

Helping young people manage their mental health

Young people's views and experiences
of social support in Gloucestershire

June 2023



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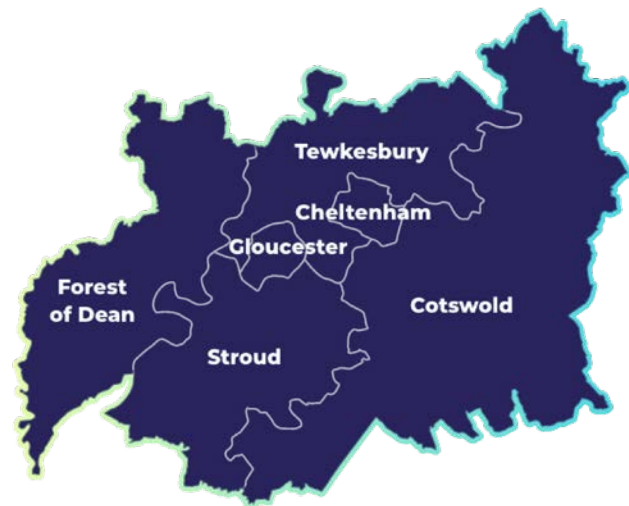
About us

Healthwatch Gloucestershire is the county's health and social care champion.

We're here to listen to your experiences of using local health and care services and to hear about the issues that really matter to you. We are entirely independent and impartial, and anything you share with us is confidential. We can also help you find reliable and trustworthy information and advice to help you to get the care and support you need.

As an independent statutory body, we have the power to make sure that NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to your feedback and use it to improve standards of care. This report is an example of how your views are shared.

Healthwatch Gloucestershire is part of a network of over 150 local Healthwatch across the country. We cover the geographical area of Gloucestershire County Council, which includes the districts and boroughs of Cheltenham, Cotswold, Forest of Dean, Gloucester, Stroud, and Tewkesbury.



Background

We know that demand and waiting times for children and young people's mental health services have gone up, as funding has gone down. (Source: [Local Government Association](#))

Through our [Young Listeners project](#) in early 2022, we advised Gloucestershire's NHS and care providers about improvements young people would like to see to young people's health and care services, including clinical mental health services (Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services - CAMHS). Changes recommended included the need for more support groups and hubs for young people who have left education; more accessible information, guidance, and support; and earlier intervention and support for young people before their mental health becomes critical.

We wanted to build on this work and continue to focus on the need for better mental health care for young people in Gloucestershire. Specifically, we wanted to hear more from young people about how they use and benefit from non-clinical, more social aspects of mental health care and support. This includes activities and interest groups, such as relaxation, fitness and sports, music, arts, and the environment. In addition, we wanted to know what works well for young people and what more could be done to help them build, manage and sustain good mental health.



What we did

From mid-January to mid-February 2023, we actively engaged with young people to gather feedback about their experiences and ideas for change. We collected their views via an online survey, one-to-one interviews, and focus group discussions.

Considerations

We raised awareness of the project through our extensive networks, including the Know Your Patch communities in Gloucestershire, many newsletters, youth clubs and schools, and we promoted it via social media and the press. Due to the time constraints of the project, we were unable to follow-up many of the connections we made, which limited the number of people we were able to engage with.



Who we spoke to

We gathered feedback from over 200 people. Forty-two people completed our survey and we spoke to around 160 young people aged 14-25 at the following events and a discussion group.

- Door Youth Centre clubs at The Pod in Stonehouse and The Vibe in Dursley
- School Council at Rednock School, Dursley
- Re-Welcome Fayre at the University of Gloucestershire
- South Gloucestershire and Stroud College
- Gloucestershire Youth Climate Group (online focus group)



Key messages

- A high proportion of young people experience poor mental health.
- COVID-19 continues to impact young people's mental health.
- Feelings of stress and anxiety are high amongst all ages.
- Young people experience pressure from different things, including school, exams, social media, climate change and friendship groups.
- Young people are not aware of any informal support they can easily access or where they could find it.
- Young people benefit from attending youth clubs and other social opportunities outside of school and college.

See 'What people told us', page 6, for more information about the feedback we received.

Recommendations

We believe that health and social care providers can best improve mental health support for young people if they listen and learn from their experiences and feedback. We have analysed what young people told us in this project and in our previous Young Listeners report. We recommend the following actions to improve social support and early intervention in Gloucestershire to help young people manage their mental health.

- Provide a local directory of the services that are available for young people, and make sure this is accessible and inclusive to all young people, and promoted widely across Gloucestershire in ways that will reach and engage young people.
- Provide services to support young people during all aspects of their mental health journey, including more social support groups, activities, and opportunities, to ensure early intervention as well as critical care.
- Provide easy access to support when it's needed via phone/App/online, to help young people manage anxiety, and help prevent the need for more formal, clinical support.
- Provide more free opportunities for young people to get involved with and benefit from support in the community, including sports and social opportunities.



What people told us

Events

To ensure we engaged with as many young people as possible at the four events we attended, we used the same specific questions from the survey and gathered responses using flip charts and post-it notes. We amalgamated their responses under each question to identify common phrases and issues.

Describe your mental health in three words

Complex, variable, challenging		Hard to understand
Terrible, gross, horrid		
Up and Down		Great, improving, flexible
Comes in waves		
Better than before		Exhausting, confusing, scary
Overwhelmed, fiery, dampening		Negative, low, saddening
Rocky, good, average		Annoyed, angry, hurtful
Terrible, stressful, tiring		Out of control
Be active always		Terrified, excited, proud
Always needs growth		Unreliable, exhausting, interesting
Ruined my life		Almost always happy
A shit show		Sad, sad, sad
Complete cataclysmic failure		

What things make you feel anxious?

School/College	
Friendships & relationships	
Homework/deadlines	
Work	Shouting
Loud noise	The unknown
Music	
Exams	Performing or speaking in front of crowds
Social Media	Social gatherings
Starting university	Going into class
The news	Overthinking
People	Confrontation
Family problems	Being laughed at
Living away from home	My dyslexia

What things improve your mental health?

Talking to/spending time with friends & family	
Listening to music	
Exercise	
Spending time with pets	
Being creative	Being at the Pod (youth group)
Time away from school	Watching TV/YouTube
Money	Gaming
Meditation	No homework
Therapy	Having fun
Going out for a meal	Sexual activity
Dancing	Having a good cry
Being outside	Making people feel nice about themselves and not judged
Travelling	
Not focusing on the bad in the world	Putting my make up on
Sleeping	Yelling

What is the biggest problem you are facing right now that affects your mental health?

College/education/school	
Exams and homework	
Anxiety and panic attacks	Friendships
Money/finances	My physical and mental health
Living in a negative world	People shouting
My parents	Addiction management
Being out of work	None – I am happy as my parents have kept it as a very important topic since I was very young
Work experience	
Stupid boys	

What other services and support would be helpful?

Youth Centres to be open more often and for longer

Having more people available to talk to (CSO's, teachers, tutors, youth workers)

More exercise opportunities (dance, boxing, trampolining, sport)

Easier access to services

More 'free to access' social spaces for young people

I don't know - what are you offering

Something other than CAMHS

An easily accessible chat function to share how I am feeling

If you could do anything to improve your mental health, what would that be?

Take more time for me

Exercise more

Worry less

I don't know/not sure

Relax

See my friends more

Take part in different activities

Get more sleep

Listen to music

Read more

Nothing, I am happy

Find people like me

Stop the shouting at home

Stop worrying about money, food and warmth

Have more people to talk to

I feel confident talking about my mental health to...

My friends and family

Youth Workers

Teacher

Myself

My partner

Tutor/Wellbeing Mentor

Nobody

Police/CSOs

My GP

Anyone who will listen

Anyone I trust who likes me for me

I cannot find the words to talk about it

People who understand and are kind about it

Online focus group

We carried out one online focus group with young people from the Creative Sustainability Group. During the informal discussion, we addressed some of the questions within the survey.

How would you describe what is meant by mental health?



It is an evaluation of overall wellbeing and mental health being an aspect of this. Wellbeing describes an individual's ability to cope with everyday life and this affects everyone in different degrees. There are also misconceptions with medication, as it does not cure, but helps you to cope.



The words **resilience**, **scaredness** and **positivity** came out strongly when we asked them to describe their mental health.

Who do you feel confident talking to about your mental health?

Family and friends came out strongly. One person noted that they are aware a particular family member struggles with their own mental health, so they are conscious not to overload them with their own feelings and tend to speak to their partner and friends more.

It was agreed that with friends, as soon as one person starts to open up it gives others permission to share how they are feeling, which starts the conversation, and this is a very positive experience. Everyone felt talking about things is positive.

Are there times when there is no one to speak to?

The group felt this had sometimes been the case in the past, but it's now rare as they have more confidence to share how they are feeling. One person expressed occasional difficulties if their partner was stressed as it prevented them from expressing their own feelings.

How did the Covid pandemic affect your mental health?

The group agreed that initially, in the short term, the pandemic had helped them, because everyone was in the same situation and had to stay at home, and it felt there was nothing they could do, which meant they had nothing to worry about. However, in the long term it was difficult, particularly when the lockdowns were starting and then stopping.

They commented that things seemed to change all at once. One example of this was exams being officially cancelled, but not really as they then had to be teacher assessed for their grades and had to sit a lot of assessments, which was stressful.

In addition, one of the group was not living at home during the first lockdown and, although they were living with their partner, they missed their family and became quite lonely. Another person was living on their own and felt very isolated, which was difficult. They described having a more severe mental health episode during this period, although looking back they felt it has given them more resilience and given them better coping mechanisms for the future.



Do you ever feel anxious and if so, how often?



Everyone agreed they do sometimes feel anxious, but not all the time and it depends upon the situation. Some of the group have found coping mechanisms such as writing things down and understanding the difference between what they can achieve now and what can wait. Everyone was aware there are occasions when certain things trigger them and there is nothing they can do, which is when they use their coping strategies.

They all expressed their concern about the climate and sometimes it can make them feel helpless, although being a part of the climate group and knowing they are doing something positive makes a difference.

What does anxiety feel Like?

The group agreed anxiety often presents as very physical and can impact the ability to sleep, their sleep patterns, creating strange dreams, twitches, and a mental fog. One person described how it also brings on a feeling of being alone and leads to a tight chest and many tears.

Everyone felt they now had the knowledge and understanding to realise anxiety is on a scale, and there is a certain amount they can deal with, but when that tips over, they can recognise they need to access help.

 I am getting better at acknowledging what it is and what I need to do. 

Are you aware of services available in Gloucestershire that help you manage your mental health?

The group identified the following services:

- CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services)
- Mind
- Young Minds Matter
- Samaritans
- Let's Talk

What is the biggest problem you are facing right now that's affecting your mental health?

A few of the group acknowledged work as stressful, having targets to meet and extra responsibilities due to staffing issues that impacted this. Having worked from home for such a long time, going into the office occasionally feels a little overwhelming, but good at the same time.

Other group members have important exams this year, and life changes, such as university and moving away from home for the first time.

What do you do that helps improve your mental health?

Taking a break from work

Writing Pets Walking
Paddleboarding
Gardening
Being outside Cycling Meditation
Spending time with friends

If you could do anything to improve your mental health, what would that be?

- Change my job, and/or have a more flexible working pattern.
- Less pressure from school and in turn, reduce the pressure I put on myself as all this affects my mental health.
- Exercise more.
- Take more breaks.
- Get outside more in the sunlight.
- More free time

Is there anything else you would like to share?

The whole group felt there is a connection between mental health and environmentalism, which can be quite depressing, although they do feel positive to be doing something about it. The state of the world is scary, but they have to focus on what is within their control and ensure they talk about it with others despite receiving different reactions, some positive and some negative.

Survey

42 young people completed our online survey to share their thoughts and experiences of mental health and the support they would like.

- 57.1% of respondents (24 people) had experience of using the mental health services; 42.9% (18 people) did not.
- 88.1% (37 people) said they feel anxious, always, often, or sometimes, and only 11.5% (five people) said they never or rarely feel anxious.
- 36.6% said the Covid pandemic negatively affected their mental health.
- 52.4% of respondents said they feel like they need someone to talk to about their mental health, but they don't know who to turn to.
- People said they feel most confident speaking about their mental health to friends, followed by their GP, parents, then a counsellor/therapist.
- 54.8% of respondents (23 people) said they are aware of services in Gloucestershire that support young people with their mental health.

People gave a variety of responses to our questions about the type of services and support they think would help them to manage their mental health, including:

- Quick access to doctors who can support 16-18 year olds specifically.
- Alternative advice that is not always therapy
- More funding for Youth Centres
- Greater charity sector support
- More counselling in schools
- Online chat/hotline
- Coffee mornings
- Places to do arts and crafts/music/singing.

See Appendix, page 13, for more detail about what people told us in the survey.

Stakeholder responses

**CLlr Mark Hawthorne MBE,
Leader of Gloucestershire County Council**



"Thank you to Healthwatch and the young people who shared their experiences to produce this report, proving an invaluable insight into young people's experiences which we can use to shape local services. Gloucestershire County Council are working closely with partners to develop options for young people in schools and the wider community to make it easier for them to access support when they need it.

"We have invested in TIC+Chat, a new 'drop in' helpline for young people aged 9-25 years to help them reach support when they are feeling anxious or low, and our new Build Back Better Youth grant scheme will invest in community based social and recreational activities for young people, such as those highlighted in the report.

"As shown by the report's recommendations, and the council's own Pupil Wellbeing Survey, we must listen directly to young people about what works for them so that we can invest in initiatives that will make a real difference to the wellbeing of the next generation."

**Children's Mental Health Commissioner
NHS Gloucestershire ICB**



"We are grateful to Healthwatch for facilitating this insightful engagement report and would like to thank all the children and young people who have contributed and shared their insights.

"At NHS Gloucestershire, children and young people's mental health is a priority and we are committed to providing the right support and a range of offers. As such, we have made significant investments over the last few years to develop and expand our offer including early intervention working with children, young people and parents. We are passionate about user-centred design and strongly believe that listening to children and young people is vital in ensuring services can best meet their needs.

"From our engagement with young people, we know that our system of support for mental health can be daunting and sometimes difficult to navigate. This is why we have recently codeveloped alongside children and young people a tool called On Your Mind Glos. It features an anonymous mental health support finder as well as a directory of services, including access to self-referral for a range of NHS commissioned services and self-help resources. This includes online text chat and anonymous drop in services, online and face-to-face counselling.

"This was soft-launched in February 2022 and we look forward to accelerating the promotion of this resource through 2023 so that more children and young people can benefit as well as parents, carers and practitioners.

"We believe that On Your Mind Glos has the ability to act as a single source of truth for children's mental health in the county and will enable us to shout about the wide range of support we are proud to have available facilitating children and young people to get the support that they need."

Thank you

Thank you to the young people from the Gloucestershire Youth Climate Group for actively participating in the focus group. Thanks also to all the young people, staff and volunteers at The Door Youth Centres in Stonehouse and Dursley for welcoming us and sharing their thoughts, experiences and ideas. Thanks to the School Council at Rednock School for their participation and to Stroud College and the University of Gloucestershire for allowing us to set up a stand and engage with the students. Finally, thanks to David Rawlings, Children & Young People Development Officer at Stroud District Council and Hollie Jones, Acorn Practice who helped us to engage with many of these groups.



Appendix: Survey data

42 young people completed our survey to share their thoughts and experiences with us.

1. How would you define or describe what is meant by mental health?

Most people described this as mental wellbeing and how people feel on a daily basis.

“Your mental wellbeing and how well you are currently coping with life in general.”

“Mental health is something that can be big or small and affects your daily life and routine.”

“Like physical health, except for the mind.”

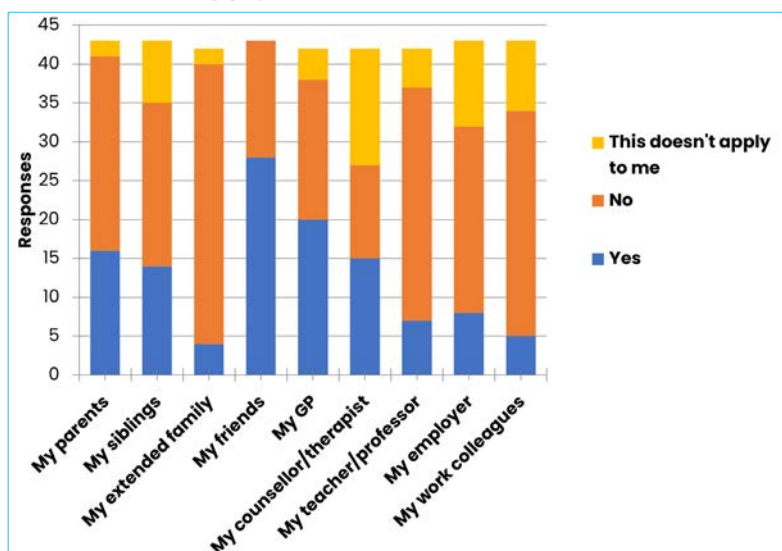
2. Describe your own mental health in three words.

Ok, better, decent	Sudden, anxious, overthinking	Could be better
Tired, alone, ignored	Stable yet mixed	Dictated by school
Unstable, declining, bad	Stable with tablets	Poor, it hurts, I'm sad
Not the best	I have improved	Anxiety stops me
Fluctuating, unpredictable, draining	Anxious, fearful, alone	Confusing, changing, indecisive
Up and down	Not very fun	Positive, recovering, stable
Really f***ing bad	Not good lately	Consuming, fluctuating, sh*t
Excitable, disappointed, pessimistic	Changing, improving, challenging	Depression, anxiety, Post-Traumatic Stress
Tired, sleepy, monotone	Changing, sudden, scary	A good place
It changes daily	Stressed, bad, deteriorating	Really not good
Good, narrow, bad	Fluctuating, Abstract, empty	It is ok
Possibly above average	Good most times	Destructive, stressful, empty
Tired, random, joyous	Depressed, sad, anxious	Bad, sad, hopeless

3. Have you had experience of using mental health services?

57.1% of respondents had experience of using the mental health services; 42.9% did not.

4. Consider this statement: 'I feel confident talking about my mental health to ...' and tick as many answers that apply



Speaking to friends received the highest response, followed by the GP, then parents, followed by Counsellor/Therapist and siblings.

“I have to build trust first.”

“Most of these people don't need to know about my problems as they have their own.”

“Though I don't enjoy talking to my parents about my mental health, I do occasionally.”

5. Do you ever feel like you need someone to talk to, but don't know who to turn to?

52.4% of respondents answered yes to this question.

"I want to be able to talk about my mental health without having to access a service. I wish there were places within my community I could go to."

"For me this is something I can resolve myself, but if I had someone to speak to it would be easier."

"I find release in doing the things I enjoy, as I struggle to put into words how I feel, so I take part in one of my hobbies."

6. What support do you need right now that you don't have?

33 respondents answered the question and seven of these felt they did not need any support right now. The remaining 26 people gave a wide variety of comments, including:

"Our school was going to implement a service for anonymous reporting, but they never did."

"Support to get into work as I have dropped out of college."

"I just need a break from life."

"Mental health support."

"I have all the support; I just need to take it."

"Therapy is too expensive at the moment."

"A service where I do not have to talk physically, and I am able to use a chat function."

7. Did the COVID pandemic negatively affect your mental health?

63.4% of respondents answered yes to this question.

"It did socially, although I liked doing schoolwork at home and didn't want to go back into the classroom."

"My anxiety worsened, I lost friends, my depression worsened, and I had no one to turn to."

"I fell into a low state, never left my bedroom and my family grew concerned about me. I felt so alone."

"I don't know how to socialise anymore."

"SO MUCH, as I developed an eating disorder, which luckily, I have under control now."

"Locked inside with a mean family."

"I fell into a strong depression."

"It completely destroyed by social life and the impact is still affecting me."

36.6% of respondents felt the pandemic had not negatively affected their mental health:

"It made it better in a lot of ways, due to less socialising."

"It improved my mental health."

"I sat at home for ages, and it was sound."

"I loved it and hated it."

8. Choose from the answers provided to complete this statement: 'I feel anxious.'

88.1% of respondents (37 people) said they feel anxious, always, often or sometimes; only 11.5 % (five people) said they never or rarely feel anxious.

Answer choice	Response %	Total
1. Always	14.3%	6
2. Often	17.6%	20
3. Sometimes	26.2%	11
4. Rarely	9.5%	4
5. Never	2.4%	1
		42

"I feel anxious nearly every day, but just for short periods."

"Because I rarely see anyone in my community."

"I often feel anxious about decisions and making choices."

"I feel anxious about meeting new people and getting into work."

"I just take it as a natural thing to happen."

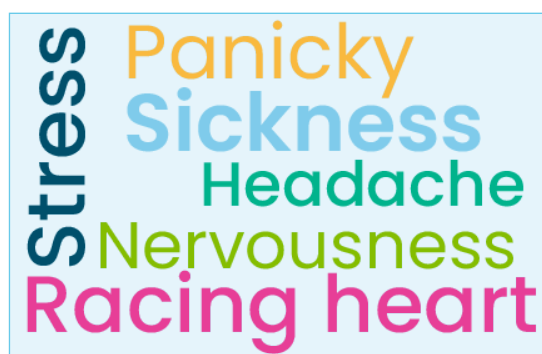
9. What things make you anxious?

39 respondents answered this question.



- "My thoughts and my habits."
- "Doing 'work-sleep-work-sleep' until I die doesn't sound particularly fun."
- "Hard to put a finger on."
- "The state of the environment."
- "Feeling I am doing badly at school."

10. What does anxiety feel like to you?

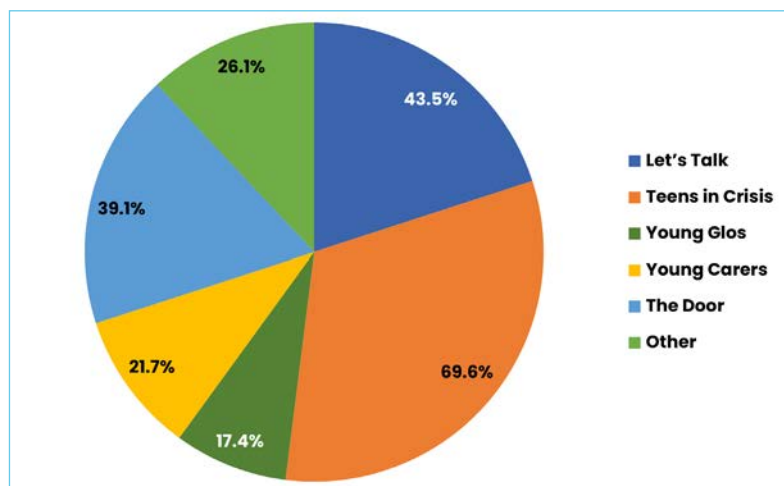


- "A looming fear of something you know is coming but don't know when."
- "A clam closing in on me."
- "Uncomfortable kind of itchy. Makes me want to peel off my own skin and curl up into a ball."
- "Very isolating and a feeling that can easily take over and is hard to fight."

11. Are you aware of services available in Gloucestershire that help young people to manage their mental health?

54.8% of respondents (23 people) said yes to this question.

12. If you answered yes to question 11, which of the following services do you know about? Tick all that apply, and tell us of any other services you are aware of.



Other services identified:
Childline
Samaritans
GP, mental health consultants at my work and college
CAMHS
Brownhill Centre

13. If you answered yes to question 11, what other services and support do you think would be helpful?

14 respondents answered this question with comments as follows:

- "Quick access to doctors that can support 16-18 year olds specifically."
- "Making the existing ones more accessible."
- "Alternative advice that is not always therapy."
- "More funding for Youth Centres."
- "Greater charity sector support."
- "More counselling in schools."

14. If you answered no to question 11, what services and support do you think would be helpful?

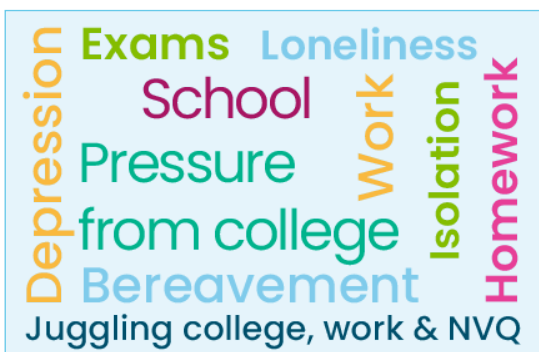
13 respondents answered this question.



"There is nothing more scary than officialdom offering help and I no longer trust you."

"Guidance & training on how to manage life in this modern day."

15. What is the biggest problem you are facing right now that's affecting your mental health?



"There being no change and I am living a boring life."

"I often feel anxious about decisions and making choices."

"Fear of the future."

"Trying to grow the confidence to get into working."

"Feeling sad all the time and disconnected."

"I have been living in a hotel for almost a year and my future is uncertain."

"Overthinking causes me to make scenarios worse than they actually are."

16. When you feel low/anxious/depressed, what things do you do that you find improve your mental health?



"Say to myself 'you gotta keep moving' and push the bad thoughts away."

"I usually try escapism into games, books or movies as nothing seems to get better at the moment, only slightly worse."

17. If you could do anything to improve your mental health what would that be?



"Achieve something which means something to me – If I knew what that was, that would be great."

"Make the emptiness go away."

"Have less homework and exams."

"Win the lottery."

"Go back in time."

"Not feel suicidal."

"Go to a different school."

18. Is there anything else you wish to share with us?

"Please do more to help people in rural communities. We only have one youth club in a ten mile radius of our home."

"Stop pushing therapy as it isn't right for everyone."

"Thank you for trying to help."

"Tell me how to access free good therapy."

"Too many young people are addicted to their phones and need other things to do."

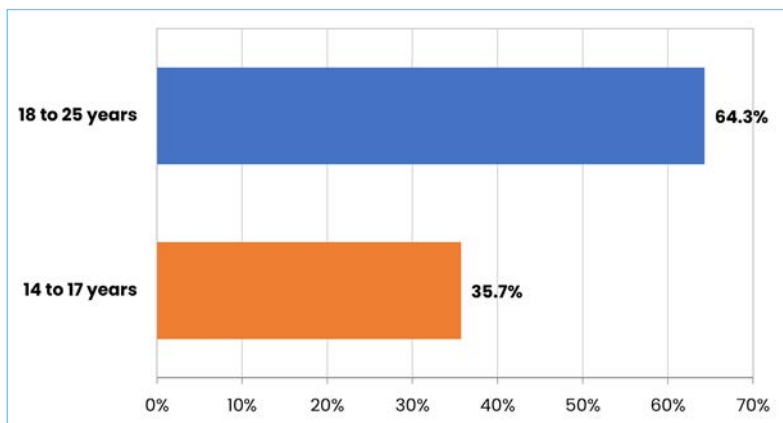
"I need help but there is no one who can help me."

"I often feel sad, but I make a great job of looking happy and making people believe I am always OK when I am not."

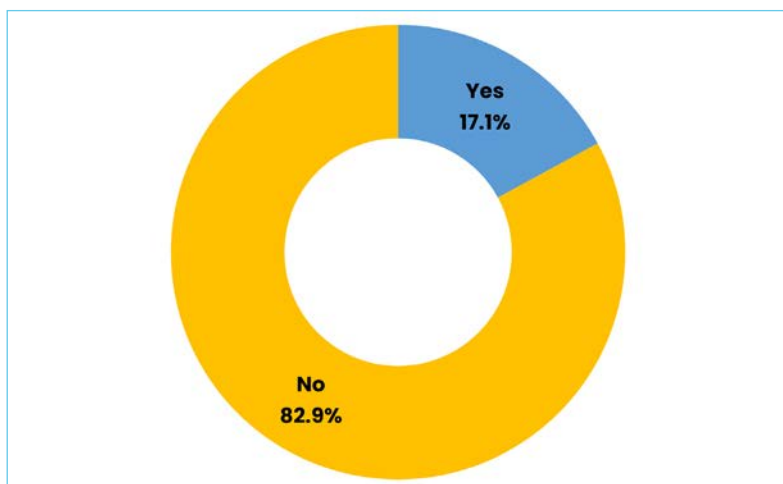
"I feel like I am not important."

Demographic data

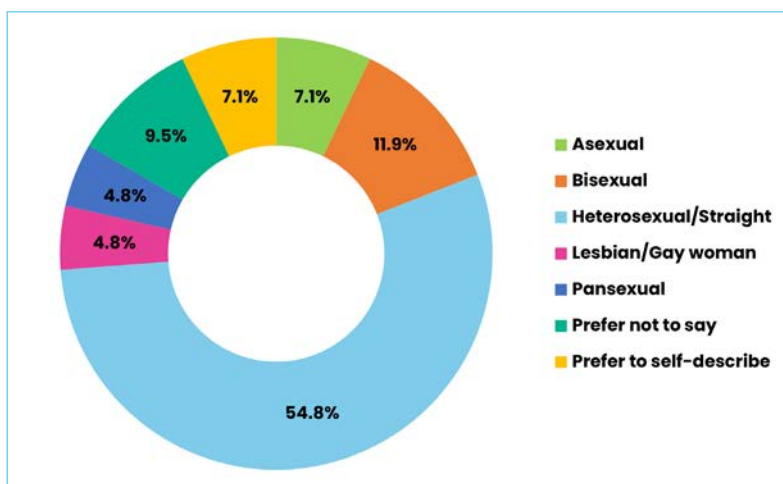
How old are you?



Is your gender different to the sex that was assigned to you at birth?



Which sexual orientation do you identify with?





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