relationships. Now, of course, that fits really nicely with loneliness, but as I mentioned before, there might be also cultural competencies or other competencies. For instance, the other thing that fits with loneliness that is also conducive to building belonging is opportunities to belong. So in schools, for instance, a lot of young people are saying things like they kind of want more assistance, particularly coming off the back of covid to build relationships with other students in the research that asking for that. And they even mentioned those school sanctioned activities that when I went to school seemed a bit daggy.

**(18:08):**

We used to not go to them, but I guess that depends on the school culture. And the other two are around perceptions and motivations. And again, there's totally overlap there with loneliness and belonging with both perceptions being around attributions, which I think is so good because it's the bread and butter of psychologists. It's about normalising feelings of not belonging and really emphasising that those feelings can be temporary and overcome. And those motivations to belong sort of link back to the need that I mentioned before and those successful outcomes around those belonging interventions that students might be able to engage in, or maybe not even students, maybe people that we're working with. So you

**Dr Lyn O'Grady (18:52):**

Mentioned Covid, and I guess as much as we don't want to talk about Covid all the time, it's pretty hard not to, I guess, to raise it. So where does all this sit now? What did Covid help us to understand this a





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little bit better? Is there more work now to be done following Covid? Where are we at? And as a researcher, what does all that look like for you at the moment?

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (19:11):**

First of all, I think there's a really optimistic story in there as challenging as Covid was, I think there is a story of optimism in there in that Covid allowed us to have more opportunities for ways to connect with others and belong. I think there was a time pre covid where say moms at home with kids might not have necessarily been able to access particular PD or particular groups because it was just too hard to even leave the house or imagine people living in rural settings, not being able to necessarily connect with different events. But post covid, people seem to have become more comfortable with online practises connecting online. We've just become more adaptable. And I think that these innovations have actually helped provide more opportunities for people to belong. So I think that's one positive outcome of covid. And then the other positive outcome of covid is that major organisations and M and M's is one organisation.

**(20:20):**

They've completely dissolved their vision and mission and decided to prioritise instead increasing people's sense of belonging. Their goal is to increase 10 million people's sense of belonging by 2025. So there's really positive things that have come out from Covid. I mean, even if we look at identity research and what that means for belonging and sense of identity, we've just gone through this major life-changing event for many people. For many people it was adversity. There's a shared collective sense of identity in there somewhere. I think there's something we've all got in common now that we perhaps didn't have before.

**Dr Lyn O'Grady (21:02):**

Yeah, I remember that the first sort of ideas of being in it together, wasn't it in Australia when we first went into lockdowns and that idea that we're all in this together, I think quite quickly we realised it was different for different people and that idea that we're all in the one ocean, but some of us are in big liners and some of us are in little dinkies or kayaks became a bit of the conversation. But it certainly made us aware of social relationships and the importance of connections with people and then like you say, the opportunities to connect and use digital technology for good, I guess. But then those people that couldn't access it in the same way. So it's highlighted some of those challenges as well, discrepancy. There's still lots that we can be learning from it and taking away, which is fantastic. And we've talked before about the sense of belonging being a very positive with long-term outcomes as well. So starting off with the lady in her car and that sense of comfort that came from her school, the reminders of being in that school community. So research is looking at that in terms of long-term benefits. What sort of things come out in the research that perhaps we don't always think about when we think about belonging?

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (22:10):**

Yeah, I'm doing some really exciting research with the Australian Temperament Project. They've got this beautiful longitudinal data set, and through that we've had a look at things like positive youth development and also outcomes related to depression, stress, and anxiety. And we've found that the presence of school belonging in adolescence at the age point of 15 can predict reduced depression anxiety and suicide ideation for people that are nearly 30 years old, that since belonging at school can



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have such powerful outcomes long-term. Work led by Phil Parker looked at engagement and employment and further training of students and found something really similar. People were more likely to connect with further education if they had a sense of belonging at school. Collectively, the research around sense of belonging and the importance for mental health and wellbeing just can't be understated or even overlooked for that fact because when we're looking at addressing mental health and we're prioritising it, particularly post covid, we need to be putting all factors on the table. Elizabeth Par found belonging to be the largest known correlate with adolescent depression. I just feel that school belonging has a really powerful story, sometimes undermined, I think, because it seems like it might just occur that it's natural.

### **Dr Lyn O'Grady (23:39):**

Yeah, no, it's really good to hear about that. And I guess even thinking about it in our various work that we do, I think about in my direct work with clients, young people and families and trying to think about what that might look like and how to support kids with that, but also thinking about suicide prevention, which is the other area that I'm interested in, and thinking about how to help people to understand that and not be jumping off to new strategies or new ideas that's come back to some of the things we know and maybe deepen that rather than trying new things all the time. Well, it's been really, really interesting hearing all the positives and all the links that belonging has with all these other ideas. But there's also a flip side that belonging does sometimes have a negative aspect to that. Would you like to just remind us about that, that there is another way of thinking about it as well?

### **Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (24:28):**

The dark side of belonging, right. Sometimes I like to call it bad belonging. Yes, certainly. I think our drive to belong can be so powerful and so pervasive and compelling that we might almost prioritise all decision points and thinking around ways that we can fit in and find a sense of belonging. So when people don't feel a sense of belonging and students can be at risk of this, they may look for other ways that they can feel a sense of belonging and find themselves in gangs or cults or fringe institutions. They might also engage in behaviour that undermines their sense of belonging. They might withdraw or end relationships with others that can further challenge their sense of belonging. And I think for people who might feel lonely or isolated or rejected, they can be really vulnerable groups of people to prey on in terms of some of these groups that we're seeing around misinformation and conspiracy theories, for instance, because they might provide a bit of a social appeal for some of those groups.

### **Dr Lyn O'Grady (25:37):**

Thank you. So it's good for people to look out for that as well, I guess. And even people in schools looking at young people who might be connecting and looking out for some of this bad belonging as we are calling it at the moment, and to recognise that that's what it's about. It's about that need to belong or need to be fitting in and desiring that. So how do we understand it in that way rather than the punitive actions we might tend to be taking, but to understand it a little bit more deeply and work on that might be really helpful and good ways to think about it,

### **Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (26:07):**

Fighting that misinformation as well. I think Jeff Green and some of his colleagues, he talks about thinking, being really hard thinking is hard, and critical thinking is even harder because if you do engage





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in some of these sites on social media that are spreading misinformation, you actually need to engage in critical thinking to be able to counter some of the thoughts that you might have or the beliefs that you might have that could be flawed. The quickest and easiest way to do that is through connecting with other people to help challenge that thinking. And so if there's not the other people around, that can be really hard and also harder if you don't have that sense of social identity to other groups in your life. So in some ways, those kind of groups can fulfil that as well. So there's a lot of work to be done, Lyn. It's scary. It's a tricky time.

**Dr Lyn O'Grady (27:06):**

You've got lots that you can offer, and I think even people listening to this hopefully going away, and we will obviously make the links available for them to go and have a look at this body of research that you're talking about, that you just kind of roll off your tongue, just make the links and talk about it very naturally without having to refer to anything. So it's obviously a really important part of your world and really invested in this, which is fantastic. And obviously a really important topic for us all to understand at whatever level we're working at with young people and trying to, maybe asking some of those curious questions is what I'm reminded of as I hear this, that idea that I can't tell what's going on for them, which we kind of know, but often it's easy as adults to make assumptions from what we see, or we gather information and people say they look like they've got friends or they look like they're fitting in to ask and to check that and how does it feel for them is one of the big takeaways for me today.

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (27:58):**

And I think really leaning in for educators and people working in schools, maybe with those students that are isolated or on the fringes, not connecting for adults, we are making judgments about some young people that maybe we feel that we don't have a good relationship with those people. Maybe what we need to be doing is looking at ways we can connect with them, really leaning in, finding out what are their interests, what's their background? Are they connecting with any other adults in the school? One of the factors that they're found around school violence and school shootings in the US is that these students that are engaging in this awful acts are isolated. They don't have a sense of belonging at school. And many teachers were able to identify that their behaviour was unusual, but they didn't necessarily have that rapport or relationship with them.

**Dr Lyn O'Grady (28:59):**

So that really need for prevention, early intervention, I guess, as well, isn't it that we.

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (29:03):**

It all about prevention

**Dr Lyn O'Grady (29:04):**

Understand the importance of that. Yeah,

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (29:06):**

Absolutely. It's all about prevention. In the early years in Australia, we see belonging as one of the core priorities, and I think it just needs to start early.



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**Dr Lyn O'Grady (29:14):**

Nice place for us to finish. There's so many more things we could have talked about. And one the things that'd be great to talk about is teachers. You talked about the importance of teachers, but their own sense of belonging or their own place, and it may be a conversation for another time, but I think how do we put expectations on teachers and parents, I guess, but how do we also support and understand what's happening for them is certainly one of the things that I've been talking about, but also this idea about prevention, early intervention and different levels in our society is also something I'm really interested in as well. And the M and M project look forward to hearing more about that and what we can expect from that down the track. That sounds like a really interesting project and fun project to be working on.

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (29:57):**

Yeah absolutely. And I know that we're wrapping up, but I did want to say just one really quick thing about teachers and belonging. I've just done a research project with Monash University led by Fiona Longmuir, and we found that teachers sense of belonging to their profession is high. So a lot of the research around teacher belonging to their school shows us that there's problems there, but to their profession is high. And I really think there's an opportunity to leverage that, and it shows that while teachers might be leaving the profession or these claims that we are seeing in the media and teachers are stressed and reporting burnout, I think that sense of belonging that they have to their profession is a wonderful thing that we need to really now nurture and take away. It shows that teachers are committed to what they're doing.

**Dr Lyn O'Grady (30:49):**

I think it fits when you work in schools. You see that and you see the teachers that are really caring about the students and want to really bring out the best in their students. So I see that when I think about teaching as a profession. It's certainly what I really hold onto for my days working in schools. But we do need to finish, I guess our time is we could keep talking for a really, really long time

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (31:09):**

It's gone so fast

**Dr Lyn O'Grady (31:11):**

Yeah, it has gone a really, really quickly

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (31:12):**

We need like a three hour podcast, I think next time

**Dr Lyn O'Grady (31:15):**

Lots of ideas for people to be thinking about for sure. So thank you very much for joining us on this episode of MHPN Presents a conversation about, you've been listening to me, Lyn O'Grady and Kelly-Ann Allen.

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (31:28):**



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It's been an absolute pleasure coming along and talking about my favourite topic.

**Dr Lyn O'Grady (31:32):**

Yeah it's really clear that it's a favourite topic for you. So we hope you've enjoyed this conversation as much as we have. I, for one, have certainly had many penny dropping moments. If you want to learn more about Kelly-Ann or myself, or if you want access to the resources we're referred to, go to the landing page of this episode and follow the hyperlinks, MHPN values your feedback. On the landing page, you'll find a link to a feedback survey. Please follow the link and let us know whether you found this episode helpful. Provide comments and or suggestions about how MHPN can better meet your needs. If you like this conversation, check out the podcast of me and conversation with Jocelyn Brewer on MHPN presents Digital wellbeing and Young people's Mental Health. And stay tuned further episodes in the series A conversation about where we'll continue to discuss young people's mental health or listen to other MHPN podcasts. Thank you for your commitment to an engagement with interdisciplinary person-centered mental health care. It's goodbye

**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen (32:25):**

And goodbye,

**Dr Lyn O'Grady (32:27):**

Goodbye for me.

**Host (32:30):**

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