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“Toxic masculinity” stopping boys seeking mental health support, survey finds

- **37% of boys and young men are experiencing mental health difficulties, but half are unable or unwilling to ask for help**
- **46% wouldn't ask for help for a problem that was making them upset, anxious or depressed, “even if things got really bad.” 30% say they feel weak or ashamed. 21% are worried people would laugh or think less of them, and 14% said they would “feel less masculine”.**
- **To help parents better support boys and young men's mental health, stem4 will hold a parents' conference on Wednesday 17 November at 7pm. [Webinar Registration - Zoom](#)**

Fear of shame or feeling 'weak' is deterring many boys and young men from seeking help for mental health problems, new research has found. The survey by youth mental health charity [stem4](#) also shows that many do not receive support when they ask for it.

Over a third (37%) of boys and young men aged between 14 and 21 said they were currently experiencing mental health difficulties. Of these, 51% had not spoken to anyone, 21% were receiving treatment, and 29% had asked for help but were not receiving treatment.

The most prevalent mental health difficulties were stress (47%), anxiety (27%), and depression or low mood (33%). Other common problems included eating disorders (11%), anger and behavioural issues (10%) and self-harm behaviours (9%).

The survey of 1,100 boys and young men by [stem4](#), which works to prevent mental ill health in teenagers and young people, found that almost half (46%) of respondents would not ask for help for a problem that was making them upset, anxious or depressed, “even if things got really bad.” When asked what was stopping them, 36% said they didn't have the courage, 32% said they “don't want to make a fuss” and 30% said they would feel weak or ashamed. A fifth (21%) worried that people would laugh or think less of them, and 14% said they would “feel less masculine”. Meanwhile, 15% said they don't know how to ask for help.

The survey also explored the effect of cultural factors, with seven in ten saying that boys and young men are negatively portrayed in the media. Almost half (46%) identified “pressure from peers to behave in a dominant masculine way” as having a negative impact on the mental health of boys and young men.



A quarter (25%) of boys and young men said being associated with peers who treat girls and women disrespectfully was one of the factors most likely to damage young men's mental health. Other factors identified were loneliness, bullying, and the pressure to look good or have a good body.

Dr Nihara Krause, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, and CEO and founder of stem4, the charity which works to prevent mental ill health in young people and teenagers, said: "We live in a culture that puts huge pressure on boys and young men to behave in particular ways, many of them damaging to their mental health. Our survey shows exactly why this is so damaging, with many suffering in silence, even when they're approaching crisis point. If we're going to tackle boys and young men's mental health, we have to address the cultural blind spots to male mental health. It's also time to start listening properly to boys and men, understand how they express their needs, and provide services that will benefit them."

Comments from the boys surveyed, included:

- *"As you get older no one cares about your mental health, so you say you're OK when you're not, because you're supposed to be a man. And men aren't supposed to have emotions. Parents push toxic masculinity onto their children. It messes their head up later in life. But who really cares that we're suffering?"*
16-year-old schoolboy, London
- *"There is nowhere near enough support. Young people need know it's okay to say I'm NOT okay."*
20-year-old university student, Wales
- *"I had a suicide attempt and I got told to man up. if I was a girl, I would get so much more support."*
15-year-old Schoolboy from East of England
- *"There is support, but it's difficult to talk about mental health issues when you get laughed at."*
16-year-old Schoolboy, North East
- *"People like us like to hide in the shadows and push everyone away. The chances of us reaching out and actually speaking are slim to none."*
18-year-old Schoolboy East of England
- *"Some of us are genuinely struggling with stuff, but don't say anything. It's hard to see because it depends on how the person is handling it. If you do say something, nine out of 10 you'll get told to man up."*
20-year-old, South West
- *People honestly don't give a shit about boy's mental health, society only allows women to be victims, just because of a certain group of stupid men."*
17-year-old college student, Yorkshire & The Humber.
- *In schools, only girls get support for things like mental health. Boys are seen as the problem."*
16-year-old schoolboy, East Midlands 4
- *It's hard to keep up with everything and all the pressure to be the best and look the best, it makes you feel bad."*
14-year-old schoolboy, Scotland

Parents Conference: Supporting Mental Health in Boys and Young Men

Wednesday 17th November, 19:00

[Webinar Registration, Zoom: https://stem4-org-uk.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_u1Pv3ZPQ0ON9VmqLpztqw](https://stem4-org-uk.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_u1Pv3ZPQ0ON9VmqLpztqw)

Just 37% of boys and young men say they would feel able to approach their family if they were experiencing mental health problems. Many parents (72%) say they feel ill-equipped to deal with their child or young person's mental health difficulties. With such limited referral pathways available, most parents say they are being left to fend for themselves.

To help parents better support boys and young men's mental health, stem4 will hold a parents' conference on Wednesday 17th November, at 7pm. To be attended by 500 parents, the conference will focus on:

- Practical strategies for families to provide a supportive environment for boys and young men
- Spotting early signs of mental ill health
- Starting early conversations about mental health
- Seeking effective interventions for mental health difficulties

The 1,100 boys and young men surveyed identified the following **positive steps that should be put in place to protect and improve the mental health of young people.**

- Regular mental health check-ups (just like going to the dentist)
- Safe places in which to ask for help
- One-on-one treatment to speak to therapists, not group sessions
- Better PSHE education in schools, not from a textbook, with practical guidance on how to ask for help
- Education for families on how to spot early signs of mental ill health, and how to talk to their children
- Better, faster access to treatment
- Recognition that loneliness is real for boys and young men, and that they are not as tough as they portray

- ENDS -

For case studies, interviews with Dr Nihara Krause, and regional breakdowns of the survey, please contact

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Notes to editors

UK-wide survey of 1068 boys and young men (801 between the ages of 14 and 18, and 267 between the ages of 19 and 21) carried out by Survey Goo in October 2021

About stem4

stem4 (www.stem4.org.uk) 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 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. Since the start of the pandemic, they have been downloaded and used over 1 million times.

These apps – which have been funded by charities including the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Comic Relief, and by generous donations from individuals – are free to use, and do not collect any personal data. They 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;
- **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;
- **Move Mood**, which uses Behavioural Activation Therapy to help improve low mood and manage the symptoms of depression.