

'Listen to us. Support us.'

The results of a questionnaire by Rhun ap Iorwerth MS asking young people for their experiences in accessing mental health support in Wales



February 2022

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Introduction – Rhun ap Iorwerth MS

During November and December 2021, I ran a questionnaire asking young people to share their experiences of accessing mental health services.

I launched the questionnaire during a short debate in the Senedd on November 3rd and shared the questionnaire on my social media accounts - Facebook, Twitter, Instagram - as well as with other Members and organisations involved with young people and / or mental health. And I would like to say a big thank you to those Members and organisations who also shared the questionnaire.

The idea of the questionnaire came from a conversation I had with a young constituent called Gareth, who prompted me to look for new ways to encourage debate about mental health, and specifically about how and where young people can turn for help.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to ask young people to help me as a Member of the Senedd, and thus help the Welsh Government, to understand their experiences.

In all, 63 responses were received, and I would like to thank everyone who shared their experience with me, and I know that it cannot have been easy for all of them, and I appreciate their courage and honesty.

I will now share the findings with the Deputy Minister for Mental Health in Welsh Government so that she too can learn about the experiences of young people in Wales.



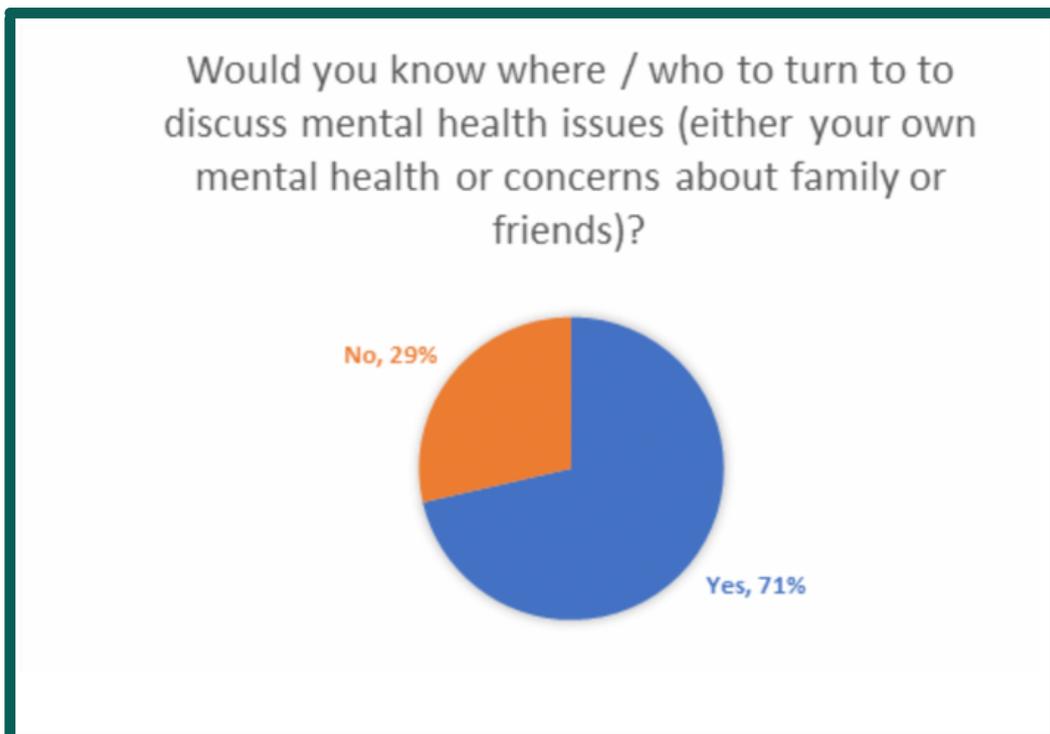


Results

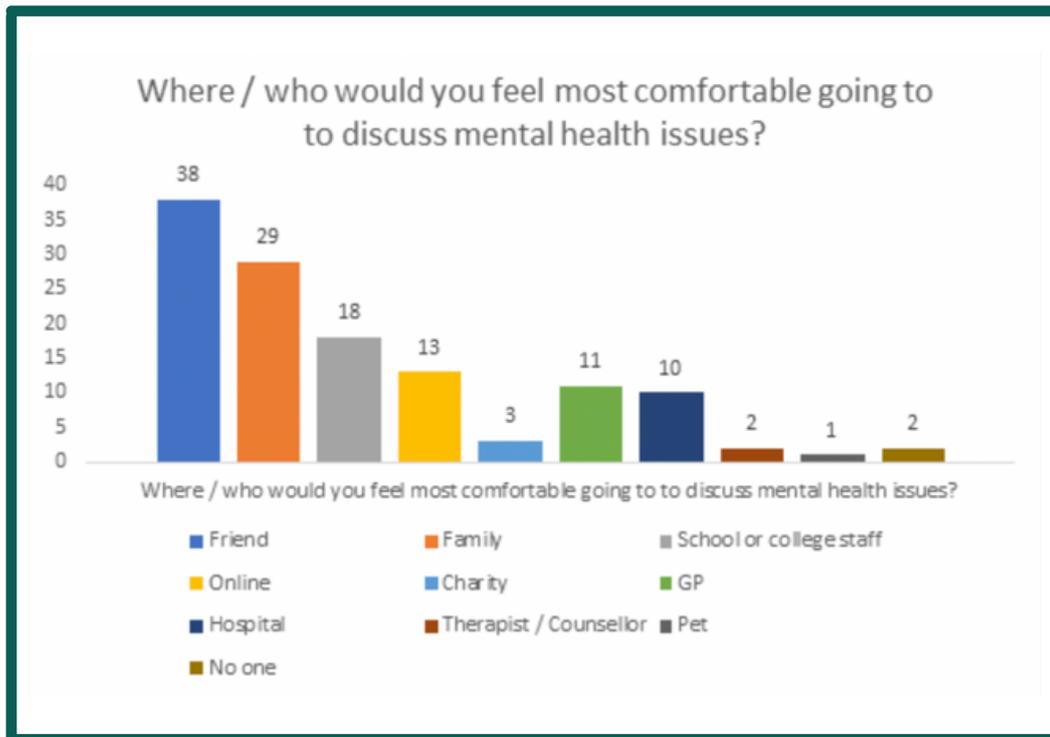
General Questions

Before asking people about their individual experiences of receiving mental health support, we also asked general questions that would apply to those who have not sought help as well.

Although most respondents told us they felt they knew who or where to turn to for mental health support, 29% still felt they did not know where to go to discuss their own mental health issues or concerns about others:



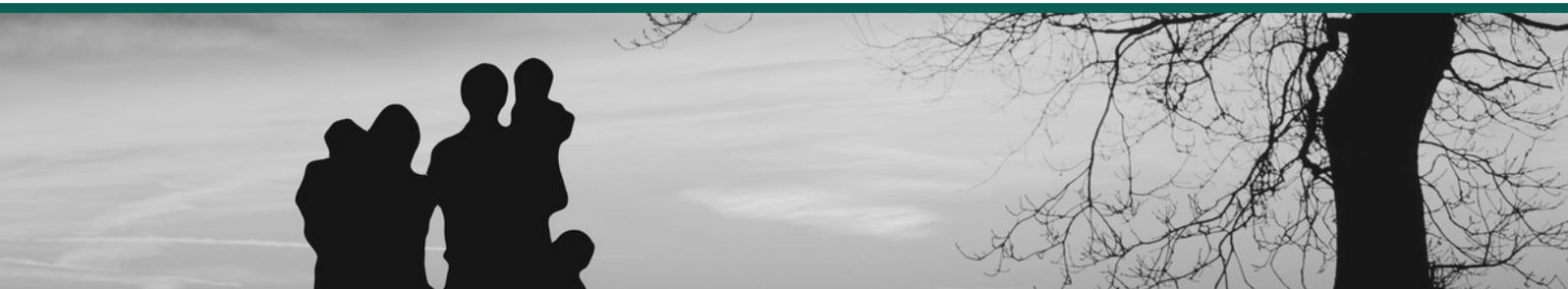
Most respondents told us that they would feel most comfortable turning to family members / friends / school or college staff, rather than health professionals, to discuss mental health issues:



From those who responded:

- 34 told us that they would only feel comfortable turning to friends / family / school or college staff;
- 6 told us that they would only feel comfortable turning to professional health services;
- 11 noted a combination of both.

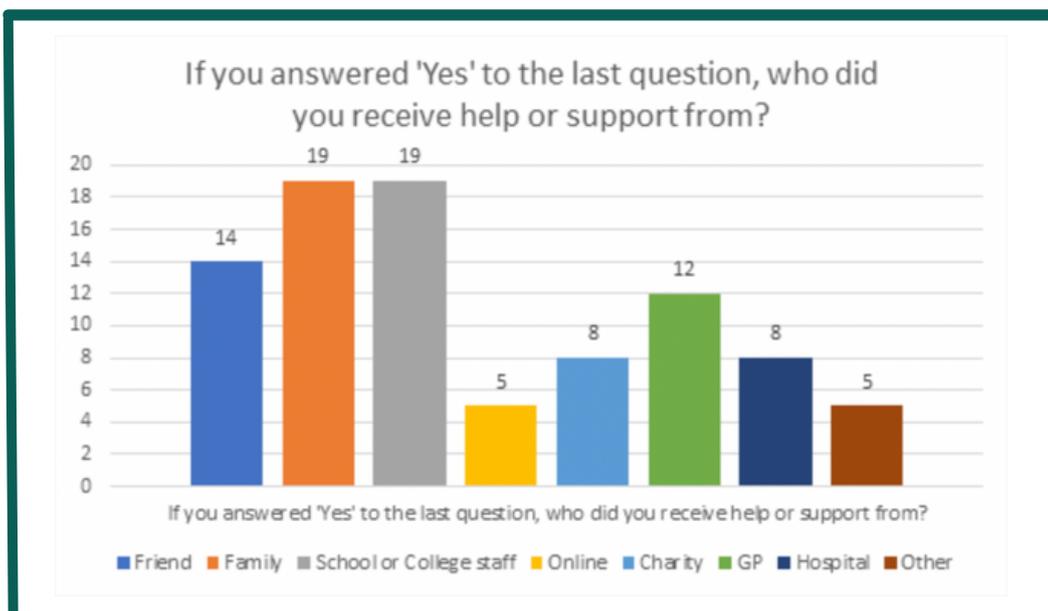
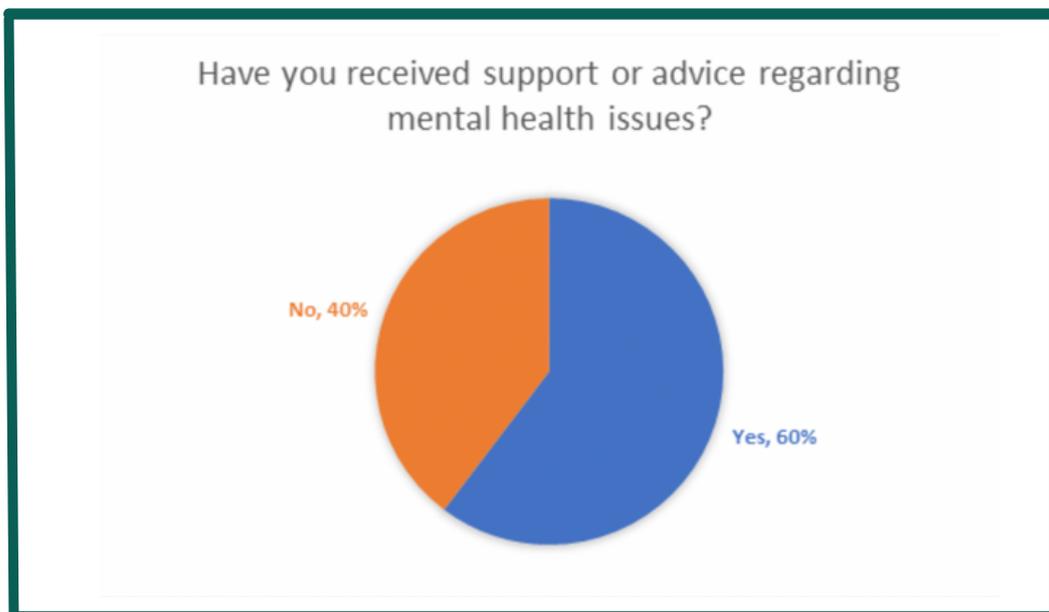
27 had only noted one answer, whilst the most (36) had noted a combination of answers.



Your experience of mental health services

The next set of questions asked about people's experiences of mental health services.

60% of respondents had received help or advice regarding mental health issues, and we asked them who they had received that support from:

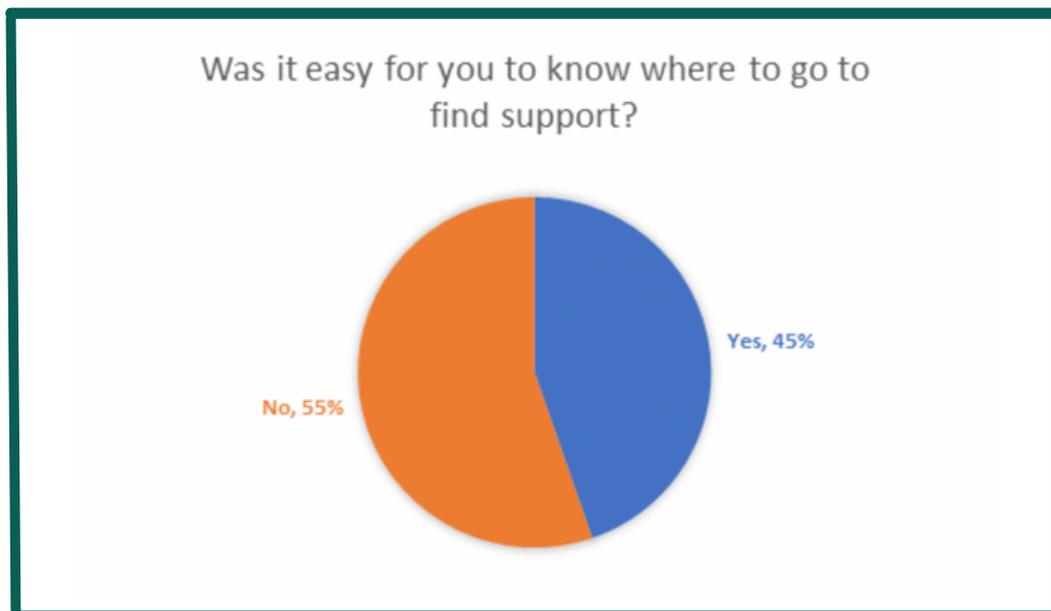


With most of our respondents having said that they would be more comfortable turning to friends, family or school staff, it is perhaps not surprising that most who had received advice or assistance on mental health issues (38 respondents) received advice from family or school staff or friends.

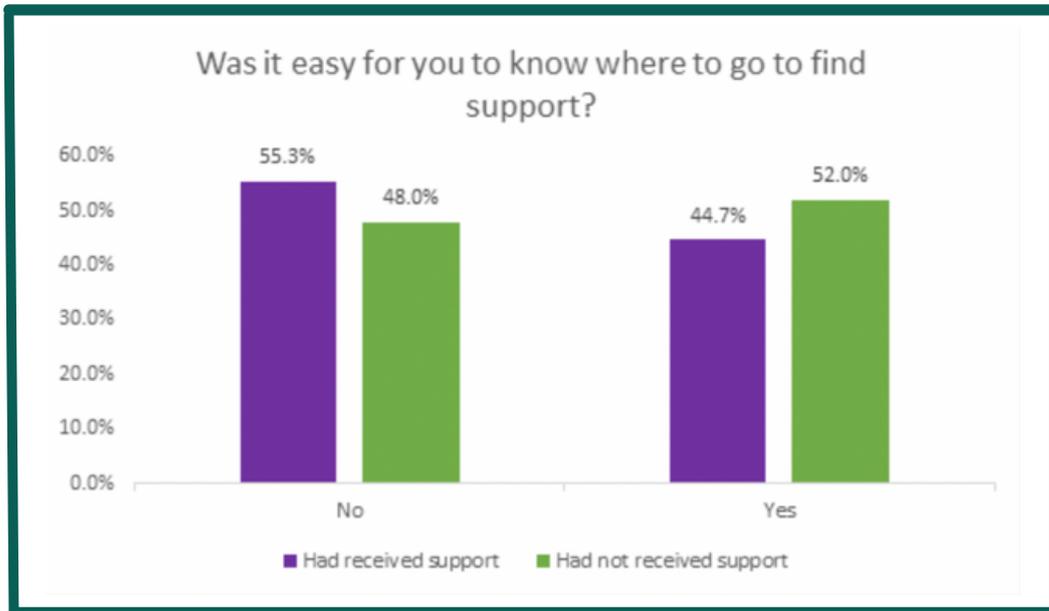
Most of our respondents had received advice or assistance from more than one source, with 9 having received advice from a GP or hospital as well as friends / family / school.

We then asked if it had been easy for them to know where to go for help.

Of those who had received help or advice, unfortunately over half (55%) felt that it had not been easy to know where to go for help:



It may be interesting here to compare the views of those who had received support with those of those who had not, perhaps showing that the perception of how easy it is to know where to go a little different from reality:



We then asked if it hadn't been easy for them to know where to go to find support, what were the biggest barriers, and this was an open-ended question.

Most of the comments we received (50% of those who shared their experiences) mentioned the fear of talking about it, or the fear of not being taken seriously. Some mentioned the lack of ability to contact someone anonymously, or without their parents knowing, as a barrier.

Others talked about waiting lists and poor experiences with professional help.

Here are some of the comments we received:

“

“It’s not spoken about much, so people don’t know what to do or where to go”

“Knowing who and where to go to for the best support, and also in terms of speed, as there is a need to see someone urgently by the time one has reached the point of needing support”

“As a child under 16, there isn’t much support you can get without a parent knowing”

It was only on my fourth visit to the doctor that my nurse suggested that I might have anxiety.”

“Difficult to contact anyone anonymously and to find services online in Welsh.”

“Finding someone to trust so much that you can share personal info with”

“My family not believing me”

“Waiting lists and waiting times were a barrier”

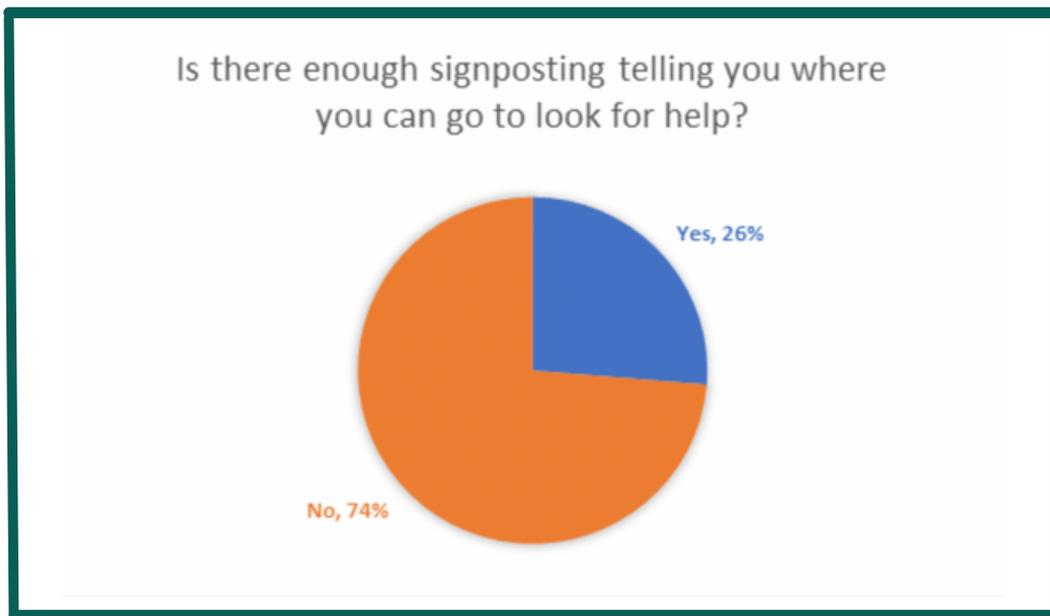
“Everyone else has their own issues, not wanting to burden anyone”

”

It appears from the responses that mental health is still a topic that young people find difficult to talk about.

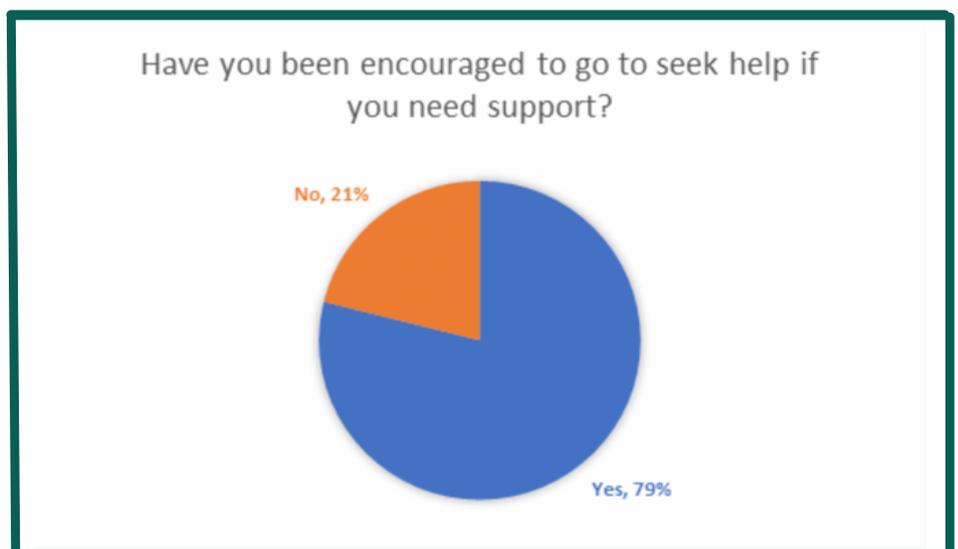
We then asked if they thought that there was enough signposting telling them where they could go to look for help.

Of those who had received help, nearly three-quarters thought that there was not enough signposting to get help:

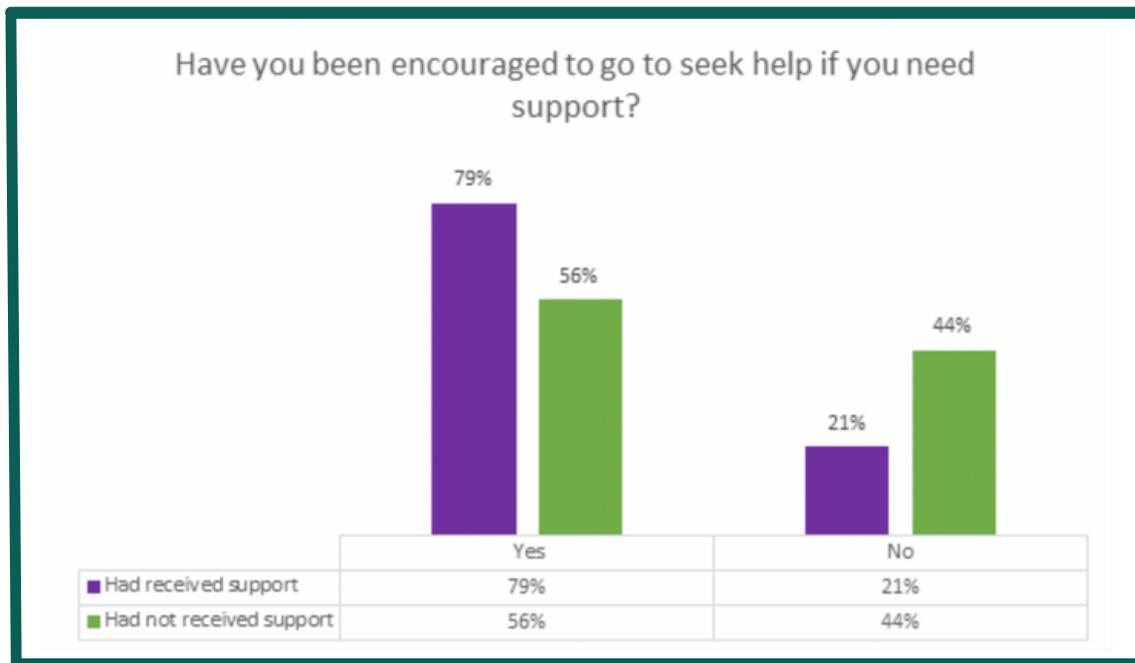


We also asked if they had been encouraged to go to seek help if they needed support.

Of those who had received help or advice about mental health issues, 79% said they had:



But when we look at the figures for those who had not received help, the figures were different, with only 56% saying they had been encouraged enough to go for help:



Our final question was an open-ended one, asking people what their experience was like when trying to get help with mental health problems.

In response to our question " Overall what was your experience of trying to get help with mental health problems? Tell us about your experience. ", we received some positive stories, but some very sad experiences as well. e.g. one telling us that they had "never had an experience where I feel more confident / less sad after asking for help" and suggested that one of the most helpful conversations he had had was from a stranger who was happening to be passing when he was contemplating suicide.

31 respondents shared their personal experiences with us - 8 were positive, 19 were negative, and others mixed. The most common negative answer was that they were not taken seriously (6), then that they were unable to trust or open up (3) and waiting lists (3).

“

Here are some of the comments we received. Some were positive

“It was okie dokie”

“There is a lot of help and support in schools and at home.”

“It was hard at first but school really helped.”

“I had two different counsellors...both were very different, but helped me immensely.”

”



However, the majority of responses unfortunately highlighted either personal barriers to seeking help, difficulties with accessing services, or feeling that the help they received did not take them seriously:

"It was not easy to open up and it took me a while to build up the courage."

"I always think that my problems are not as severe compared to other children."

"Difficult to try and get anonymous support sometime, especially for personal issues such as sexuality etc"

"I tried to ring on several occasions and never got an answer"

"Long waiting times, being signposted elsewhere."

"Some places were disgraceful. Been a very long time finding out what was wrong because nobody seemed to be listening / understanding / being driven to the wrong places."

"Was left with no help after voicing my problems, never got a call back after showing signs of mental illness, and was only told to hang out with friends and bathe by school councillor"

"Rushed almost like I didn't feel important"

"I haven't had very good experiences with getting help, I have always been deemed as 'not unwell enough' to receive help... Once I had a social worker tell me she'd like to see me less because she has 'more import people to see' which I understood but the way she said it made me feel invalidated."

"Referred onto online CBT programme which made my problems seem worse, it was not geared to the individual, a danger with off the shelf packages, trying to access a counsellor to access talking therapies was impossible, the whole process felt dehumanising"

"I was left to deal with crippling post-traumatic stress disorder with a prescription of Prozac and expected to just deal with it."

"I have never had an experience where I feel more confident / less sad after asking for help. Teachers are often too busy to have a real conversation with pupils or rush to finish the conversation because they have other things to do at the time. In addition, I believe that school staff are not experienced enough to support children with depression, we are often turned away by saying that we just feel sad. This can be enough to send a sufferer over the edge. "

"My experience was very disappointing and could've put me at serious risk. After seeking help for an eating disorder, I was referred to CAMHS after months of waiting and referral to 'support groups'. Once accepted into CAMHS, I had just 3 in person appointments, all of which used scare tactics and disturbing images to try and fix the problem. I was then given only online meetings, in which a psychologist told me that my problems were 'too severe for her to manage' and that I'd have to be referred to someone else. After this, I received a letter of discharge and have not been contacted since. The system is slow, inefficient and disorganised with inexperienced staff who subsequently put patients at further risk."

"CAHMS told my parents I was just attention seeking at one point which made me not trust them again. Then I turned 18 and went to adult services... The crisis team actually took me seriously but it's sad that no one took me seriously until things got really bad."

And lastly, a quote by one who had spoken to his friends at school about the topic and came to this conclusion after listening to their experiences:

"I think that youth counsellors are so used to kids not properly understanding the severity of mental illness and mistaking themselves for having one, that when someone who actually has depression walks through the door, they aren't given the support they deserve. You can't expect kids with mental illness to be proactive and to take initiative because they're in a bad place. You can't afford to make a mistake in that scenario; there might not be a second chance."



Conclusions

My main aim with this survey was to have a snapshot of the experiences of young people in seeking help with mental health issues, and I am very grateful to everyone who took part to help me to do that.

I will now share this document with the Deputy Minister for Mental Health.

It seems to me that:

- still too many young people do not know who to turn to (of those who had received help, 55% had found it difficult to know where to go)
- the role of friends and family, as well as school or college staff, in being able to discuss mental health issues is extremely important.
- many young people are still afraid to talk about mental health issues, or find it difficult to open up or trust others. Some also feared that they would not be taken seriously, including by health professionals. Others were unsure if they had mental health problems.
- there is not enough signposting to the right place, and this was also reflected in some of the comments about being passed from one place to another when seeking help.
- if people are encouraged to seek help, they seem more likely to get it.

It was sad to read some of the individual experiences of mental health services - that they do not feel they have enough time to discuss, that they are not taken seriously, or that they are passed from one place to another or find it difficult to get any response.

I'm releasing this report on 'Time to Talk Day'. It seems appropriate as the questionnaire showed how important it is for people not to be afraid to talk about mental health issues. And with so many saying that they would be most comfortable turning to friends or family, it is important that we all have the confidence to talk about the issue.

I look forward to hearing the Government's comments, and once again I'd like to thank those who shared their experiences with us. It is only through learning from the experiences of those who have gone through it that we can improve the provision for them.



ap lorwerth

