Exploring young people’s awareness of mental health in Northern Ireland
The Youth Mental Health Committee

We're a group of nine young people made from the Belfast Youth Forum, NI Youth Forum and Youth@clc and we came together in 2017 to explore issues connected to mental health and young people.

But we don’t just want to explore these issues; we want to take action on them and make change happen.

We want to make sure that as many young people as possible have a meaningful say in shaping the future of mental health education and support services.

We hope that young people to use their voices to talk about mental health, to challenge the stigma and to push for change from our decision makers.

We will use this research to help make all of this happen.

Why did we do this research?

In July 2016 the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that the NI Government:

Rigorously invest in child and adolescent mental health services and develop strategies at national and devolved levels, with clear time frames, targets, measureable indicators, effective monitoring mechanisms and sufficient human, technical and financial resources…”1

At a follow up youth event in October 2016 organised by youth@clc, NI Youth Forum and the Belfast Youth Forum, over 100 young people expressed their frustrations at the lack of mental health education and support services available here and called for the UN’s recommendation to be fully implemented by our government.

To help make this happen, young people at the event asked us to begin work on creating a mental health campaign.

STIGMA

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Where would young people like to go to receive mental health information & support;

What actions they think our government should take to promote positive mental health and well-being in society.

How young people view mental health and how does this impact on their ability to speak about it.

We wanted to find out what young people in NI thought and knew about mental health, in particular:

Where young people get their information about mental health and how do they rate this:

• Mental illness is the largest cause of ill health in NI
• It is estimated that approximately 45,000 children and young people in Northern Ireland have a mental health problem6
• More than 20% of young people here are suffering ‘significant mental health problems’ by the time they reach 189
• In NI, 50% of mental health problems emerge by age 14

• Childhood experiences like poverty, addiction in families and trauma experienced within families are linked to the emergence of mental health issues at a young age8
• There is a relationship between ill mental health rates and the legacy of the conflict, which continues to impact young people through trans-generational trauma6
• The legacy of the conflict contributes to poor mental health through its negative impact on the social and economic circumstances of people and communities, and through death, violence, bereavement and injury suffered.7

• NI has the highest rates of suicide in the United Kingdom8
• Suicide rates in the most deprived areas of NI are three times higher than in the least deprived20
• Research indicates that many young people are not accessing mental health services even when they self-report as experiencing serious mental health problems10
• According to experts, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is given just less than 8% of the mental health budget in NI11
• In one local study young people said they felt uncomfortable about seeking help due to the stigma associated with poor mental health or because of lack of adult awareness of mental health issues12
From the start, we knew that we wanted our research project to be youth led. It had to be a piece of work done by young people for young people. We asked a local researcher with lots of experience to help us; we knew this would help make our work valid and produce a stronger report.

They helped us to:
- Develop our online survey and focus groups
- Get trained in research skills
- Analyse our findings
- Create our research report

Our research timeline:

1. Our research was carried out from January-April 2018.
2. Young people who took part were aged 14-17.
3. We used an online survey and youth-led focus groups to gather our information.
4. We sent the online survey to all post-primary schools in NI through the C2K network and we promoted it widely through social media.
5. The young people on our Forums also took hard copies of the survey into their schools and youth groups to complete.
6. A total of 1,117 young people completed our survey.
7. We then used the survey findings to develop our focus group session and ask young people more qualitative questions about mental health.
8. Four focus group sessions took place across NI in total, these were in Belfast, Newry, Ballymena and Derry.
9. At the focus groups, we asked young people to design their own elephant with their messages about mental health.
10. A total of 351 young people participated in our focus groups.
11. From May to August 2018, we analysed the findings of our research and created our report.
12. We used these messages and the research findings to create our recommendations for government at the end of this report.

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Out of the 1,268 young people who took part in our research, 91% of them told us that mental health is a huge issue for young people in NI.

The findings of our research can be broken down into 3 broad themes which all connect with one another:

1. Stigma
2. Safe Spaces
3. Schools and information
Overwhelmingly, young people told us there is a huge negative stigma attached to mental health which in turn leads to a ‘culture of silence’ when it comes to talking about it.

A key issue for young people is that there is little to no positive mental health language; they told us that society frames ‘mental health’ in a negative way and this makes young people associate with negative thoughts.

40% of young people in our survey had negative thoughts when they heard the term ‘mental health’.

Within each of the focus groups young people described the term ‘mental health’ using these same sets of words and phrases:

- Depression
- Suicide
- Bullying
- Drinking
- Frightened
- Self-harm
- Alone
- Silence

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Young people were clear that ‘mental health’ was associated with negativity because of:

- The media (TV & Films);
- Social media;
- A lack of knowledge & understanding it and the misconceptions this creates;
- Can’t discuss it out of fear;
- Adults not understanding how young people are affected by it.

“People are afraid of being judged, being treated differently.”

“People think if they say they are suffering, they will be put in an asylum.”

“There is a huge stigma linked to ‘seeing the counsellor’, people feel ashamed and embarrassed.”

“Depression, Suicide, Bullying, Drinking, Frightened, Self-harm, Alone, Silence”

“We know about your physical health, but young people don’t know anything about your mental health. We don’t get taught how to look after ourselves; how to balance life pressures.”

“I told them about the cuts on my arms and they were like – here’s the number for lifeline.”

“When you are 12-18 years of age, adults and professionals often dismiss how you feel…they say it’s your hormones, you’re a teenager.”

“Silence”

“IT’S ALWAYS A BAD NEWS STORY WHEN YOU HEAR MENTAL HEALTH…AND PEOPLE DON’T WANT TO HEAR WHEN THINGS ARE NOT GOING WELL, SO THEY SWITCH OFF. LIKE THINK WHEN DID YOU EVER HERE A GOOD MENTAL HEALTH STORY”
Importantly, young people said that discussions on mental health are always framed by adults and this can often narrow the discussion and stop young people from talking about it as well. Young people told us they aren’t given the space to transform how mental health is talked about and viewed and that this needs to change.

There is an appetite among young people to talk about mental health, to access information about mental health, and challenge the stereotypes that exist around mental health.

**Young people told us:**

- “We need to develop a new language when talking about mental health and young people need to be given a role in helping to develop this;
- The negativity needs to be replaced with words such as ‘confidence, resilience, happiness and excitement’;
- 90% of young people surveyed believed that there needs to be an awareness raising campaign focusing on mental health and young people to challenge the stigma and culture of silence.

76% of survey respondents told us that young people are afraid to talk about mental health.

A further 86% told us that large numbers of young people don’t know how to talk about mental health.

Large numbers of young people in the focus groups also told us that there is a lack of safe spaces to talk about mental health.

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When discussing the issue of being able to talk about mental health, young people tended to concentrate their discussions on ‘safe spaces’ to get useful information and talk openly. Young people said these ‘safe spaces’ would be places within their community where they can relax, but are also trustworthy and confidential. Somewhere they feel listened to and not judged.

**SAFE SPACES**

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Large numbers of young people in the focus groups also said that there is a lack of safe spaces to talk about mental health.
In the focus groups, there was a lot of attention given to the role of the internet by young people, who discussed if it was a useful place to receive mental health information and act as a ‘safe space’. Young people’s feelings on this were mixed.

The overall view from young people was that online was a good place to access mental health information but there were issues with being able to separate fact from fiction. This meant that at times, using the internet to get information could make mental health issues worse for them. When explaining why they felt this way, young people gave these reasons:

**Online bullying**

**Loss of anonymity**

**Self-diagnosis**

**Myths and misinformation**

Although the risks about receiving inaccurate information were high, there was general agreement amongst participants that online was still the best place to reach young people and to get them to access mental health information.

The challenge highlighted by young people was how to separate fact from fiction and make sure you keep everyone safe?

"Short images and videos are a good way to raise awareness of mental health issues."

"I like the wee positive messages (affirmations) that come up on Facebook and Instagram. They can cheer you up and be inspiring."

Finally, the discussions looked at what young people thought a ‘safe space’ might look like in real life:

"The best place to go would be to your youth worker because you trust them and they know you, and you know them and they can help point you in the right direction."

"An ideal service would be tailored to meet the needs of individuals, no pressure, understanding and empathetic staff, positive bright environment, welcoming training for transgender issues, listening ears and the right advice."

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"Internet. YouTube. Filled with negativity."

"I just type in all my symptoms and see what comes up."

"When I look online, I convince myself I am dying."

"When young people mention mental health on social media (their own) they usually face a negative backlash from their friends or bullies or trolls, usually look at them attention seeking. That kind of stuff."

Young people identified social media in particular as having a negative impact on their mental health and said it was actually making things worse.

All of the young people who took part in the focus groups felt that social media was responsible for increasing negative stigma and creating an environment which forced young people to not talk about their personal feelings:

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According to the young people the three most common places they would source information about mental health are:

- Online (59%)
- Family member (48%)
- Friends (45%)

Young people said the problem is that the quality of this information is inconsistent and that it often isn’t useful because:

- It’s usually framed in a negative way;
- It often spreads myths and rumours;
- It sometimes romanticises mental health issues;
- It encourages self-diagnosis and misinformation;

To balance this, young people said schools, teachers and the curriculum have a very important part to play in developing positive mental health engagement with young people.

Young people felt that more could be done in schools to create an environment where they can talk about mental health and receive useful, consistent information.

In conversations about mental health and school they told us:

- There are some positive examples of mental health education and support for young people in schools, but this is not standard across all schools and it isn’t common for the majority young people to experience this.
- Good experiences tended to be because of individual teachers, not the result of a school policy or a common approach that all schools sign up to.
- It is difficult to access mental health information in schools; most young people we spoke to hadn’t received any information in their school.
- School staff often lack knowledge and understanding about mental health and young people, and are therefore unable to help.
- Schools should adapt more to the needs of young people when it comes to mental health education and services.
Young people said this type of mental health education should include:

- Accessing information (to help increase knowledge and/or for personal need)
- Addressing stigma
- Raising awareness
- Provision of support for young people who need it
- Training for teachers and all school staff
- Needs to be embedded in the curriculum— one off lessons won’t work.

“Feelings and emotions should be discussed and explained more in the curriculum.”

“More approaches like storytelling and drawing exercises.”

“Time should be taken once a week to talk about mental health.”

“Make it a subject from primary school on.”

“There should be an open clinic approach, like a drop in.”

“Time should be more of senior members of a school talking to the junior members.”

“It should be interactive, less lecture type, small groups and make them active.”

87% of young people in our survey agreed that mental health issues need to be discussed more in schools and colleges and young people in the focus groups said overwhelmingly that mental health education should be embedded in schools via the curriculum.

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Young people said:
There is a lack of safe spaces to talk about mental health and receive useful information & support.

We are asking our decision makers to:
• Create a website for young people, designed by young people, to provide mental health information, support, raise awareness & challenge stigma.
• This website could include an online support platform where young people can ask questions and receive real-time support from health professionals.
• The website could be used by schools to engage young people in mental health discussions and would provide the safe online space young people told us they wanted in our research.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT

Young people said:
The quality of mental health information they receive is inconsistent and often it isn’t useful. They said there is little to no mental health education in schools and they would like to see this change by having a programme embedded into schools and colleges.

We are asking our decision makers to:
• Create a compulsory curriculum programme for all schools and colleges on mental health & wellbeing that helps to raise awareness and challenge stigma and that allows young people to access consistent mental health information.
• This curriculum programme should be long term and embedded in schools – one-off workshops won’t be effective.
• Mental health & well-being training for all teachers, school support workers & youth workers so that this programme can be delivered effectively.

Young people said:
There is a huge stigma attached to mental health which stops young people talking about it and creates a ‘culture of silence’ which only makes the problem worse.

We are asking our decision makers to:
• Support the creation of a youth-led, government-backed, mental health campaign challenging the culture of silence and negative stigma.
• Work with young people to develop a new and positive language around mental health by creating a ‘mental health dictionary’. This could be used as part of a potential mental health curriculum programme.
Thank you

We want to say a big thank you to all of the young people who took part in our research, for sharing your stories and telling us what you think about mental health.

Without your help none of this would have been possible.

JOIN THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM CAMPAIGN!

Tweet & Facebook & your messages about mental health and help us call out the ‘Elephant in the Room.’

Help us to #FillTheTrunk and challenge the stereotypes, bust the myths, influence decision makers and get people talking about mental health!

Remember to include our hash-tags:

#FillTheTrunk
#EITR

Follow us on Twitter @FillTheTrunk

1 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s Concluding Observations and Recommendations to the UK Government, July 2016; 60(b)
4 Sands, Dr. L. (2017), Council member, RCGP NI, Associate Director, GP Career Development Scheme and GP Training Programme Director, NIMDTA, ‘Priorities for prevention, intervention and access to mental health services’ presentation to Policy Forum for 10 Keyspace Seminar: improving mental health services in Northern Ireland, presentation, March 17th, 2017, Stormont Hotel
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