

stem4
July 2023
survey

ANXIOUS AND AT BREAKING POINT



Registered charity no. 1144506

Foreword

The results of this report unfortunately reflect the fact that children and young people's mental health problems appear to be not only increasing in number, but because of waiting times, have become more complex, requiring more targeted, specialist, evidence-based intervention. Yet, despite some investment in mental health support, specialist services remain stretched, with demand outstripping resource and what's available is not adequate to prevent young people from seeking their own ways to deal with how they feel, primarily, seeking 'social media DIY' or increasingly withdrawing and avoiding situations they find difficult. There are also strong links to suggest that prevalence of poor mental health has increased because of the impact of the pandemic, and the social inequalities and poor parental mental health, both of which are high, as a consequence of the cost-of-living crisis. Because of lack access to Children and Young People's Mental Health Services, traditional gatekeepers of health, such as GP's, parents and carers, are turning to schools for support in increasing numbers, whilst young people are taking matters into their own hands and seeking help online often from unqualified people. Since children and young people do not present in the same ways as adults when experiencing mental illness or distress, and their difficulties require age appropriate, evidence-based interventions to prevent further escalation, it is important for all involved in their care to be provided with first steps to understand and manage their difficulties, together with early access to high quality care. This reports highlights some of the difficulties and provides some suggestions on what might make a difference.



Dr Nihara Krause MBE
CEO and Founder of stem4, Consultant Clinical Psychologist

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Executive summary

Over recent years improving Children and Young People's (C&YPs) mental health has remained a focus for this and previous governments, with a raft of measures introduced to improve the mental health outcomes of this young generation, and into adulthood. Yet despite these welcomed strategies and increased investment, little progress has been made in increasing access to early evidence-based mental health interventions and support in schools. Meanwhile, Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (C&YPMHS) continue to struggle to reduce waiting times as demand continues to outstrip supply.

This has left many C&YP with moderate to acute mental health difficulties waiting months to start treatment, and those with mild to moderate symptoms of anxiety see their referrals to C&YPMHS rejected as their symptoms are not considered severe enough to warrant treatment.

This report by youth mental health charity stem4 gives a voice to young people, highlighting the impact of not being able to access evidence-based mental health treatments and support has on their mental health.

In this survey of 1,025 regionally representative young people in the UK, aged from 12 to 21 carried out in July 2023, finds that failed promises to improve access to early evidence-based mental health interventions post-pandemic has contributed to shocking levels of school absenteeism across the UK. Meanwhile children as young as 12 are now resorting to 'social media DIY' to improve their mental health.

Key findings ¹

- Six in ten 12-to-21 year-olds say they are in mental health distress. Yet, just 15% of the young people in need of support say they are receiving professional mental health support or intervention.
- A third of children, some as young as 12, say they are 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.
- Eight in ten 12-to-21 year-olds 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."
- Nearly three in ten 12-to-21 year-olds say that over the past 12 months, they have avoided going to school or college so as not to feel anxious. This figure rises to exactly half in the 48% of young people who have mental health difficulties.

Introduction

Children's and young people's mental health has declined over recent years, with one in six children and young people aged 7 to 16 experiencing a mental health problem in 2022, compared to one in nine in 2017.² On top of this, children with special educational needs and disabilities, children living in lower income households and children from racialised communities, are more likely to experience mental health difficulties. Today 17.3% of all pupils have educational needs, with 4.3% having an education, health and care plan and 13% being provided with SEN support.³

Yet despite this rise in unmet need, schools are some of the worst hit by the current cost of living crisis. Estimates suggest that school spending per pupil remains at 3% below 2010 levels in real terms.⁴ Although investment has increased in school-based mental health in recent years, any progress made has halted. Currently only 38% of state-funded schools have school-based mental health support teams. Where schools offer counselling, demand is so great that students can wait up to three months to be seen. And going forward, almost half (44%) of school leaders plan to cut spending on targeted intervention or pupils requiring additional support.⁵

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 2019.⁶ However, demand for NHS mental health services for children and young people continues to outstrip supply, and according to the Children's Commissioner, a third of the children and young people referred to NHS services will fail to receive treatment.⁷

Online harm

On top of this, 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,¹² yet today stem4 finds that these feelings deterred only 7% of young people from using social media.¹ 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%).¹

School absenteeism

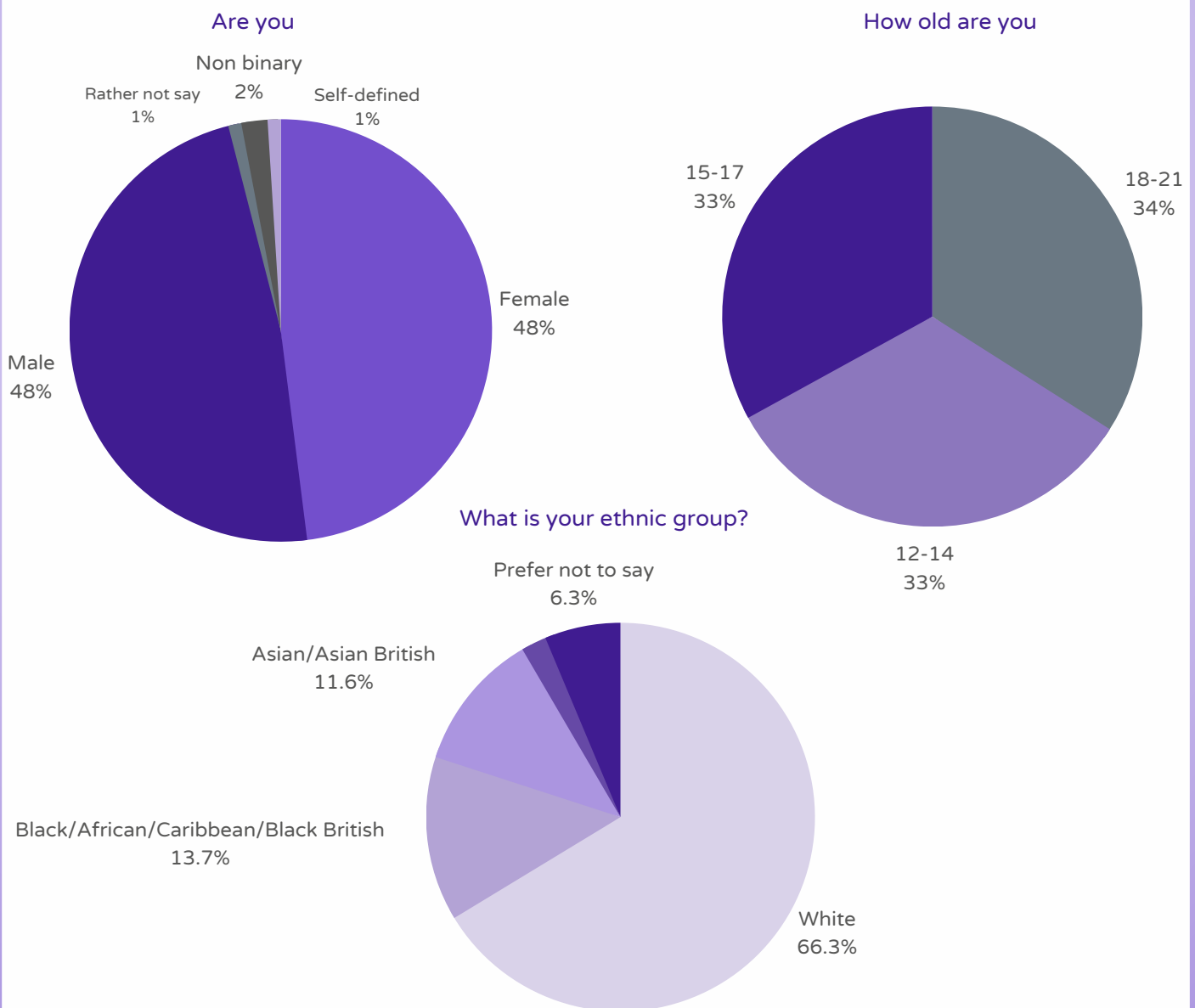
All of this comes at a time when Government data shows shocking levels of school absenteeism across the UK, which in part, stem4 believes, is due to failed promises to improve access to evidence-based mental health interventions post-pandemic. For the school year 2022-23:

- in England, more than a fifth (22.3%) of pupils missed at least 10% of school days, a rise from 10.9% in 2018/19;⁸
- in Wales, 18.1% of pupils missed 30.5 days or more of school;⁹
- in Scotland, 22.75% of pupils missed 10% or more of their sessions;¹⁰
- in Northern Ireland, figures for 2020-21 (the most recent available) indicate that almost 10% of school days were missed by pupils, compared to 6% in 2018-19.¹¹

Methodology

The “Anxious and at Breaking Point” survey was conducted in July 2023 by Survey Goo for stem4. The objectives of the survey were to i) collect insights from young people into current mental health strategies being adopted by schools and Children and Young People’s Mental Health Services and ii) gain insight into the associated impact on young people of not being able to access effective evidence-based mental health interventions.

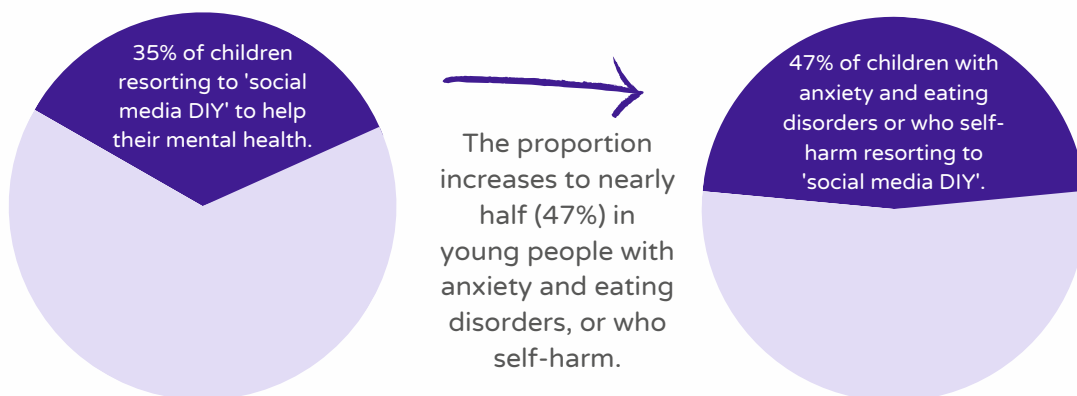
The survey consisted of 1,025 regionally representative young people in the UK aged from 12 to 21 and was conducted in July 2023.



Key findings

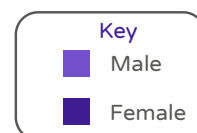
CONCERNING GAPS IN NHS CHILD AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

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.

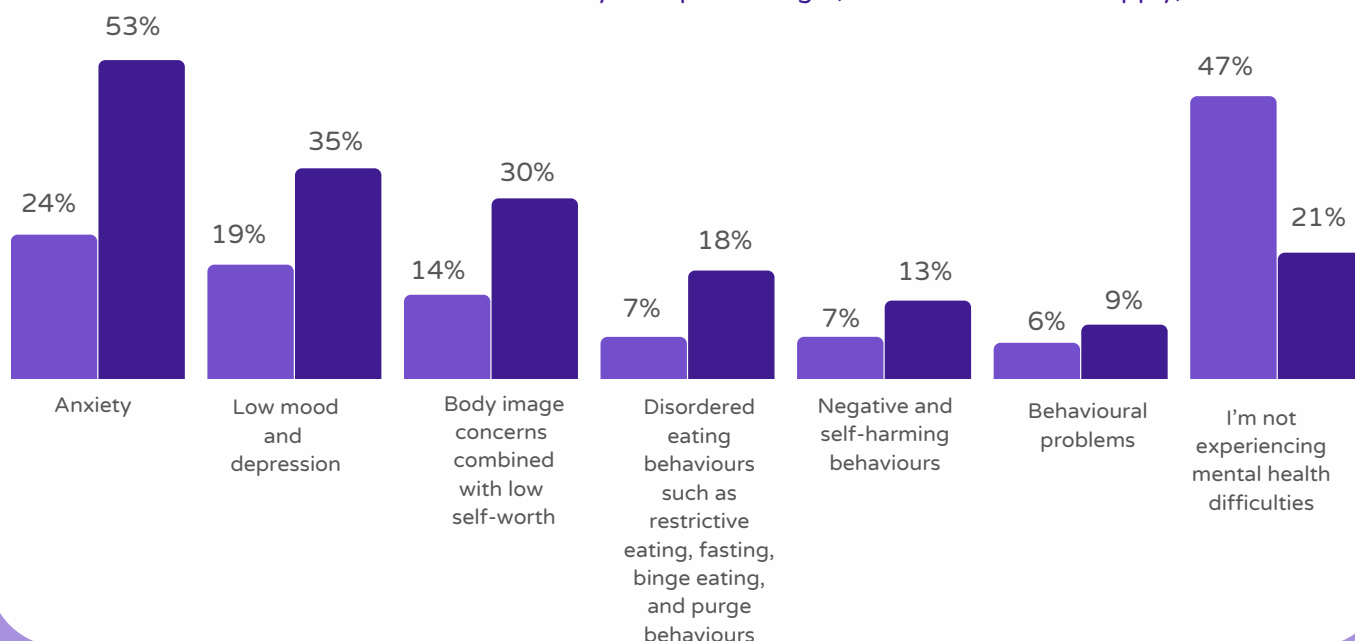


Today, nearly six in ten 12-to-21 year-olds say they are in mental health distress. Just 15% of the young people in need of support say they are receiving professional mental health support or intervention.

Four in ten (40%) experience anxiety; nearly one in three, (28%) depression; 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%).



Are you experiencing mental health difficulties, and what difficulties are you experiencing? (Please select all that apply)



Key findings

SOCIAL MEDIA DIY

In January 2023, stem4 reported that 97% of children and young people aged between 12 and 21 are now on social media.¹² As many as 70% say that social media makes them feel stressed, anxious, and depressed, yet today stem4 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.

“Age limits don’t work as young people lie about their age however banning certain apps and removing AI may work (or having the option to remove it).”

What could be changed online and on social media apps to keep young people safe and help those who are anxious?

“Removing algorithms so young people don’t get stuck in a loop of harmful content, making report and block functions more accessible and easier to do.”

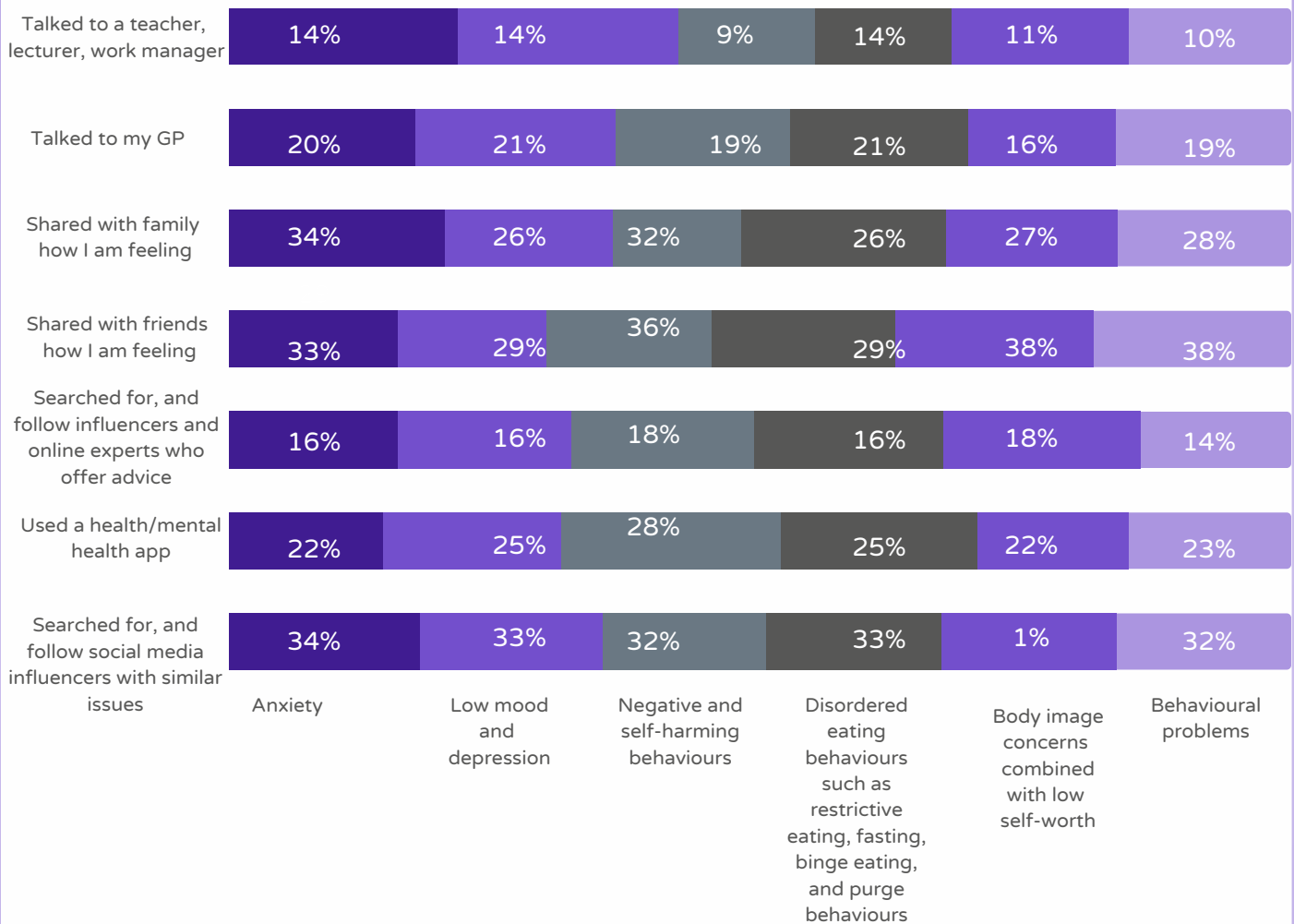
“More tightly regulated algorithm tailored to a confirmed age at sign up to prevent toxicity towards younger people.”

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%).

Key findings

Which of the following have you done to understand and improve your mental health?

Top 5 by mental health difficulty



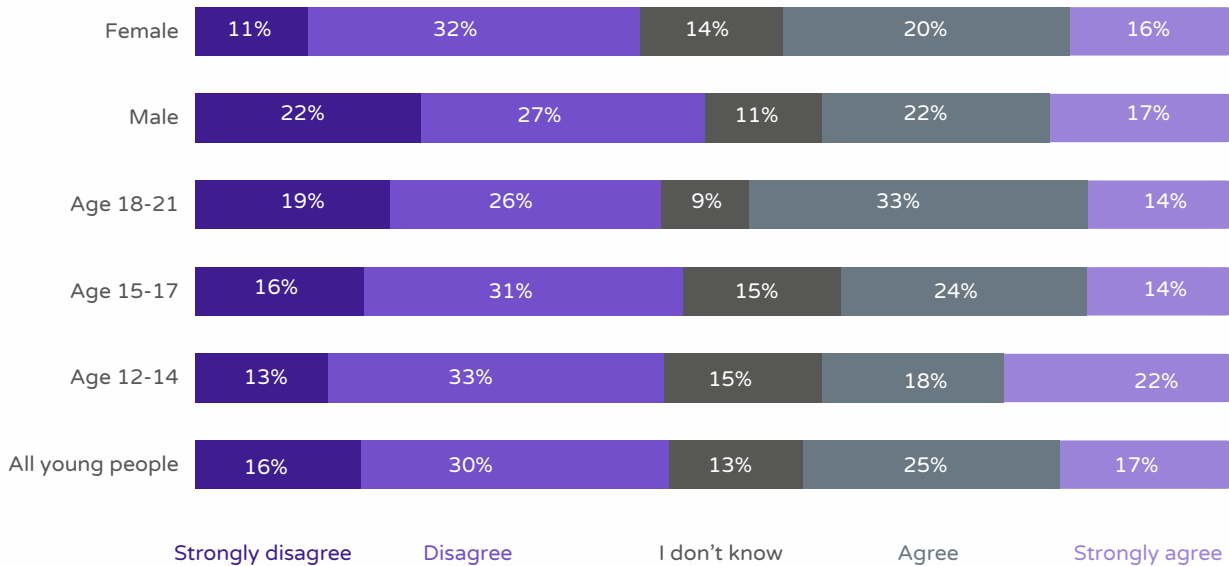
Weight: AGR; sample size = 807; total sample size = 1025; 218 missing; effective sample size = 670 (83%); 95% confidence level

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.

Over eight in ten young people 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.”

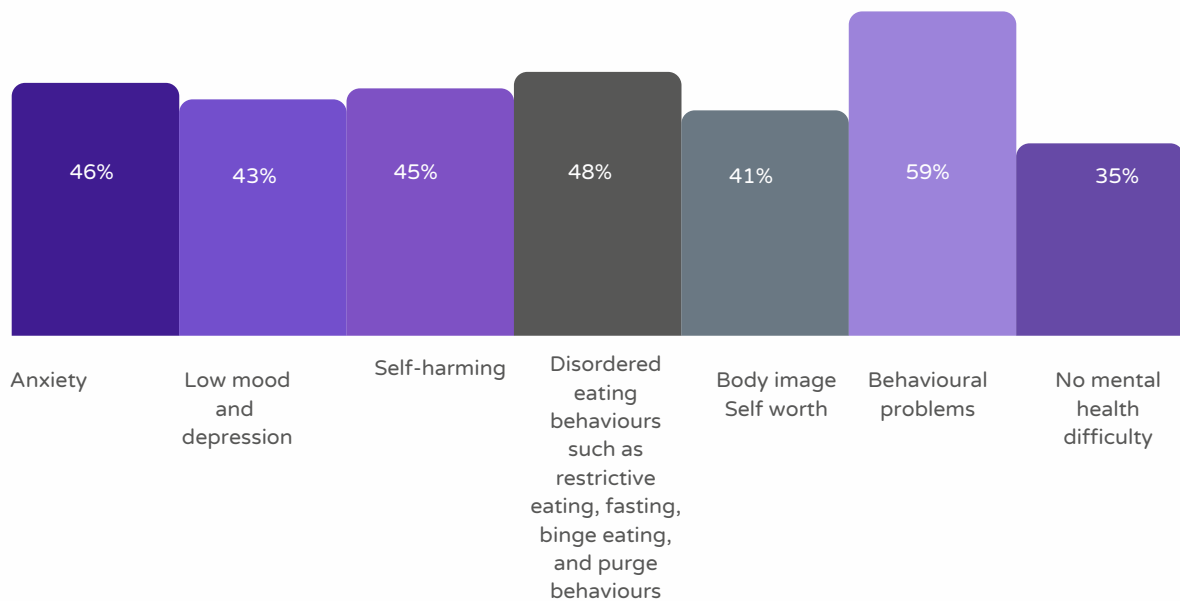
Key findings

“It’s better or okay to avoid anxiety provoking situations, than to learn how to tackle and overcome my fears.” Please tell us whether you agree or disagree with this statement
(please select one answer)



Weight: AGR; sample size = 807; total sample size = 1025; 218 missing; effective sample size = 670 (83%); 95% confidence level

“It’s better or okay to avoid anxiety provoking situations, than to learn how to tackle and overcome my fears.” Please tell us whether you agree or disagree with this statement
(please select one answer)

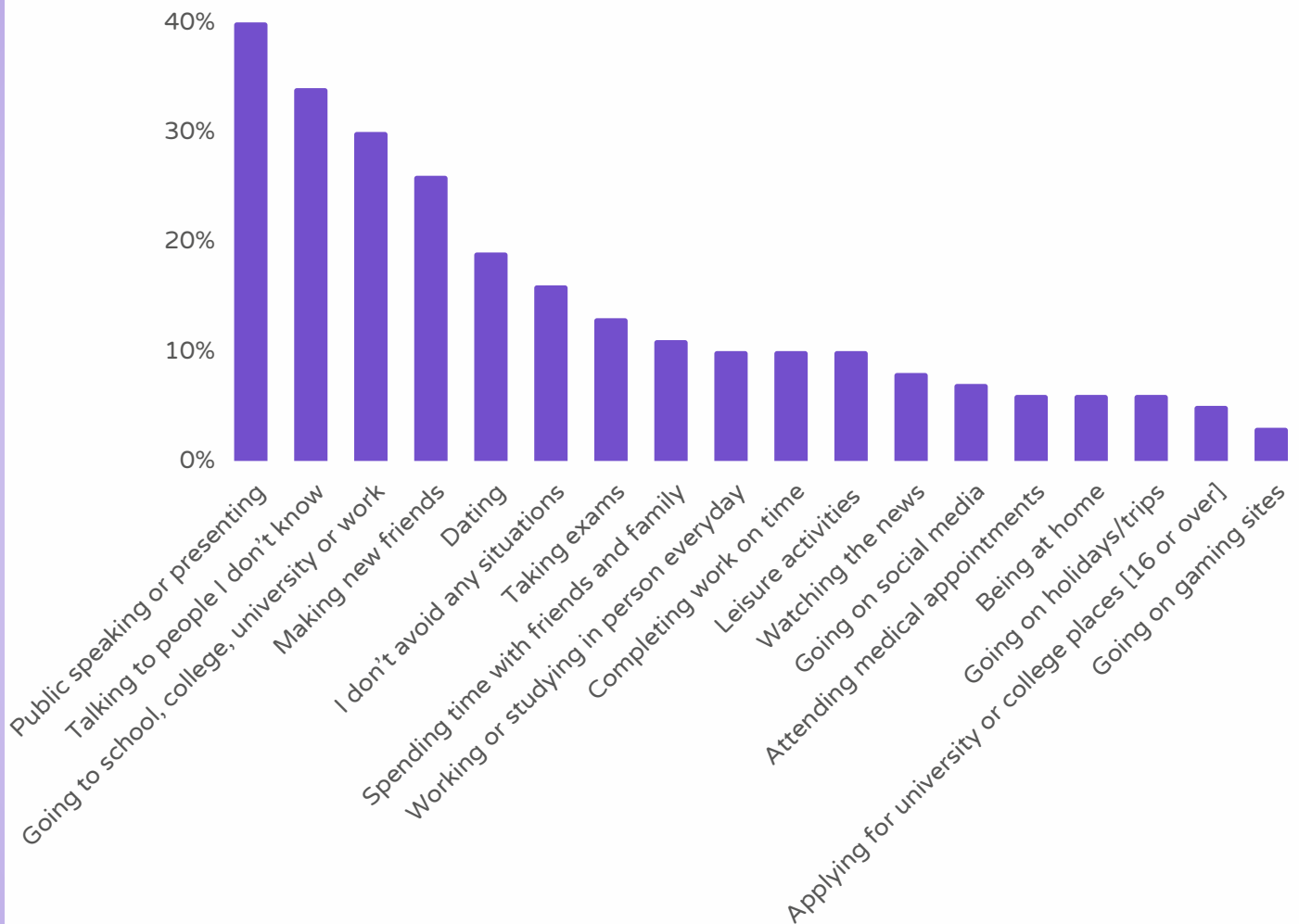


Weight: AGR; sample size = 807; total sample size = 1025; 218 missing; effective sample size = 670 (83%); 95% confidence level

Key findings

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%).

Over the past 12 months which of the following situations have you avoided so as not to feel anxious and uncomfortable



Weight: AGR; sample size = 807; total sample size = 1025; 218 missing; effective sample size = 670 (83%); 95% confidence level

A 14 year-old girl told the survey: "I feel so scared all of the time, I just want to disappear and for people not to notice me. When I'm at school I try to keep under the radar. I feel under so much pressure all of the time to be a better version of myself, more outgoing, to do better at school. My friends have had enough of me, and don't bother asking me to go out. 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. The only people that get me are on social media. Literally it feels like no one cares."



Key findings

Dr Nihara Krause MBE, Consultant
Clinical Psychologist
CEO and founder of stem4

“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 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.

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 stem4's Youth Mental Health Day this year 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.”

Key findings

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE MORE WORRIED THAN EVER ABOUT GOING TO SCHOOL

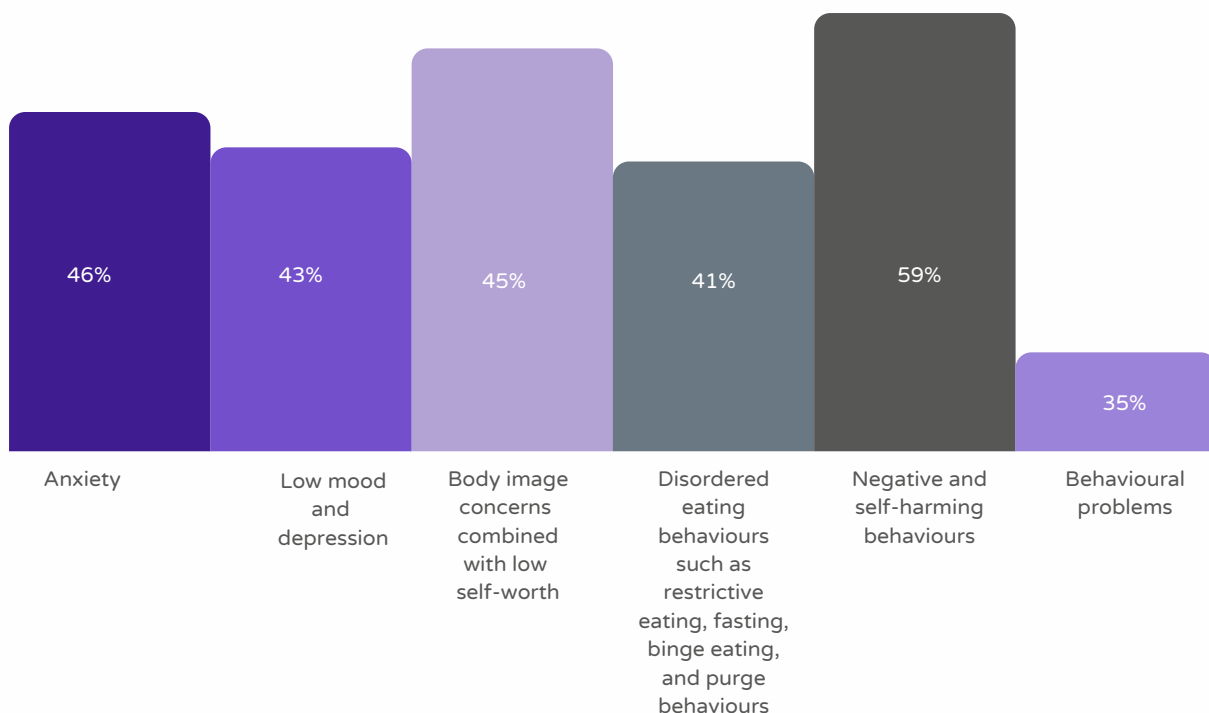
Half (48%) of 12-to-18 year-olds say they are in mental health distress. In turn, half of that cohort (25% of all young people) say that over the past 12 months they have avoided going to school or college so as not to feel symptoms of anxiety.

Government data for the school year 2022-23 shows that:

- in England, more than a fifth (22.3%) of pupils missed at least 10% of school days, a rise from 10.9% in 2018/19;⁸
- in Wales, 18.1% of pupils missed 30.5 days or more of school;⁹
- in Scotland, 22.75% of pupils missed 10% or more of their sessions;¹⁰
- in Northern Ireland, figures for 2020-21 (the most recent available) indicate that almost 10% of school days were missed by pupils, compared to 6% in 2018-19.¹¹

Nearly three in ten (28%) 12-to-18 year-olds say that over the past 12 months they have avoided going to school or college so as not to feel anxious. This figure rises to exactly half (50.2%) in the 48% of young people who have mental health difficulties such as anxiety (38%), depression (22%), body image difficulties (22%), eating disorders (11%), and who self-harm (11%) or have behavioural problems (8%). These vulnerable young people say they avoided going to school because they felt unable to cope. Just over one in ten (14%) young people with no mental health difficulties avoided going to school or college so as not to feel anxious.

Over the past 12 months which of the following situations have you avoided so as not to feel anxious and uncomfortable?



Weight: AGR; sample size = 807; total sample size = 1025; 218 missing; effective sample size = 670 (83%); 95% confidence level

Key findings

One young person told the survey. “During the Covid lockdowns I was stuck in the house like everyone else, but I felt isolated, depressed and alone, with no help or support to overcome my problems. When I returned to school, I thought things would improve, they didn’t. I still can’t get help and I now feel anxious, depressed and alone all of the time. The only place I feel safe is in my room.”

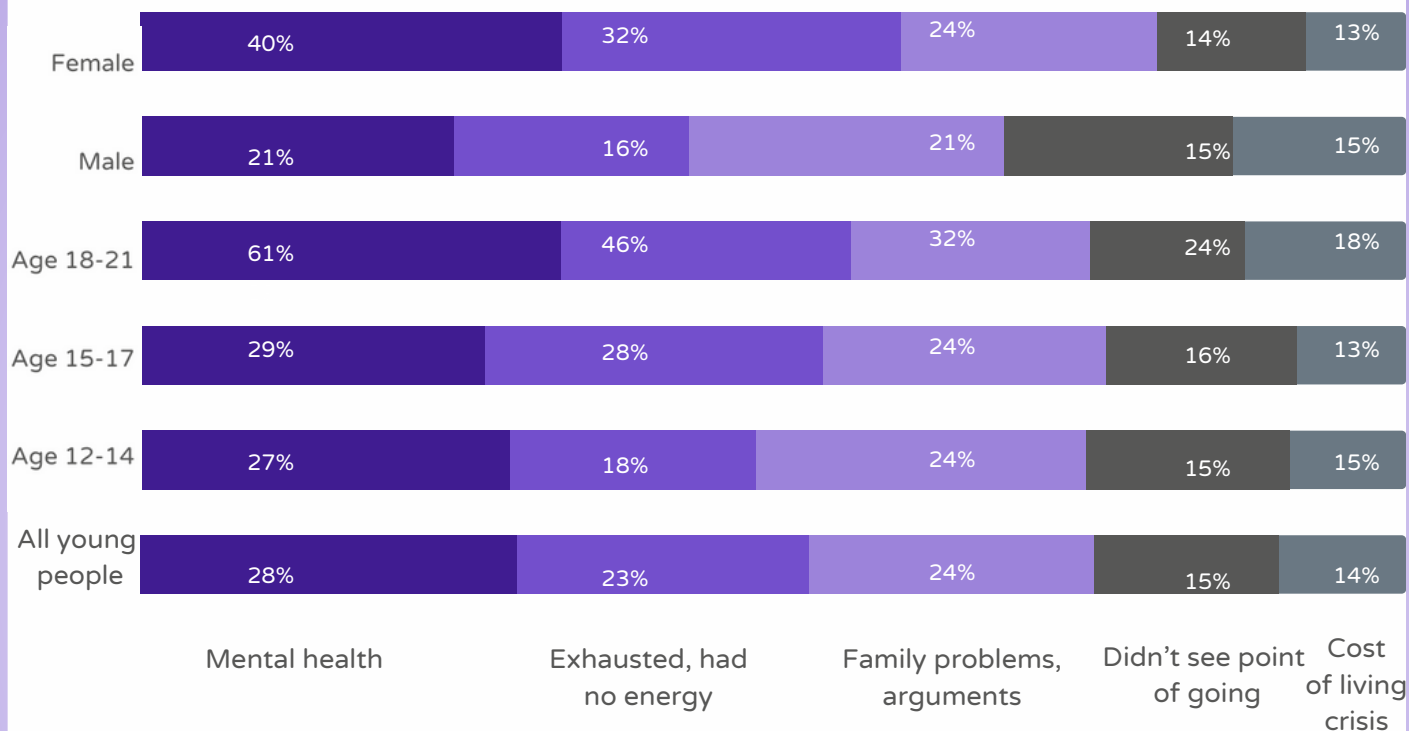
Another young person added. “Last year I started to feel really anxious and depressed. I was referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services by the school. I was told by a nurse I wasn’t ill enough to get medical help. Things then got worse and worse until I couldn’t face going into school. I said I would rather die than go back to that school and face all of those bullies, but still there was no help. Eventually I got added to the SEN register following a private diagnosis of Autism, still no help. After 8 months of missed school my parents borrowed money and sent me to a private school who are able to provide me with the emotional and learning support I need. I’ve now been in school for three whole weeks.”

Why are children and young people across the UK more worried than ever about going to school?

A large majority (79%) of 12-18 year-olds say that over the past 12 months they have missed school days for reasons other than physical illness. One in three (28%) say their absence was due to mental health problems; one in four (24%) to family difficulties, and nearly one in five (18%) because of bullying or friendship issues. Meanwhile, over one in ten (14%) students say they have been unable to attend school because they were hungry, or because they couldn’t afford the journey to and from school, had taken a paid job, or needed to assume caring duties in the home. Only 15% of young people say they missed days from school because they couldn’t be bothered to go in.

Key findings

When thinking about days you may have missed from school, college, or university, that were NOT due to a physical illness or a medical appointment, why have you taken these days off?

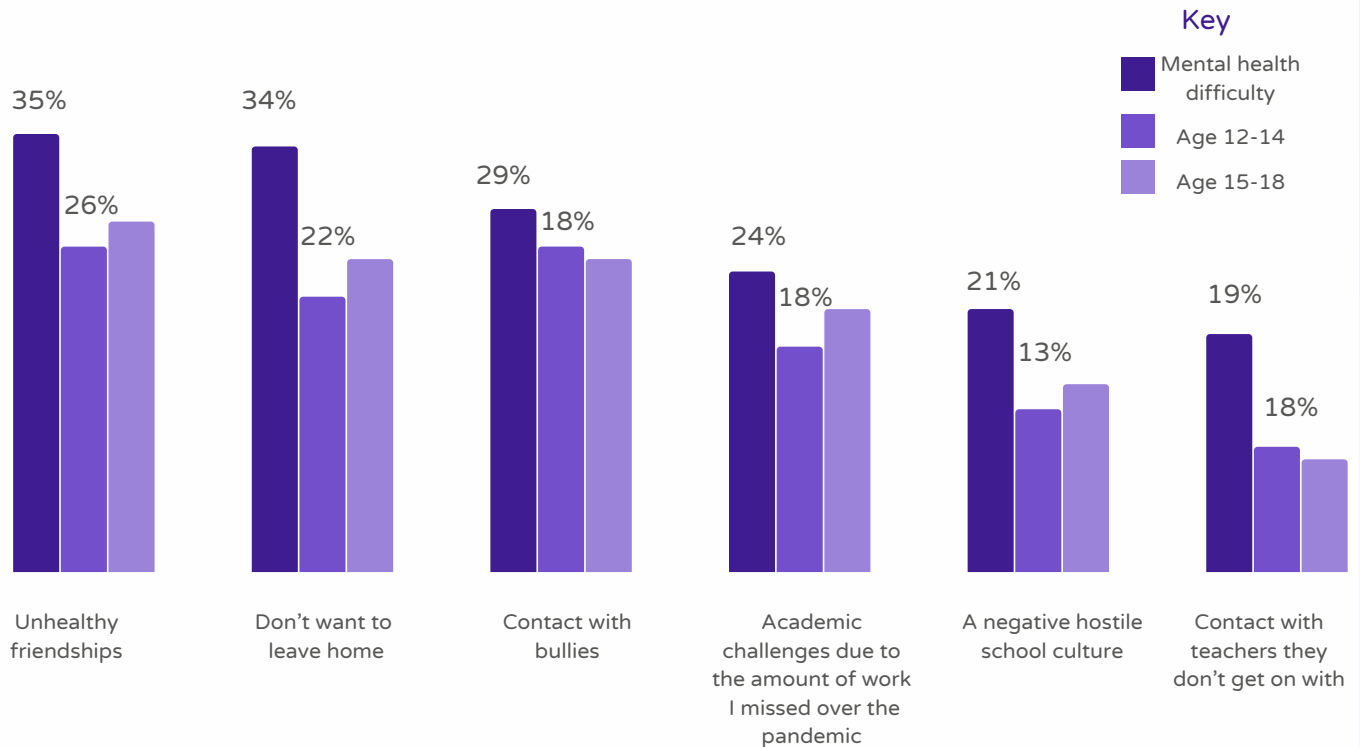


Weight: AGR; sample size = 807; total sample size = 1025; 218 missing; effective sample size = 670 (83%); 95% confidence level

Over eight in ten young people say they are forced to avoid certain situations in and around school so as not to feel anxious. These result from unhealthy friendships (28%), contact with bullies (26%), academic pressures due to lost work in the pandemic (19%), contact with teachers they don't get on with (17%), and a negative and hostile school culture (13%).

Key findings

When thinking about anxiety provoking situations that you have avoided related to school, why did you avoid these situations?



Weight: AGR; sample size = 807; total sample size = 1025; 218 missing; effective sample size = 670 (83%); 95% confidence level

Although investment has increased in both school-based mental health and in NHS mental health services for children and young people, demand for treatment continues to outstrip supply.

Today, nearly half (48%) of 12-to-18 year-olds say they are in mental health distress, and nearly four in ten (38%) of all students at secondary school or college say they are experiencing symptoms of anxiety.¹ Less than half of the young people surveyed say their school or college provides any support in facing anxiety directly and trying to overcome it.

Key findings

How helpful would it be if the school, college or university provided support to help you face your anxiety directly and try to overcome it?

Has your school, college or university provided help to you to face your anxiety directly and try to overcome it?



Weight: AGR; sample size = 807; total sample size = 1025; 218 missing; effective sample size = 670 (83%); 95% confidence level

Key findings



Dr Nihara Krause MBE, Consultant
Clinical Psychologist
CEO and founder of stem4

“What this survey shows is that a quarter of young people are missing school because of their mental health difficulties, and few can access adequate mental health support through the NHS, school or college. Only 38% of state-funded schools have school-based mental health support teams. Where schools offer counselling, demand is so great that students can wait up to three months to be seen. Moreover a third of the children and young people referred to NHS services will fail to receive treatment.

Existing children and young people’s mental health policies were formulated prior to the pandemic. What we now need as a matter of urgency is a comprehensive mental health review and strategy that is reflective of current levels of unmet need. The NHS does not have the infrastructure or capacity to provide effective treatments for certain mild-to-moderate mental health conditions. If we want to reduce these stubbornly high absence figures, then we need urgent access to evidence-based mental health treatments in schools, together with the provision of self-support tools, and training for parents/carers and educational professionals. They need to understand how they can support certain conditions, especially anxiety disorders, and at what point referrals should be escalated to NHS mental health services.

The concept of resilience is about equipping people with effective ways to learn to deal with adversity. The young generation of today are currently facing multiple adversities. These include long Covid and trauma from the pandemic, poverty, increasing online harms, a lack of access to specialist assessments for neurodiverse issues such as autism, ADHD or dyslexia, and not being able to access effective treatments for physical and mental health difficulties.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, this report has shown that unfortunately children and young people's mental health problems appear to be not only increasing in number, but because of waiting, have become more complex. Despite some investment in mental health support, specialist services are stretched, with demand outstripping resource and what's available not being enough to prevent young people from seeking their own ways to deal with how they feel, primarily, seeking 'social media DIY' or increasingly withdrawing and avoiding situations they find difficult. There are also strong links to poor mental health arising because of the pandemic, and to social inequalities and poor parental mental health, both of which are high as a consequence of the cost-of-living crisis.

stem4 is calling for policies to help young people deal with mental health symptoms rather than feel that avoidance is the only way to manage them.

To help young people experiencing difficulties, stem4 is campaigning for support to empower young people, educators, and parents/carers in acquiring an enhanced understanding of anxiety and mental health disorders. It emphasises the value in seeking early evidence-based support to pre-empt avoidance behaviours, and of early intervention by CBT specialists in schools and colleges.

As a matter of urgency, stem4 is calling for:

- Clear guidance on strategies that schools and colleges can implement, and parents and carers can adopt at 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.
- The establishment of drop-in community family hubs, acknowledging the need for support to counter the impact of anxiety disorders on families.
- A comprehensive system of mental health support teams in schools with access to specialist psychological support.

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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 PSHE in schools.

stem4 is also included in the Royal College of GPs toolkit.



Our Apps



A free app to help teenagers resist or manage the urge to self-harm www.calmharm.co.uk • @calmharmapp



A free app to help children and young people manage the symptoms of anxiety www.clearfear.co.uk • @clearfearapp



A free app to help teenagers manage low mood and depression www.movemood.co.uk • @appmovemood



A free app to help families and friends provide mental health support www.combinedminds.co.uk • @combmindsapp



A free app to help young people manage negative body image, poor self-worth, and related early-stage eating difficulties or disorders www.worthwarrior.co.uk • @worthwarriorapp

stem4's award-winning apps are available to download from the App Store and Google Play.



Please note that these apps are an aid in treatment but do not replace it.

stem4
supporting teenage mental health

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stem4, 51 St George's Rd, Wimbledon, SW19 4EA

 @stem4org  @stem4org  @stem4org

www.stem4.org.uk • enquiries@stem4.org.uk



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