YOUNGMiNDS

Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs

Survey 4: February 2021

Introduction

Our latest research shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to have a devastating impact on many young people with a history of mental health needs. As a society, we must not fail them over the coming months.

Around three-quarters of young people who responded to our survey said that the current lockdown has been harder to cope with than the first one, for a variety of reasons: a growing sense of isolation; a loss of faith in their prospects for the future; freezing weather that disrupts basic routines; and for those in school or university, the pressures of home learning.

This is not to say that all young people support a rapid easing of restrictions. In fact, some were concerned that the end of the lockdown would happen too quickly and result in further lockdowns in future. Again and again, young people said that they felt like they were experiencing 'Groundhog Day' – and, above all, they wish for an end to a cycle of freedoms followed by restrictions, of hopes snatched away.

There are grounds for optimism. Most respondents believed that their mental health would start to improve once it was possible for most restrictions to be lifted, and there was cautious optimism about the vaccine programme. Some young people have developed strong coping mechanisms, and others have benefited from effective mental health support.

However, two-thirds of respondents believed that the pandemic would have a long-term negative impact on their mental health. Unlike in our previous surveys, we heard numerous accounts of bereavement. Other young people were worried about whether their friendships would recover, whether they would get the grades they had previously hoped for, whether they would ever find a job. As we emerge from the pandemic, it will continue to be those already impacted by inequalities that are most likely to be affected.

The survey also highlighted significant gaps in mental health support. While professionals in the NHS, schools and charities have worked around the clock to adapt and improve services, the reality is that many of those we heard from felt they had not received the level of support they needed. This is partly for technological reasons. As in our previous research, there were mixed feelings about virtual and digital support: practically and emotionally, this is not a form of help that works for everyone. Any future provision must recognise the value of face to face interaction alongside virtual and digital forms of support.

We also heard about other barriers to support: about long waiting times, including hidden waiting times, where initial support is followed by delays; about school counselling coming to an abrupt end; about young people losing faith in the system after poor experiences. There is also a worrying stigma about seeking mental health support, with many young people concerned about being a burden on services. While the NHS is providing mental health support to more children and young people than ever before, our research suggests a significant level of unmet need.

Given the scale of need, there is no room for complacency from the Government. We have seen a number of welcome measures - including additional funding for NHS mental health services, the expansion of Every Mind Matters, and the £8 million Wellbeing in Education Return Fund. But, as the Children's Commissioner has highlighted, the growing prevalence of mental health problems puts the ambitions of the NHS Long Term at risk.

It is also crucial that catch-up planning in schools prioritises mental health: young people need to catch up socially and emotionally, to feel safe, to have opportunities to have fun, to do the things

they enjoy, rather than have additional pressure heaped upon them. The emphasis of catch-up planning must be on improving wellbeing, which will in itself have a positive knock-on effect on academic performance. There also needs to be additional funding for mental health support in schools, both in the short term and as part of a longer term plan.

We need the Government to use this opportunity to be far more ambitious in the mental health support we offer more generally, and look to providing fully funded early intervention through a hub model in local communities. This should be part of a new young people's mental health strategy that places more emphasis on early intervention, as well as prevention, including addressing inequalities that fuel poor mental health.

There are grounds for optimism in dealing with the pandemic over the coming months. Let's also give young people grounds for optimism about their mental health, and ensure that they live in a society where they are fully supported.

Emma Thomas, Chief Executive, YoungMinds

Impact of coronavirus and lockdown on children and young people's mental health

This report outlines the results of the fourth survey we have carried out with young people with a history of mental health needs during the coronavirus pandemic. The previous surveys were carried out in March 2020, at the start of the first lockdown; in Summer 2020, when measures were announced to ease restrictions; and in Autumn 2020, shortly after schools re-opened.

This survey took place between 26th January and 12th February 2021, during a new period of national lockdown, when schools, colleges and universities were closed to most students.

2,438 young people aged 13-25 who have looked for mental health support at some point in their lives took part. This included 1,817 young people who say that they have needed mental health support since the beginning of the pandemic. See Methodology section for more details.

Key findings

All participants were aged 13-25 and had a history of mental health needs, and have looked for some form of mental health support previously.

75% of respondents agreed that they were finding the current lockdown harder to cope with than the previous ones.

67% believed that the pandemic will have a long-term negative effect on their mental health.

79% believed that their mental health will improve once most restrictions are lifted.

When asked what the main pressures were during the current lockdown, the most common answers were: 1) Loneliness and isolation; 2) Concerns about school, college or university work; 3) A breakdown in routine ["not being able to do the things you usually would"]

Among young people who believe they have needed mental health support during the pandemic, **54%** said that they have received some form of support (e.g. through NHS mental health services; school or university counsellors; helplines; charities). **24%** said that they have looked for support but not accessed any; **22%** said that they had not looked for support.

Among respondents who are at school or college, **55%** said that there was a counsellor or mental health support team available in their school, **23%** disagreed.

Among respondents who are at school or college, almost half **(48%)** did not think that their school was focusing more on wellbeing and mental health than usual.

Impact of the lockdown

75% of respondents agreed that they were finding the current lockdown harder to cope with than the previous ones, including **44%** who said that it was much harder. **14%** said that it was easier cope with, while **11%** said that it was the same.

67% agreed that they believe the pandemic will have a long-term negative effect on their mental health. **19%** neither agreed nor disagreed, **14%** disagreed.

79% agreed that they believe their mental health will improve once most restrictions are lifted. **12%** neither agreed nor disagreed, **9%** disagreed.

50% agreed that they believe their mental health will improve once most people are vaccinated. **30%** neither agreed nor disagreed, **20%** disagreed.

66% agreed that they have been able to stay in touch with friends and family during the current lockdown. **14%** neither agreed nor disagreed. **20%** disagreed.

23% agreed that they have coped well with restrictions on movement. **18%** neither agreed nor disagreed, **59%** disagreed.
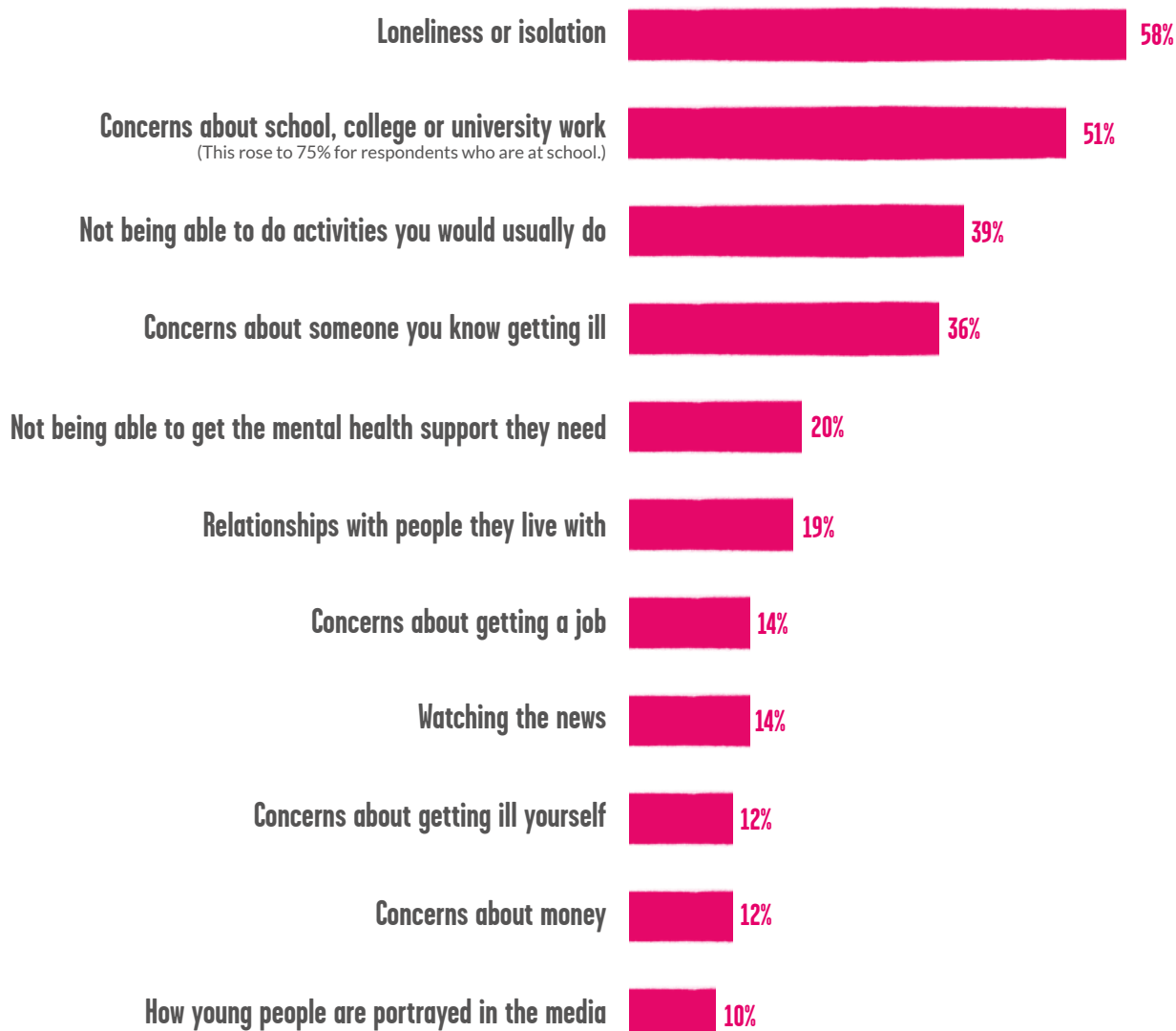
Three-quarters of respondents said that they are finding the current lockdown harder to cope with than the previous ones. Many expressed a sense of frustration, uncertainty about the future and a loss of hope. Some young people said that they had started self-harming again, having panic attacks or having suicidal thoughts. Others expressed growing anxieties about food, eating or weight, missing human contact, or losing motivation to carry out basic tasks or to look after themselves.

The lockdown itself was causing additional pressure for a wide range of reasons, including many that have featured in our previous surveys – **isolation**, a **loss of routine** and **challenges accessing mental health support.** Most young people who were at school or college also cited **academic pressure** as a major factor that was affecting their mental health, with home learning described by one as "like school without the fun bits".

Worryingly, young people expressed pessimism about the future – a sense that little progress had been made in tackling the pandemic. Some were concerned that the Government would ease restrictions too quickly, which would lead to further lockdowns and restrictions in the future.

What is impacting young people's mental health the most?

We asked respondents to pick the three things that were having the biggest negative impact on their mental health during the pandemic. The leading answers were:

Loneliness or isolation	58%
Concerns about school, college or university work (This rose to 75% for respondents who are at school.)	51%
Not being able to do activities you would usually do	39%
Concerns about someone you know getting ill	36%
Not being able to get the mental health support they need	20%
Relationships with people they live with	19%
Concerns about getting a job	14%
Watching the news	14%
Concerns about getting ill yourself	12%
Concerns about money	12%
How young people are portrayed in the media	10%

Positives of the lockdown

While the majority of respondents said that the current lockdown was harder than previous ones, some young people cited factors that made it easier to cope with. These included:

Changes in life circumstances
For example, finding a job, starting a new relationship, moving back home from university, or moving away from an abusive home. Some respondents also referred to the positives of being in a support bubble, which was not possible during the first lockdown.

Established coping mechanisms
Implementing techniques, routines or coping mechanisms that they had learned from previous lockdowns.

Improvements in support from school, college, university or workplace
Finding online learning easier because of improved school provision, or believing their school, college, university or workplace is providing more effective support.

Having structure through study or work
Some young people who were in work and either at home or going into a workplace spoke of the benefits of having a job that keeps them productive and accountable. Others who were studying also said that this kept them distracted and focused. Some students and young people in work said they preferred the flexibility of working from home.

Mental health support
Some young people said that they had received effective mental health support since the first lockdown, which helps them cope better this time round.

"This time I feel like I'm more prepared for what is to come. My friends and I have been in more frequent contact; helping us to feel less isolated. Also the schools are prepared to do online sessions."

"I've started doing more self-care during this lockdown and made sure I'm looking after my mental health and physical health. In the first lockdown I struggled a lot but I've now learnt how to manage my mental health better and found what works for me."

"Going into work still has meant my mental health has remained pretty stable as I am seeing colleagues daily. Work is busy which keeps me distracted but is also a very important job so that raises some anxiety, however my supervisors are really supportive."

Negatives of the lockdown

The majority of respondents said that this lockdown was harder than previous ones. This was for a number of reasons:

Limited progress in tackling the pandemic

A large number of respondents used the same phrases in response to the survey: "Groundhog Day"; "No progress"; "no end in sight"; no "light at the end of the tunnel."

Many young people said that the first lockdown had felt like a one-off, that there was a sense of solidarity; but the repeated lockdowns had taken a greater toll on them and meant that they could see less hope for the future. Some expressed a lack of faith in the Government response.

"This lockdown is so much harder. I think it's due to the fact that there doesn't seem to be an end in sight. There are so many mixed messages from the government and I now live away from my parents so can't see them. Also, the dark nights don't help, it just is work/eat/sleep/repeat."

"The first few lockdowns, whilst emotionally taxing and anxiety inducing, felt time-limited with a taste of freedom to look forward at the end. This one feels unrelenting, time moves slowly and nothing captures my attention/interest. I am relying on binge eating and alcohol a lot more this time."

"All of my work is overshadowed by the outside world and whether any of it matters anymore. I see no future."

Isolation, loneliness and loss of connection with friends

While some young people said that they had established positive routines with their friends, others suggested that the novelty of video calls had worn off, and there was less contact with people outside their household than in previous lockdowns. Some talked about how hard it was to be separated from partners during the lockdown.

Some respondents talked about difficult – and sometimes abusive – relationships with their family, and how hard it was to escape them, which added to the feelings of isolation.
A number of respondents stressed that they had been isolated throughout the pandemic, particularly if they were shielding – so they had had very limited contact with others since March 2020.

For young people who were studying, many said that remote learning had made them feel more isolated as they couldn't interact with friends. Teachers were also unable to support them in the same way and it was harder to reach out to them.

For those that were in work, not being able to connect with colleagues in the same way has been challenging and those who had been furloughed were anxious about their jobs in the future and how they would settle back in when they return to work.

"Everyone has got bored of connecting online and stopped reaching out."

"I feel like I'm connecting with people less. I don't really talk to people often at the moment and with all the uncertainty about my GCSEs it all just feels lonely and confusing."

"School is better prepared so lessons are much nicer, but not seeing friends for so long (particularly ones from other schools who I haven't seen for a year now) is worse."

"I'm struggling working from home every day since March 2020. I have little social interaction, very little motivation and every day feels the same."

Bad weather, and disruption to coping mechanisms and routine

Many cited the weather as a significant change from the first lockdown, when it had been sunny and warm. This time round, with darker, shorter and colder days, young people were either demoralised by the weather itself, or felt that it limited their chance to exercise, even more so than in the first lockdown.

The weather exacerbated the breakdown in routine activities that young people referred to in previous lockdowns. Once again, not being able to take part in ordinary activities – going to the shops, taking part in classes or going to the gym – meant that many young people felt that they had lost their coping mechanisms.

Some that are learning from home felt that the weather had impacted their motivation, concentration and ability to perform well academically.

"I like to be outdoors a lot and due to the lockdown being in winter the weather is pretty bad and makes it hard to go out."

"The bad weather and dark nights make it harder to get out of the house after work so I feel I spend a lot of my time cooped up in my room. I live with my parents so it makes it more difficult for me to have down time in the way that I'd like."

"Having finally got myself back to some normality after the first lockdown, with the routine of college, being able to see people, having a reason to get up every day - my productivity, motivation and overall happiness has plummeted."

School pressures

There were a few positive accounts of learning from home: some respondents preferred working from home and found it easier, while others enjoyed setting their own routines and taking breaks when they needed to. Some young people who found school difficult before the pandemic said that being at home was less stressful and felt safer.

However, many more young people who were at school said that they were struggling with the pressure of home-learning. Among those at school (either learning from home or attending in person), 75% highlighted academic pressure as among the top three factors having a negative effect on their mental health.

Respondents talked about not being able to keep up, about a lack of understanding from the school, college or university that they were struggling to cope, or about being exhausted doing several

hours of online lessons every day; and about missing the 'fun' parts of school, including seeing friends. Some mentioned technical difficulties with learning online or having to care for younger siblings disrupting their learning.

Young people scheduled to take GCSEs or A-levels were also, understandably, struggling to cope with the fact that they did not how their grades were going to be assessed, only a few months before their exams had been due to take place.

"During this lockdown there has been far more pressure from schools to continue working at 100% because no one is sure what will happen with exams. Also, it's much harder to get outside as it's winter so there is a large feeling of isolation."

"In the first lockdown the work was given at a pace where I was able to take a step back when I needed to. However, now it's thrown at me."

"It isn't the school's fault but the whole discourse about exams is really making my mental health suffer, and also the workload is really high and I'm struggling to keep up. too much pressure (I'm year 13)"

"The work is extremely stressful at home. It's hard to get motivated and create a routine."

University pressures

Some respondents who are at university cited positives of learning from home, or of remaining on campus and being able to interact with other people in their student flat or while exercising.

However, many young people at university spoke of anger and frustration at having to pay for accommodation that they aren't allowed to live in, and at paying for courses when they are not having the experience or the academic support they expected. Some said that they could go for days not speaking to anyone and missed the support from peers around them.

Some said that the university expected them to produce the same amount of work with less support from academic staff, and a lack of sympathy or understanding. Many expressed feelings of exhaustion and burnout.

Several young people doing practical courses at school or college or university said that online learning was not appropriate for their studies.

"At first [my course] was a nice distraction and helped my mental health but I came home for a week and ended up staying for three months because of restrictions so now I'm paying money for a place I can't even stay at and it's really worrying me."

"Working on a creative practical course from home virtually is incredibly difficult and frustrating, I don't feel like I've received the same level of teaching or support that I should have from my university or my course. There is such a disconnect with students and the tutors that is really hard to navigate."

"AWFUL. The Government are ignoring us, the uni do not care as long as they get their money. I have no access to resources, LESS teaching time and it's all online and this is my last semester. My diss is due in May and I have no idea what's happening."

Concerns about COVID and getting ill

Some respondents talked about their fears of catching COVID and spreading it to other people; or of their family becoming ill. Some key workers felt that their work environments were not safe. Others were upset at the Government adverts suggesting that young people were spreading COVID.

"It has enforced my reasons why it's not safe to leave the house. Last year I thought we would be over this by Christmas but it just got worse and new variants make the world a very unsafe and scary place."

"All the government adverts to scare us young people saying we are responsible for people dying is terrifying. This is not something I considered before and it's made me incredibly anxious that I had COVID in the past and I've spread it."

"I'm a nurse and the stress that I have been under is off the scale, worrying about if I'm doing anything wrong or if I bring any viruses back to my elderly parents who I live with."

Bereavement

Bereavement came up far more prominently as an answer in this survey than previous ones. A significant number of young people found this lockdown harder to cope with than previous one because someone in their family had died, often as a result of COVID.

"The first one was worse because a relative died of COVID, which spiked my anxiety. This time I'm struggling to get motivated but I am less anxious because I feel safer at home than I did at school."

Other factors cited by young people included:

- Not living in a supportive environment
- Concerns about the mental health of friends, family, partners or the wider public
- Fears about losing their job or not being able to find a job

What has been most helpful for young people's mental health during the current lockdown?

65% of respondents said that speaking with friends is helpful for their mental health

55% said that exercise such as walking or running is helpful

54% said that listening to music is helpful

45% said that having a routine is helpful

40% said that watching TV or films is helpful

35% said that speaking to family is helpful

18% said that meditation and breathing exercises are helpful

18% said that gaming is helpful

17% said that doing a job is helpful

13% said that doing something new was helpful

12% said that school or university work is helpful

During the first lockdown, young people told us that face-to-face calls with friends (72%), watching TV/Films, exercise (60%) and learning new skills (59%) were helpful for their mental health.

Mental health support

Among the respondents, 1,817 agreed that they have needed some form of mental health support since the beginning of the pandemic (including through the NHS, counsellors, helplines or online support).
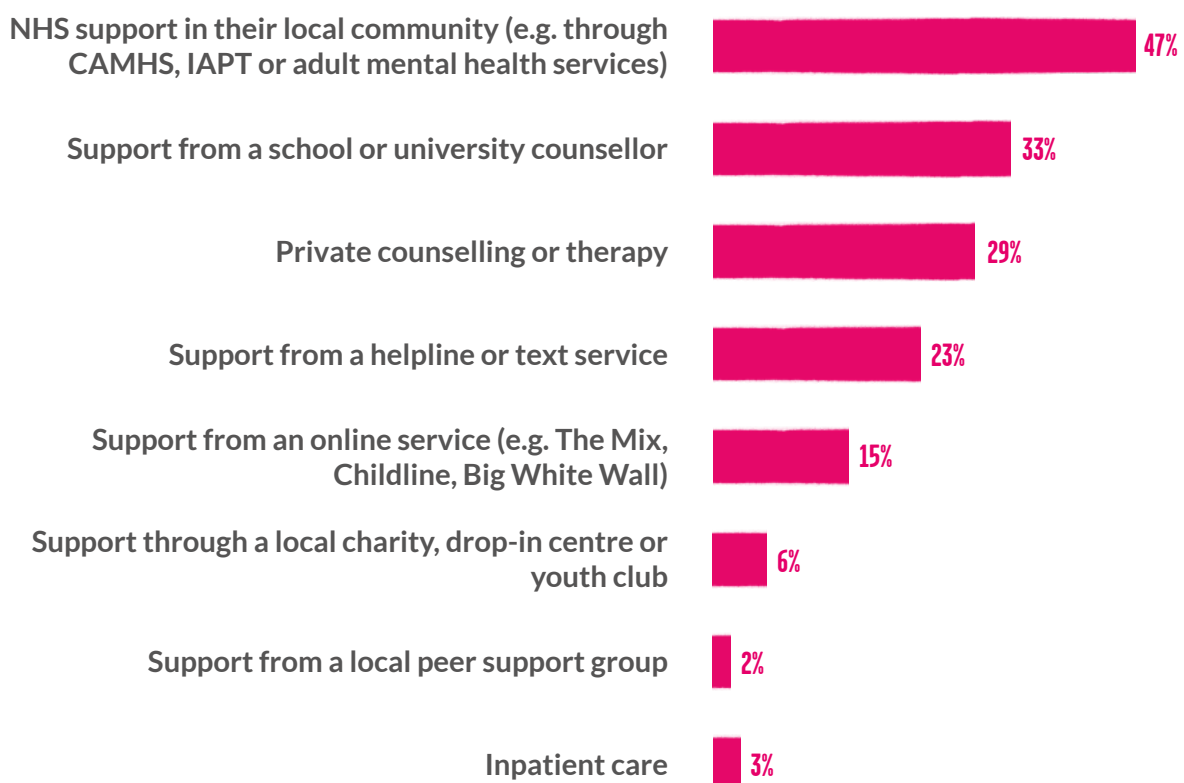
Of those who believe they have needed mental health support since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic:

54% have accessed some form of mental health support

24% have looked for mental health support, but received no mental health support

22% said that they have needed support but not looked for it

Of those who have received support, the types of support that young people have accessed since the pandemic began are:

Support type	Percentage
NHS support in their local community (e.g. through CAMHS, IAPT or adult mental health services)	47%
Support from a school or university counsellor	33%
Private counselling or therapy	29%
Support from a helpline or text service	23%
Support from an online service (e.g. The Mix, Childline, Big White Wall)	15%
Support through a local charity, drop-in centre or youth club	6%
Support from a local peer support group	2%
Inpatient care	3%

73% have received virtual support, 8% have received only face-to-face support and 20% have received both.

While mental health professionals across all sectors have done a remarkable job adapting to the challenges of the pandemic, the survey results make it clear that there is significant unmet need. 54% of those who believed they needed mental health support had accessed it during the pandemic. 24% said that they had looked for support but not received it – sometimes because of barriers to accessing support online. A further 22% said that they had not looked for support at all, often because of stigma.

Some young people praised the support they had been given, and said that it had helped them cope better with the challenges they face. In some cases, young people said that it had been life-saving.

"I am finding it a bit easier as now I am more open about my mental health and am talking to a counsellor."

"I struggled really badly with my mental health in the first two lockdowns. Attempted suicide after the second, got counselling and medication and also had support from the crisis team so am now on better tracks."

"Mental health has significantly improved over the course of last year or so due to counselling so this lockdown has been much better."

"I now have support from the school and am able to go in everyday which is better for me, as I need a break. Got on antidepressant meds and have seen an effect - not something I had during the 1st lockdown."

However, other young people cited barriers to looking for support and to receiving the level of support they felt they needed.

Barriers to receiving support

Stigma about looking for support

Despite welcome anti-stigma campaigns both before and during the pandemic, a significant proportion of respondents who believed they needed mental health support have chosen not to look for it. Some said they were aware of how many people are struggling, which stopped them seeking support. Others were worried about overstretched services and felt 'guilty' or 'selfish' for needing help during this time.

Some respondents were concerned about what other people would think if they sought support, including parents and friends – there was a perception that it was harder than normal to seek support without people around them finding out.

A number of respondents also said that they were too busy to seek support because of the pressures of school or university work, or because of work pressures.

"I worry that my problems aren't as bad as others and that I don't want to be wasting a Doctor's time when there is a pandemic."

"My dad doesn't understand mental health and I haven't told him, therefore limiting what support I can get."

"Not having any way of getting help without my parents being involved. Feeling like I'm being annoying if I try to ask for help."

"I feel as though I am inconveniencing teachers if I say I am struggling because I know they have a lot going on themselves."

"I've spent more time trying to catch up on work and supporting my friends, I feel I would let others down if I went to get help."

Not knowing where to turn

While campaigns like Every Mind Matters have highlighted places where young people can turn if they need help, some respondents said that they didn't know where to go to get additional support or what might be available to them. This included young people who had received support in the past, and felt it had been hard to access or it had not met their needs.

Some young people also felt that the only way their problems could be fixed were through practical changes to their lives – such as finding a job – and believed mental health support alone would be of limited value.

"I don't really know what to do or how to get the help I need."

"Needing more information about what is out there."

"I have no idea who to go to or contact to try and find a therapist."

"I almost called Samaritans but I was too nervous."

"I already had CBT online therapy in 2019, I don't think they can give me anything else."

"I don't see how anything will change even if I do. The things making me sad won't change. I need a chance for a job and for restrictions to life."

"Several times I would have taken myself to A&E because I am so low, but I am concerned about doing that because there is a pandemic."

Types of support available during lockdown

Young people said that the type of support available had changed as a result of the pandemic, and that services were predominantly online or by phone. While virtual support was considered more convenient by some, in many cases this was preventing them from seeking support or receiving the level of support they felt they needed.

Many said that they preferred face-to-face support and that there were privacy implications when it was online or over the phone. Others said that they struggled to explain why they need more support over the phone or when they spoke to people remotely.

This was also relevant for those young people who would normally speak to friends, family or trusted adults about how they were feeling, but who felt uncomfortable doing this over the phone.

"Phone anxiety makes it hard to make doctors' appointments so when I was told that I needed to make another appointment it just didn't happen."

"Staff at college are really supportive when in college but since lockdown, they have not been able to be contacted so easily and when contacted they have directed towards online sources, possibly because staff are too busy or don't know what to say."

"I find online counselling really difficult so I've paused my treatment until I can have it face to face and it has caused setbacks."

"Virtual help relies on having a private environment where I can share my thoughts freely which I do not currently have access to, as everyone is in the house all the time and I don't want to discuss some things where people can hear me. Most virtual services are over the phone and phone calls give me panic attacks and/or major anxiety so it's hard to get my needs across clearly."

"I don't want to do counselling online. My room is not a private space when I can discuss things I may want to, and I know from counselling that I've had in the past that the ability to go somewhere separate and talk to someone in person is a big part of why it worked for me."

Long waiting lists and difficulties accessing mental health services

While there has been significant investment in NHS mental health services for children and young adults over several years, support continues to vary across the country. There is also inconsistent provision of support through schools, universities and voluntary sector services. We heard from respondents who:

- Were on a waiting list for support
- Had previously been on a waiting list, or heard that there were long waiting lists, and therefore had decided not to look for help
- Had been discouraged from receiving further support from GPs or staff at GP surgeries (e.g. being told that a referral would not result in treatment, because of high thresholds)
- Had experienced bureaucratic problems – e.g. struggling to receive ongoing support in a new location, or where paperwork appeared to have gone missing
- Felt they fell between the cracks in services – with symptoms that were too severe for one form of support but not severe enough for another
- Had been offered reduced levels of support because of limited capacity

We heard individual examples of significant shortcomings in services, with some young people saying that they had been on waiting lists for specific services for months or in some cases over a year.

"My doctor's forgot about my appointment and said they'd refer me (this was in October). I waited 18 weeks and heard nothing. Then the pandemic happened and obviously my so called counselling never happened."

"Coming home means I've had to switch GP and it has taken a very long time to get information transferred. I'm worried that by the time I can receive support for my eating disorder I will need to switch back to my university GP and have to join another waiting list and start the process again."

"I tried to find support through the NHS and through my university back in October but I was told with both the wait list was over 6 months long."

"I have no idea who I've been referred to, how to contact them, how to chase, when they'll contact

me. It's all "we'll be in touch" and I just keep getting random phone calls with MH assessments and questions"

"I have been on the CAMHS waiting list for a year and have had nothing come through."

"CAMHS discharged me despite admitting they knew I was getting worse because apparently I wasn't "severe enough" for more treatment."

Lack of money

Some respondents believed that they would have to receive private support in order to meet their needs, and said that they didn't have the money to get treatment.

"Money. You need money to be able to receive help for complex needs and traumas."

"Private counsellors are expensive and I don't want to go back to the doctors."

"Don't have enough money for a good therapist and I get anxiety going to the doctors especially during a pandemic which means I can't get a NHS referral. NHS mental health counselling/therapist waitlist is at least 3 months for my area."

"Private therapy is expensive and I'm already being expected to pay for accommodation I'm not living in."

Mental health support in schools and colleges

579 children and young people answered questions about their experiences of support at their school or college:

55% agreed that there was a school counsellor or Mental Health Support Team available for students at the moment (**21%** neither agreed nor disagreed, **24%** disagreed)

64% agreed that their school or college has told students about places they can find mental health support (**12%** neither agreed nor disagreed, **24%** disagreed)

29% agreed that their school or college is focusing more on wellbeing and mental health than normal at the moment (e.g. through assemblies, PSHE lessons). **23%** neither agreed nor disagreed, **48%** disagreed

Over half (**55%**) agreed that there is a teacher they can talk to about their mental health if they need to (**16%** neither agreed nor disagreed, **29%** disagreed)

17% agreed that their school or college is putting less pressure on students to achieve good grades than normal (**19%** neither agreed nor disagreed, **65%** disagreed)

Respondents to the survey painted a mixed picture about their school's approach to mental health during the lockdown period. Many young people highlighted positives, with over half saying that there was a teacher they could talk to about their mental health, and 55% being aware of in-school mental health support.

However, others believed that there were not sufficient allowances being made for the impact of the pandemic. Almost half of respondents (48%) did not believe that their school or college was focusing more on wellbeing and mental health than normal. It is also worrying that nearly a quarter (24%) said that their school had not signposted them to places where they could find mental health support.

Many young people also highlighted a **lack of resources and other barriers** to mental health and wellbeing support within their school. These included:

- Teachers not having sufficient training or knowledge to help those struggling with their mental health – even though they were often seen to be trying their best

- Long waiting lists for school counselling services, or previous negative experiences of school counselling preventing young people from seeking support again

- Schools signposting to support which young people didn't feel confident accessing (e.g. because of anxiety about calling a helpline), and a lack of informal in-school support

- Concerns about privacy, with a fear of sensitive information being communicated back to their parents or carers

- A perception that young people with good grades are considered to be mentally well, even when they are not, and so are not receiving regular check-ins; a sense that there was more support available for those struggling with school work or with bullying than from mental health needs.

- A lack of teaching about mental health (through lessons, assemblies etc)

- Ongoing academic pressure, despite the recognition of the mental health impact of the pandemic and of home learning.

"They are giving us a lot of options to talk to people and get through it via links on google classrooms or asking genuine questions within the class time about people's wellbeing and how they are coping which is a good thing. It reminds us of our options and ability to talk and get the support we may need."

"They have a great, qualified team of counsellors/therapy people who you can ask to meet with but getting the service is the difficult part."

"There's an understanding that times are difficult but constant reminders about A-level grades makes it feel like if you display symptoms of poor mental health because of the situation then you'll be unfairly represented in grades. This encourages young people to hide their struggles."

"They do basic help well, but when it comes to the more serious problems, they tend not to know quite what to do."

youngminds.org.uk

"They seem to send emails with mental health resources but when asked how we are in lessons, if I or someone in my class opens up about the stress we're under they say "ok, now here's 10 pieces of work to complete in 2 days". I think they're trying but they're not equipped with the tools they need to help those with mental health issues."

Mental health support at University

392 young people answered questions about mental health support at their university:

34% felt confident that they are able to get mental health support at university if they need it. (20% neither confident nor unconfident, 45% unconfident)

Among those that felt confident about access to support, some said that the counselling at their university was of a high standard but that there were currently delays to appointments. Others said the support at university was much better than other places where they have looked for help and that tutors and lecturers were very supportive.

For those that did not feel confident, some said they did not know where to look or how to access support and that their university still had long waiting times. Many said that although services are available, they are not adequate in terms of the amount of support and the options open to students.

"Uni could only provide six weeks' worth of support. I'm not in a position at home to get help. My GP is at Uni and I don't feel able to call them while I'm 400 miles away."

"University counsellor is overloaded so there's a three month wait. I feel like no amount of support will fix how I feel."

Concerns about the future

We asked young people what their top three concerns are for the coming months.

In general, many listed factors that do not directly affect them but have wider societal implications. For example, one of the top issues was whether vaccines will stop transmission, whether there will be enough of them and if they will work. Young people also talked about the financial implications of coronavirus both personally and more broadly for the country as a whole. Many were worried about inequality rising as a result of the pandemic.

Top concerns included:

1. **Loneliness and isolation**

Concerns about ongoing loneliness and isolation, or friendships being changed as a result of the pandemic.

2. **Work and career prospects**

Many young people were worried about either getting their first job or finding another job and how the economic consequences of the pandemic would impact their future careers. Many who are studying also mentioned their grades and the grades of their peers and how this would impact the next stage of their life.

3. **The Government response to the pandemic**

Many respondents did not trust the government to get 'opening up' right – they worried it would be too quick and lead to further lockdowns or increased levels of sickness. Many also worried about the wider implications on inequality.

4. **Uncertainty**

Uncertainty continues to be a big factor – young people were worried about when they would be able to return to school, university or college, and when they would be able to see their friends again, or family they don't live with.

For those that are studying, not knowing how GCSEs, A-Levels and university exams would be assessed came out very highly as a concern and a source of frustration. Some young people mentioned that they don't want to lose another year of being young, having the chance to have fun and enjoy things they cannot now do.

5. **Mental health**

Many young people were specifically concerned that their mental health would deteriorate further. Some mentioned not wanting to relapse into behaviours like self-harm or having suicidal thoughts. Other described a growing feeling of 'burnout' from school, or work, or exhaustion from the pandemic.

"Jobs. I've applied for over 100 jobs and I just feel like I have no chance. There's a lot of fear around family members becoming ill. Other people being able to start doing things as they've been vaccinated but having to wait almost a full year to be fully protected."

"Relationships with friends and family, future of young people, the wider effect of the pandemic such as poverty and inequality."

"The vaccines not working on the new strains of the virus. Everyone being allowed to be near each other again making me anxious even if COVID is no longer a threat. The employment opportunities now that many businesses have collapsed."

Conclusion

This report adds to a growing body of evidence showing the impact of the pandemic on children and young people's mental health. NHS Digital data collected in July 2020 demonstrated a substantial increase in mental health needs of children and young people, while the University of Oxford's Co-Space research has shown increasing levels of need during lockdown periods. Many others surveys, reports and pieces of research paint a picture that shows an increase in mental health problems for a significant proportion of children and young people.

While it is too early to be sure of the long-term impact, young people who responded to this survey were deeply concerned about the future. Some are likely to experience trauma or require a lengthy period of readjustment, while others were concerned about the impact of the pandemic on the economy or their access to education or work.

In the short term, the Government must do all it can to ensure that it tackles the pandemic effectively and that young people's lives can return to something like normal in the foreseeable future, without additional uncertainty or distress.

The Government must also make sure that **wellbeing is a priority in school catch-up planning**, and take a cautious approach to measures that could introduce additional pressure to some young people – such as extending the school day. There also needs to be an honest assessment of the **inconsistent mental health support available through schools**, and we recommend additional ring-fenced funding to enable schools to commission the support they need in this time of crisis.

The Government must also ensure that **local charities and youth clubs**, which provide vital early mental health support, survive the economic impact of pandemic. And, in the longer term, we are calling for a **national network of community early intervention hubs**, which provide open-access mental health support in non-medicalised setting. This would help to break down the alarming levels of stigma and concern about seeking support that we have seen in this survey.

While there has been significant progress in improving **NHS mental health services** for children and young people in recent years, responses to our survey suggest that there is far more to do to improve the access and quality of services – particularly in the context of rising demand. It is also vital that **all young people know where and how to find support** and that there are smooth pathways between services.

Above all, the Government must develop a new young people's mental health strategy in the wake of the pandemic, which addresses the factors that lead to mental ill health: as well as introducing extra mental health support in schools, we must ensure that schools are positive environments for young people's mental health in the first place; as well as expanding NHS services, we must address the inequalities that are fuelling rising demand.

Methodology

The young people in this report

This report outlines the results of the fourth survey that we have carried out during the coronavirus pandemic with young people with a history of mental health needs - defined as young people aged from 13 to 25 who answered 'yes' to the question 'Have you ever looked for support for your mental health?'. The survey was completed online via alchemer.eu, and promoted through YoungMinds newsletters, social media and advertising.

2,438 young people aged 13-25 took part in the survey, including 2,015 who answered all relevant sections. All respondents live in the UK and have looked for mental health support as some point in their lives (through the NHS, counsellors, helplines or online etc).

Among the respondents, 1,817 agreed that they have needed some form of mental health support since the beginning of the pandemic, including 981 who have received support. 22% of all respondents agreed that they were not struggling with their mental health before the pandemic, but now are.

When asked "which best describes what you are doing at the moment?"

41% are at school or college

23% are at university

27% are working

7% are not in education or working

579 young people answered questions about their experiences of mental health support in schools. Among those 88% were being taught from home and 9% were attending school or college.

392 young people answered questions about their experiences of mental health support in university. Among these, 21% are currently attending university and 71% are learning from home.

Among the respondents, 24% were aged 13-16; 27% were 17-19; 22% were 20-22; 26% were 23-25. The majority identified as female (79%), and 88% told us they were White British. 89% of the young people that responded currently live in England, 6% in Scotland, 4% in Wales and 1% in Northern Ireland. 20% said that they had a health problem or disability that limited their day-to-day activities and had lasted, or was expected to last, at least 12 months.

Based on this, and the sampling method, the data cannot be considered to be representative. Additionally, as the survey was completed online, some young people without appropriate access to technology are less likely to have completed it. However, the results provide a valuable snapshot of children and young people's experiences of the winter lockdown in a fast-changing situation.

YM | Parents Helpline
0808 802 5544
youngminds.org.uk
Mon-Fri 9.30am-4pm

YoungMinds
Fourth Floor, India House
45 Curlew Street
London SE1 2ND

Telephone 020 7089 5050

ymenquiries@youngminds.org.uk

youngminds.org.uk