

**Mental health impact of the COVID-19
pandemic on young people:
Survey of GAMH young adult service users**



Mental health impact of COVID-19 pandemic on young people

April 2020

Experts have warned that the world is likely to face a global crisis in poor mental health after the coronavirus pandemic has passed (Holmes et al, 2020, Lancet Psychiatry). Mental health scientists including neuroscientists, psychiatrists, psychologists and public health experts have warned of the long-term impact of the virus on people's mental health. A YouGov poll commissioned by Mental Health Foundation before the lockdown found that 1 in 10 had felt lonely, and 1 in 5 have felt hopeless, with young people 18-24 years old expressing more anxiety about being isolated from friends and families than other age groups. Findings from a large Ipsos MORI survey conducted in March 2020 confirmed that people's mental health was already being affected by the UK lockdown and self-isolation policy. The most common issues were found to be social isolation, anxiety including over practical issues such as finances, employment and housing (Office for National Statistics, Ipsos MORI) and concerns about mental health deteriorating (Ipsos MORI). Further, people affected financially were more anxious (Office for National Statistics).

“Increased social isolation, loneliness, health anxiety, stress and an economic downturn are a perfect storm to harm people's mental health and wellbeing.”
– Professor Rory O'Connor, University of Glasgow

Research to date have shed some light on the impact of COVID-19 on young people. A study by mental health charity YoungMinds identified more than 80% of young people with a history of mental illness have found their conditioned worsened since the coronavirus crisis began. When respondents were asked what impacted their mental health most, loss of routine and social isolation were the most commonly cited factors in young people. Many were affected as they were no longer able to attend peer support groups or receive support as certain types of face-to-face support could not be provided remotely. Others had been offered remote support but felt anxious about speaking on the phone or via video calls.

“The pandemic is a human tragedy that would continue to alter the lives of young people. Poor mental health among young people has been described as an ‘epidemic’ and an ‘escalating crisis’ “
– Chief executive, YoungMinds

Childline highlighted that over 400 children and young people in Scotland have contacted their helpline due to COVID-19 related concerns such as; impact on their mental health, worry about their parents losing jobs and abuse. Shout, a 24h crisis texting service also saw demand rise to 1,000 conversations a day one week after UK entered lockdown, and 70% of conversations with people under the age of 25.

More in-depth surveys will increase our understanding on the impact of COVID-19 on young people. Young people have been invited to share their views on COVID-19 in the Lockdown Lowdown survey commissioned by the Scottish Youth Parliament, YouthLink and Young Scot. A partnership between The University of Glasgow, Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH) and Samaritans is also assessing the long-term psychological impact of COVID-19 on the mental health and wellbeing of adults in Scotland. Co-SPACE (COVID-19 Supporting Parents, Adolescents, and Children in Epidemics), currently carried out at the University of Oxford, further aims to identify ways to target support to make the most difference, by understanding what protects young people from deteriorating mental health, especially at particular stress points and how this may vary according to child and family characteristics.

Findings from these ongoing research and surveys will provide useful information but evidence already points to a wider mental health impact of COVID-19. Young people in

particular have lost their sense of routine, feel isolated, disconnected from their peers and feel uncertain about their future. It is therefore crucial that we deliver tested models of support that builds their resilience, their confidence and longer-term wellbeing.

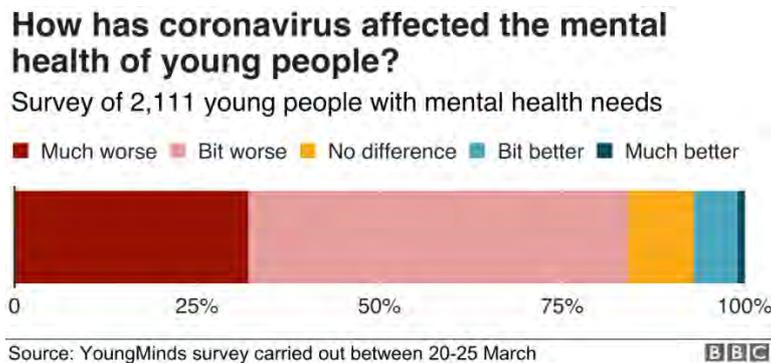


Image: Infographic from BBC

Update (June 2020):

195 young people from Glasgow participated in the initial *Lockdown Lowdown* survey, which highlighted that young people from Glasgow were most concerned about the impact on COVID-19 will have on their futures. Around 35 - 40% of respondents expressed being moderately or extremely concerned over mental health and wellbeing, employment situation, financial situation or social relationships, mirroring the overall picture across Scotland.

Experts have warned physical and social distancing will particularly affect development in adolescents (age 10-24) but that using digital technologies to remain socially connected can help reduce these effects. (Orben et al 2020, *The Lancet*). At this age, peer interaction is important for developing cognitive abilities, self-identity, and shaping how the brain processes information relating to self and others, which enable adolescents to reflect, take other's perspective and understand the reciprocity of social exchanges.

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Survey of COVID-19 impact on GAMH service users aged 16-25

May 2020

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted surveys to understand the mental health impact on the general public, as well as specifically in people presently experiencing mental health difficulties and young people. The wider impact of COVID-19 financially, on family, relationships, and mental health is expected to affect people of different socioeconomic demographics unequally. Further mental health intersects with social issues and there may be specific difficulties and pressing concerns in particular demographic groups that are not well understood. GAMH works with young people from economically disadvantaged or BAME backgrounds, who experience existing mental health difficulties, and we want to understand how COVID-19 has affected them in order to support them better.

With cessation of services requiring face-to-face contact, there has been a large volume self-help resources and information pages accessible online, developed to support mental wellbeing during the pandemic. These are targeted at issues such as loss of routine, changes in mood resulting from self-isolation, loss of social contact with friends and family. We hope to tailor our support for young people who are already socially isolated and struggling with mental health difficulties, by understanding their needs better and build on their existing coping skills and support system.

Survey

We carried out a survey between 1-7 May 2020 over the telephone to scope the impact of COVID-19 on young people supported by GAMH (Young Adult Mental Health (YAMH) pilot and Young Carers) and how we can support them best during the pandemic and lockdown, and after.

We asked 6 questions related to: A) Current impact of COVID-19, B) Coping during the pandemic and lockdown and C) Coping after the pandemic (see attached survey form). Here, we summarise the findings of the survey from 5 young adults from the YAMH pilot who participated in the survey. In the next section we report the full results from the survey.

Summary of findings

- 4 out of 5 young adults interviewed felt that mental wellbeing had worsened since the pandemic. All young adults interviewed experienced mental health difficulties directly related to the pandemic and social distancing restrictions, as well as disruptions in other areas of their life.
- Social contact was an important part of staying well during the pandemic for young adults, including spending time with family in the same household and connecting with friends over the phone.
- Restrictions on social distancing and outdoor activities impacted young adults coping skills. These changes also created anxiety over what life would be like after the pandemic, including worries about increasing social contact again.
- Young adults felt that online groups would be a good platform to support each other, relate to the similar issues faced and share coping skills.
- Young adults also expressed they would like support to introduce structure in their life through activity ideas, and do things out in the community again after the pandemic.

- Young adults felt that it would be helpful to increase their understanding on mental health, to overcome the pandemic's impact on their mental health and wellbeing and other aspects of their lives.

Conclusions

Isolation and restrictions on social contact has added to young adults' mental health difficulties. Going outdoors and being engaged in activities help young adults remain mentally well but the pandemic has disrupted these coping strategies. Young adults want to be able to participate in activities in the community and may experience anxiety and long-term social isolation in the past that affect their ability to do so. Although support from GAMH usually addresses these barriers, support after the pandemic should also consider that young adults may have worries about returning to social contact, worries about the future, and coping with mental health challenges resulting from the pandemic.

Results of survey

A: Current impact of COVID-19

4 out of 5 young adults interviewed reported that mental wellbeing worsened since the start of the pandemic, and all young adults interviewed expressed difficulties with depression, anxiety, or feelings of isolation during the lockdown. These changes or difficulties were related to the pandemic or impact of social distancing rules.

"I can't go out as often...this makes me feel depressed" – NM

"I feel anxious standing in queues at shops, it feels weird" – LK

"I do sometimes feel restrictions on how to socialise gets me down." - JG

"I feel more anxious now, as I suffer from excessive thoughts around hygiene" – CM

"It has impacted my improvement in mental health negatively. I feel much more anxious about becoming more isolated." – AK

When asked about main concerns, young adults felt that the pandemic affected their existing coping skills.

"I worry I will not be in a structured routine now" – JG

"I can't talk to my friends as I feel embarrassed about my illness and now I can't go out" – NM

The pandemic has also disrupted important areas of their life.

"I feel my social life has deteriorated to the point where I do not have one anymore." – AK

"My benefits have been affected with this also..." – CM

"I was volunteering in summer camps..." – JG

Young adults present worries included anxiety about what will happen after the pandemic, including general uncertainty about how life will be and coping with the changes that has resulted from the pandemic.

"... I often worry about my future as I am unsure as to what will happen" – AK

"I don't know what will happen after this – it scares me" – LM

"It will take time for me to bring back my normal routine..." – CM

"Finding a job or things to do would be a struggle." – JG

"I fear I may have to apply and appeal (for my benefits) which was not a good experience for me before." – CM

B: Coping during the pandemic and lockdown

Table 1. Summary of things that help young adults cope during lockdown

Social contact	Indoors	Outdoors
Being with family	Listening to music	Going for walks
Activities with family	Watching TV	Going to the shops
Calling friends	Playing games	Sitting in the garden
	Cleaning and organising	

Young adults shared that things that help include social contact (over the phone or with family they live with), going outdoors, and staying occupied indoors.

“My mood can be up and down at times, when I am feeling okay, I call my friends and go out for a walk with my mum. I listen to music and watch my tv” – NM

“I try talking to my friends as often as I can, however there are times where I feel as though I cannot talk to anyone. I also watch TV, and I try going outside often to the shops or on a walk, for fresh air” – AK

“I like sitting in the garden with my family... I also go on small walks with my dad sometimes” – LK

Young adults felt that online groups will be helpful to support and relate to each other.

“I think I can open and talk about issues that relate to other people without having to feel stigmatised” – NM

“Online groups would be helpful as people can relate to what is going on, and provide support to one another.” – AK

“Engaging with the groups and discussing coping strategies will help me” – JG

Young adults also felt that support to form a routine will be helpful.

“I feel many young people like myself will be wanting a routine or activities to do.” – JG

“Before this pandemic I was volunteering and I enjoyed my routine now I am stuck in the house. I think if I have a routine it makes me feel good.” - LK

C. After the pandemic

Table 2. Summary of the types of support discussed

During the pandemic	After the pandemic
Online groups, relating to one another	Support to be active in the community again
Support to form a routine	Support to form a routine
	Coping with changes
	Understanding and coping with mental health difficulties

Young adults main concerns were over increasing social contact again.

"I would be mindful who I meet and how I meet people" – LK

"I would also hesitate meeting in crowds and large groups" – JG

"As I have always had issues with hygiene...this has enhanced my concerns in meeting people or going out" – CM

"I will hesitate to meet people in large groups...or be in crowds" - AK

Young adults were also concerned about negative impacts on their mental health, finding employment and engaging in the community.

"I fear my mental health may deteriorate...my therapist has left her job, I'm fearful to meet a new therapist" – AK

"I worry a lot about my health" - NM

"I get very anxious thinking this virus will never go and I would become more isolated" – CM

"..how to find a job or volunteering..."

Young adults also expressed uncertainty about what concerns they may experience.

"I'm not sure... I fear things may be different" - NM

"This pandemic has changed everything about how to socialise. I'm not sure how things will result" – LK

"I am not sure..." – AK

When asked about the types of support they will benefit from, young adults felt that they will benefit from practical support to:

- be active in the community again
- form a routine

"I want to be given support on how to get my routine back to normal and how I will be able to volunteer again" – JG

"I would like to get 1-1 support to gradually build steps out of the house again" – NM

“More support to be active in the community again” – LK

“I would like to be out and about...” – AK

“I am sure I won’t be alone, a lot of young people my age would fear to go out, it would be good if small groups can work together on this” – CM

Young adults also expressed that they wanted to gain knowledge and learn strategies to:

- Cope with changes
- Understand and cope with mental health difficulties

“I think there should be more support given to people to help understand their poor mental health. I would like... to learn more strategies to cope with my anxiety” – AK

“Coping with anxiety and my mental health... I would need to find strategies on how I would be able to overcome anxiety after this pandemic” – CM

“I feel there should be more support in every social, mental wellbeing and how to cope with new changes given to people” – JG

Sample form

Young person initials: A.B

Date: 07/05/2020

Your participation will help GAMH understand the impact of COVID-19 on young people like you, and what we can do to help support young people better during and after the pandemic.

A. Current impact of COVID-19 pandemic/lockdown

A1. Have you felt changes in your mental wellbeing since the pandemic/lockdown?

Prompts: What changes have you experienced? Have you felt more/less anxious, depressed, stressed or lonely since the pandemic?

Change	Yes/No
What changes in mental wellbeing did you experience?	Yes – it has impacted my improvement in mental health negatively, as I feel much more anxious about becoming more isolated.

A2. What are your main concerns resulting from the pandemic/lockdown?

Prompts: Has the pandemic affected your mental wellbeing, social contact, worries about the future, practical issues (finances)?

I feel my social life has deteriorated to the point where I do not have one anymore. This makes me feel low and I often worry about my future as I am unsure as to what will happen

B. Coping during the pandemic/lockdown

B1. What have you found helpful to cope during the pandemic?

Prompts: Which of these have you used/find helpful? Apps and resources, telephone support, having people close to chat to, having a routine, going outdoors, knowing where support is when needed

I try talking to my friends as often as I can, however there are times where I feel as though I cannot talk to anyone. I also watch TV, and I try going outside often to the shops or on a walk, for fresh air.

B2. How can we support you better during the pandemic?

Prompts: Which of these do you think will be helpful? Online groups: peer support, discuss strategies. Support to form a routine, scheduling activities. Staying connected with newsletter/activity idea suggestions

I think online groups would be helpful as people can relate to what is going on, and provide support to one another. I also think mental health will now be looked at differently as people will understand how isolation can impact your mental wellbeing.

C. After the pandemic

C1. What are your main concerns for returning to life as normal after the pandemic/lockdown?

Prompts: Struggles with mental health, uncertainty, financial instability, meeting people again

I am not sure, however I fear my mental health may deteriorate and I will hesitate to meet people in large groups. My therapist has left her job, I'm fearful to meet a new therapist – or be in crowds.

C2. What support do you think you can benefit from after the pandemic?

Prompts: Which of these do you find helpful? Support to be active in the community again: eg coping anxiety being out and about, volunteering. Achieving goals important to me. Coping with mental health wellbeing

I think there should be more support given to people to help understand their poor mental health better. I would like to be out and about and learn more strategies to cope with my anxiety.

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