

Summary report: *Young Voices on Mental Health*

The full report is available on our website.

Over the summer of 2016, Healthwatch Southwark engaged with 114 young people aged 12-23, via workshops and surveys, to find out about their experiences of mental health education and information, access to services, and where they prefer to go for support.

To assess awareness and perceptions, we asked young people what the term ‘mental health’ brought to mind for them. The majority interpreted the term negatively. Everyone felt that mental health was at least as important as physical health.

More disagreed (37%) than agreed (28%) with the statement ‘It is easy for young people to get information and advice about mental health’. Some said that information must be actively sought out. While some saw the internet as a helpful source, many did not feel information online was reliable, locally applicable or easy to find, or feared they might wrongly self-diagnose.

The majority of participants also disagreed that their school had provided good education on mental health. While a couple of people were satisfied with information provided via, for example, assemblies, large numbers of young people in all of the groups said that they had not received anything at all. Where schools did provide information (for example around exam time), it was often inadequate - teachers were not trained in the subject and were too vague. In a few schools a potentially more effective approach had been taken, with external educators coming in.

To find out about awareness of the seriousness of mental health problems and of sources of support, we asked the young people what they would do if someone else might have a problem with their mental health. A good number said they would talk to someone close to them, a professional or voluntary organisation, but some that they would not talk to anyone or would not know what to do.

We asked who young people would feel able to talk to about their mental wellbeing. **61% agreed that they would be able to talk to their friends and 53% to their parents.** Reasons for not talking to friends included wanting to be positive, fear of judgement or awkwardness, and fear that a problem might get ‘brushed off’. In one group made up mainly of young men, many said that young women are much more likely to open up to their friends. Reasons for not talking to parents included families not understanding mental health issues, perhaps because of their cultural background, families focusing on practical issues, or trying to ‘joke it off’.

As with information and education provision, several workshop participants were **critical regarding support provided by schools**. Some said it was hard to access school nurses or counsellors. Other obstacles included support being predicated on the young person having academic or behavioural problems, and fears about safeguarding rules.

Only a third of participants agreed, and over a half disagreed, that they would be able to talk to their GP about their mental health. While some were confident in the GP and said ‘they’re professionals’, others felt their relationship with the GP was not good enough, had fears about confidentiality, or did not believe GPs could help (some did not know they even had a role in mental health support). Some feared the GP would take extreme measures such as ‘locking them in the Maudsley’, and several were unwilling to take drugs and thought they would not be offered talking therapies.

However, only 35% of people said they would feel embarrassed if people found out they had sought support with their mental health, and 44% said they would not. Discussions about more **general social stigma** showed that many felt this was still powerful, with for example television and traditional cultural ideas playing a part.

Recommendations

We asked the young people themselves what advice they would give to commissioners and providers when they consider how best to support young people around mental health, in terms of education in schools, health professionals, preventing people from being embarrassed to seek help, and sexual health services in general.

Teach young people about mental health, in a creative and engaging way. Several people suggested having medical professionals or external organisations come to schools, partly so that young people are more aware of sources of support. People wanted to see a range of information formats, from posters to films and social media. Information should include

- positive definitions of ‘mental health’ as well as discussion of illness
- awareness-raising about less extreme treatment-worthy mental health problems
- types of treatment on offer
- a range of illnesses and symptoms
- signposting to reliable websites, organisations and support that are applicable locally.

Teach teachers about mental health. Young people felt that teachers aren’t equipped to support them. We also suggest awareness-raising for parents to help them support their children and to dispel myths.

Reduce stigma; normalise talking about mental health. Young people felt that the NHS, campaigners, media and schools should help reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness.

Promote mental health support services including GPs. Services need to raise awareness about what they can offer, and give examples of when they have been effective. The NHS needs to promote the fact that GPs can be seen about mental health.

Support young people at school. Schools could be well-positioned to offer support for those who are struggling, particularly at stressful times such as exams.

Improve access to talking therapies. Young people said that more talking therapies/psychology should be offered, not just medications.

Encourage peer and mentor support. Some also wanted younger mental health advocates, particularly those with experience of illness, to educate them.

Give clear information about confidentiality, and offer anonymous support. Professionals should be clear with the young person about what referrals are being made, keep them informed, and ask their permission. Some suggested that anonymous services are needed in order for some people to seek information and support.

Listen to young people. It is important that young people feel understood and empowered. GPs need to be non-judgemental.

Make services friendly for young people. Health professionals need to know how to talk to young people. Some participants also said it was important that service environments do not feel too clinical.