

**A new report exposes concerning gaps in NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services:
Children as young as 12 are now resorting to 'social media DIY' to improve their mental health.**

**The theme of stem4's Youth Mental Health Day (19 September) is #BeBrave.
Young people are calling for more early evidence-based interventions to help them overcome and
face their fears.**

Lack of access to NHS mental health treatment has resulted in one third (35%) of children, some as young as 12, resorting to 'social media DIY' for help with their mental health. The proportion increases to nearly half (47%) in young people with anxiety and eating disorders, or who self-harm.

Today, nearly six in ten 12-to-21 year-olds say they are in mental health distress. Four in ten (40%) experience anxiety; nearly one in three (28%) depression; and nearly one in four (23%) body image difficulties and just over one in ten suffer from an eating disorder (such as extreme restrictive eating, binge eating and purging or vomiting). Meanwhile around one in ten say they self-harm (11%) and have behavioural problems (8%). Just 15% of the young people in need of support say they are receiving professional mental health support or intervention.

These findings come from a major new report '[Anxious and at breaking point](#)' by youth mental health charity stem4.¹ It was commissioned to mark Youth Mental Health Day (19 September), which this year takes the theme #BeBrave in acknowledgement of the increasing rise in anxiety conditions. stem4 warns that lack of access to evidence-based mental health interventions is stopping young people from participating in developmentally important activities. Clearly, this situation represents a significant risk to the current and future health of today's young generation.

Of the 1,025 children and young people surveyed, over eight in ten say they avoid situations so as not to feel anxious, with four in ten (41%) agreeing with the statement "it's better or okay to avoid anxiety-provoking situations than to learn how to tackle and overcome my fears."

A substantial majority of young people (84%) aged from 12 to 21 say that over the past 12 months they have avoided a variety of situations that make them feel anxious and uncomfortable. These include public speaking (40%), talking to people they don't know (35%), going to school, college, university, or work (29%), making new friends (26%) and even dating (19%).

A 14 year-old girl told the survey: "I waited 4 months to be seen by CAMHS, only to be told by a nurse that I would have to go on a 12-month waiting list for cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and if my parents had the money they should pay. I'm terrified of everything. Going to school, talking to teachers, and I'm being bullied. I've not been to school since December 2022. I even wrote to my MP to ask for help, who said just keep working with the school, who can't or won't help. Literally it feels like no one cares."

Dr Nihara Krause MBE, consultant clinical psychologist, CEO, and founder of youth mental health charity, stem4, commented:

"NHS mental health services lack capacity, and school and college counselling services are overwhelmed by having to deal with increasingly severe mental health problems, so that when mental ill health conditions may be starting or in the early part of progression, they do not meet current thresholds for treatment. Of these, anxiety disorders are often



CALM HARM



CLEAR FEAR



COMBINED MINDS



MOVE MOOD



WORTH WARRIOR



CONFERENCES



WEBSITE



HEAD ED

overlooked. Avoidance is a common outcome of anxiety since it provides immediate relief but maintains the problem in the long term. As a result, young people miss out on important developmental activities – such as going into school, gaining social confidence, or dating – experiences that build identity, and confidence. At the same time, they are being deprived of the opportunity to learn how to spot and deal with adverse experiences, and to learn how to face and overcome the anxiety and challenges they generate. Early access to an evidence-based approach such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) will help tackle avoidance behaviour, build their confidence, and help intercept further negative impact. Sadly, a substantial number of these young people are unlikely to receive any treatment on the NHS until their symptoms are severe and avoidance in itself has had its own negative consequences, and those that do get referred will face a significant wait. What makes the current situation worse is that these young people feel abandoned, left to deal alone with their mental health problems, and they perceive social media as a main and reliable place they can turn to for help.”

Many GPs say NHS Children and Young People’s Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are failing.

Since the pandemic, demand for NHS child and adolescent mental health services has increased by 76% (A record 1.4 million children and young people sought help for mental health problems in 2022, rising from 812,070 in 2019.² Unfortunately, levels of provision mean that treatment is only available to those presenting with imminent physical risk.

Demand is now so great that *“The whole NHS is broken, but worst of all are the children’s mental health services”* a GP in the South West of England told stem4 in its annual GP Survey ³. Or, as another GP in London put it: *“CAMHS is massively ‘oversubscribed’ and huge waits. I don’t doubt the doctors and teams are doing their best but essentially, they need huge numbers more. Almost every single referral I make is rejected with “does not meet the threshold”*. These comments are echoed across the whole of the UK: A GP in Wales added: *“CAMHS is a failed service. It’s not fit for purpose. They will not even see acutely suicidal children unless they have actually harmed themselves.”*

“Social media DIY for mental health”

In January 2023 stem4 reported that 97% of children and young people aged between 12 and 21 are now on social media. As many as 70% say that social media makes them feel stressed, anxious, and depressed,⁴ yet today sem4 finds that these feelings deterred only 7% of young people from using social media.¹

Today, young people admit to continuing to use social media apps even though they are concerned about possible damage to their mental health from content pushed at them by algorithms. Concerningly, young people with mental health difficulties, are twice as likely (32%) to seek out social media influencers who openly discuss their mental health problems, or who offer advice, than young people with no mental health difficulty (14%). This figure rises to nearly half (47%) among young people with anxiety, eating disorders, and who self-harm (34%). One in five (21%) of 12 – 21 year olds with no mental health difficulty admitted that their mental health was made worse by going on social media apps and connecting with influencers. This figure rises to exactly three in ten in young people with anxiety, eating disorders and who self-harm, and to over four in ten (42%) for those aged 12-14, indicating that there needs to be more focus and help for younger teens.

Dr Krause added: *“These findings are positive in terms of young people identifying their difficulties, but very concerning in terms of how they are dealing with them, which is to either avoid the situation since it’s too difficult to face or, in the absence of real-life help, turning to social media. Whilst peer support and self-help approaches have their place, given the unique individual factors that need consideration in terms of the aetiology and progression of a mental health condition, with a lack of targeted and evidence-based support it is unlikely a young person can experience positive change easily. Reliance on social media DIY as a strategy for coping with anxiety and other mental health difficulties is, at best, a lottery, since whilst some may access validated support, other young people are presented with non-personalised, random or*

generalised content, which will often be attenuated by algorithms ‘pushing’ further unsolicited content. In addition, people who are anxious seek reassurance, and can become reliant on their online ‘checking behaviour’.

“Psychological theory and evidence indicate that anxiety behaviours can be helped in the long-term by learning to face fears, one small, supported step at a time. This is why we have focused this year’s stem4’s Youth Mental Health Day on what it takes to ‘be brave’. By providing a range of resources about anxiety as well as the rationale for why it’s important to stop avoiding, helpful strategies to overcome anxiety, and access to our FREE app Clear Fear which uses principles of CBT, we hope to give young people the courage and confidence to face and overcome their fears so they can achieve their goals and ambitions and be the best version of themselves.”

To mark **Youth Mental Health Day (19 September)**, which this year takes the theme **#BeBrave**, stem4 is giving schools and colleges a range of free [resources](#) including ideas on how young people can navigate the many challenges they face while at school or college, and indicating ways to manage the anxieties that can arise. Whether young people are looking to build confidence to face difficult situations – or to learn to have the courage to fail by doing something new. There are also resources for educators on hosting ‘be brave’ assemblies, and classroom activities.

NOTES TO EDITORS

References

1. [Anxious and at breaking point](#), survey of 1,025 regionally representative young people in the UK aged from 12 to 21 carried out by Survey Goo between 21 & 27 July 2023
2. [NHS Digital Data](#) published by [The Guardian](#), 27 June 2023
3. Survey of 1,004 regionally representative GPs across the UK, carried out by MedeConnect Healthcare Insight between 14 & 24 December 2022
4. Survey of 1,032 regionally representative young people in the UK, aged from 12 to 21 carried out by Survey Goo between 21 & 27 November 2022

For a full copy of the survey findings, press release, and expert comment from Dr Nihara Krause MBE, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, CEO of stem4, please contact:

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About Youth mental health Day, 19 September 2023

Youth Mental Health Day #YMHD is an annual campaign launched by youth mental health charity stem4. The theme of this year’s campaign is #BeBrave. Whether it’s building confidence to face difficult situations, social confidence to overcome fears, or learning to have the courage to fail by doing something new – no matter what the outcome, being brave can mean something different to everyone.

By focusing on what it takes to be brave, stem4’s Youth Mental Health Day hopes to give young people the courage and confidence they need to achieve their goals and ambitions and be the best version of themselves.

#BeBrave Wall on Wimbledon Piazza - 19 September 2023

This year, stem4 will be hosting an event in central Wimbledon on 19 September to celebrate YMHD. We will be inviting members of the public to write what 'being brave' means to them on a makeshift "#BeBrave wall". There will be prizes to give away and activities to get involved with. The stem4 team will also be there all day.

Better policies to help young people overcome their fears and anxieties

To help young people experiencing difficulties, stem4 is campaigning for educators and parents/carers to have better education and understanding of anxiety and anxiety disorders, including the importance and benefit of seeking early evidence-based support to help avert avoidance behaviours, and through offering early intervention CBT specialists in schools and colleges. As a matter of urgency, stem4 is calling for:

- Clear guidance for schools and colleges on strategies they can jointly implement in school, and for parents and carers strategies for home.
- Clear guidance for the prompt assessment of undiagnosed Special Educational Needs (SEN) such as autism, ADHD, or dyslexia.
- A buddy system in each educational establishment to help support young people who may find social situations difficult.
- Acknowledgment of the need for support and the impact anxiety and anxiety disorders has on families by having drop in community family hubs.

About stem4

stem4 is an award-winning charity that supports teenagers with their mental health. It provides evidence-based education, builds resilience, enhances motivation to change, and provides signposts to ensure early intervention and action. stem4 focuses on commonly occurring mental health issues in teenagers including eating disorders, anxiety, depression, self-harm, and addiction.

The charity works with students, parents and teachers in secondary schools and colleges, and with health professionals such as GPs and school nurses through its conference programme and through its digitally delivered workshops suitable for PHSE in schools. **stem4** is also included in the Royal College of GP toolkit.

■ stem4's free, evidence-based, smartphone apps

With children and young people experiencing difficulty and long waiting times in accessing effective treatments, **stem4** has developed four NHS-approved smartphone apps, all based on evidence-based strategies, to help young people in the treatment of and recovery from their mental health difficulties. These apps have been downloaded and used over 2 million times. These apps include:

- **Clear Fear**, which uses the evidence-based treatment Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) to help manage the symptoms of anxiety;
- **Calm Harm**, which uses the basic principles of an evidence-based therapy, Dialectic Behaviour Therapy (DBT) to help manage the urge to self-harm;
- **Move Mood**, which uses Behavioural Activation Therapy to help improve low mood and manage the symptoms of depression;

- **Combined Minds**, which uses a Strengths-Based approach that has been shown to be effective in recovery, providing practical strategies for families and friends to support teenage mental health,
- **Worth Warrior**, which uses the principles of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for Eating Disorders (CBT-E) to overcome issues of negative body image, low self-worth, and related early-stage eating difficulties or disorders.

www.stem4.org.uk

For information on stem4's Youth Mental Health Day please visit youthmentalhealthday.co.uk for stem4's full range of downloadable resources or follow [@Stem4org](https://twitter.com/Stem4org) on social media to keep up to date.