

## Survey reveals fall-out of COVID-19 on young people's social confidence and mental health

### **stem4's Youth Mental Health Day: Young people, report feeling lonelier than ever, calling for tools opportunities to help them develop their social confidence.**

Nearly four in ten young people aged 12-21 say they have lost social confidence as a result of the pandemic, with many reporting feeling lonely and struggling with mental health issues, a survey commissioned by stem4 to mark **Youth Mental Health Day** (22<sup>nd</sup> September) finds.

The far-reaching fallout of 'the pandemic' has left many (71%) young people struggling to maintain meaningful relationships, leading nearly half of 12–21-year-olds to say that – either 'all' or 'most of the time' – they feel lonely, isolated, and left out.

#### **The scale of young people's mental health problems, and the lack of support available to them**

Of the 2007 young people surveyed, almost half (46%) say they are currently experiencing mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression, and self-harming behaviours. Prevalence is highest among 19–21-year-olds (54%) but also high among 12–15-year-olds (37%) and 16–18-year-olds (48%).

Among those who say they are experiencing problems, 31% say they have not told anyone about it. 27% are receiving help or treatment, but 20% say they are not receiving any help or treatment, despite having spoken to someone and asked for help.

#### **Mental health issues are often a barrier to forming new friendships and connections.**

When asked what would hold them back from making new friendships and connections, 45% (57% female, 33% male) of young people say it's 'feeling anxious'. Exactly half overall (42% males, 59% female) say it's 'fear of rejection'. Females are significantly more likely to say a lack of confidence in their physical appearance is holding them back from making new friends (47% compared to 29% male).

#### **The Scale of loneliness**

Nearly (44%) of the young people surveyed (and 49% of females) say they feel lonely either all or most of the time. Almost as many (39%) say they feel left out, and 36% say they feel isolated

Nevertheless, the survey still paints a positive picture of modern friendship relationships. Two-thirds (66%) of young people say they would describe relationships with their friends as meaningful, with only 8% describing them as superficial. Yet only 51% say "there's honesty on both sides", 45% say "I completely trust them", and 42% say that their friends have "got my back". Four in ten (39%) say "I can turn to them for comfort and understanding when things go wrong," although this figure is significantly lower among males (30%) than females (49%). The majority (84%) were are confident that they could say 'no' to something they don't want to do without damaging their relationship.

To mark **Youth Mental Health Day (Thursday 22 September)**, which this year takes the theme **#ConnectMeaningfully**, stem4 is calling for schools and colleges to assemble the resources they need to help young people build healthy meaningful connections. The benefits of positive social connections and good mental health are numerous including increased self-worth and resilience and reduced anxiety and low mood. stem4 is offering schools, colleges, and universities [information packs](#) containing ideas for helping young people to build meaningful relationships that improve their mental health. stem4 will also encourage young people to express how they connect meaningfully their future through creativity (for example through art, music or creative writing) and to share them on social media.

**Dr Nihara Krause, Consultant Clinical Psychologist and founder and CEO of stem4 says:** *“The pandemic has had powerful and far-reaching impacts on the way young people build social connections. They have essentially missed out on two years of social experience, and many feel that they are now less confident when it comes to initiating and engaging in meaningful relationships. It is therefore vital that we provide them with tips and opportunities to catch up.”*

*“One of the most heartening findings of our research is that many young people say they get so much out of their connections. They also say they know how to ask for help from their friends, and how to give support when it’s needed. But, sadly, because of increasing reported isolation and lack of reported confidence in making new connection and in a world where so many young people are experiencing problems with their mental health, far too many are unable to rely on their networks for solace and support when going through tough times. This is why the theme of this year’s Youth Mental Health Day – Connecting Meaningfully – is so relevant and timely. We hope to encourage everyone to leave their self-imposed comfort zones and to start to make those positive meaningful connections that are the building blocks of good friendships relationships and positive mental health.”*

### **Advice for the Education Secretary**

stem4 echoes young people in calling for a package of policies to help them build meaningful social connections. Nearly all the 2,007 young people surveyed say they would like to learn how to develop social confidence. Over 90% are requesting more support in schools, colleges, and universities to equip them with better skills for engaging with each other and managing friendships and relationships. Taking on board young people’s requests, stem4 is campaigning for a **friendships and relationships teacher in every school** who can coordinate a learning programme to enable students in making meaningful connections and building social confidence face to face, and not just online. There was also widespread support for a buddy system, which would pair up isolated school and college students with volunteers, and for improvements to the quality of PHSE lessons. Many young people also say they would be in favour of regular workshops on friendship-building, and of a weekly online register, where students could provide updates on mental health issues.

### **Young people told the survey:**

- *“Adults underestimate how lonely young people can feel at times. There needs to be improvements in picking up signs and supporting each other.”*
- *“The state of life these days makes it so difficult to carry on, I’m barely scraping through. Young people shouldn’t be scared to speak out.”*
- *“Much more help is needed for young people’s mental health and well-being. In the last six months my cousin took his life at the age of 22 after not receiving the help and support he needed after reaching out for help.”*
- *“If you don’t have anyone, like me, don’t suffer alone.”*
- *“Everyone needs to get better when dealing with young people who have mental illness. Not pity, instead show support, and let them know there is a help.”*
- *“I feel like everyone should be able to talk to someone about how they feel and what’s going on, without being told ‘It will go away by itself’ ‘stop being silly’ ‘your fine’.”*

### **NOTES TO EDITORS**

Survey of 2,007 regionally representative young people in the UK aged from 12 to 21 carried out by Survey Goo between 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> July 2022:

For interviews and regional breakdown of survey results across the UK, please contact:

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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 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.

For information on stem4's Youth Mental Health Day please visit [youthmentalhealthday.co.uk](http://youthmentalhealthday.co.uk) for stem4's full range of downloadable resources or follow @stem4org on social media to keep up to date.

[www.stem4.org.uk](http://www.stem4.org.uk)