

MENTAL HEALTH NOTEBOOK

**MENTAL HEALTH NOTEBOOK'S
REPORT ON TEENAGE MENTAL
HEALTH**

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About Mental Health Notebook (MHN)

MHN is an organisation aiming to promote the mental health of teenagers all over the world. Founded by teenagers, for teenagers, MHN hopes to remove the stigma on mental health, encourage you to prioritise your happiness, and push politicians and schools to do more to protect the mental health of teenagers. With over 15,000 followers on its Instagram account, MHN is proud of what they have accomplished and looks forward to continuing to serve the community in the future.

Introduction

When we first founded MHN, we started by posting on social media and providing free tutoring for teenagers. Since then, we have helped tens of thousands of young adults via our different programs. While we are incredibly proud of all the work we have done, we are aware that to make a bigger change and change the lives of more people for the better, we need to do more. This is when we started recruiting students from different schools across the UK. Once more than 200 students, all from different schools, agreed to join our school council, we proceeded to host meetings and discussion groups among all the members. We then used all the information gathered to create a questionnaire, which has been completed by almost 5,000 different students.

This report will illustrate all of our findings from both the questionnaire results and the findings from the discussions we have had within the school council, with teachers from schools and politicians in the government. We will forward this report to MPs and schools across the world, who will hopefully use our report as part of their guidance on how mental health education and treatment of teenagers need to evolve and encourage them to make a bigger change. Thank you for taking the time to read this report - we appreciate this.

Demographic

Most of our respondents were aged between 12 and 18, with the most responses being from teenagers aged 16 (25.7%) and 17 (29.6%). With a significant amount of responses from each school year from year 9 to year 13 (the lowest being teenagers aged 18, with only 9.2%), I believe our findings are representative of what teenagers generally believe. With almost 5,000 responses from teenagers from both public schools and state schools, I believe these responses are also indicative of the consensus of all the students across the UK.

The Main Source of Stress From School



Figure 1 - Our respondents' main source of stress at school

We decided that one of the most important questions we can establish is what are the main sources of stress in schools for students so we can tackle those areas specifically. The options we gave were 'exams and tests', 'socialising with other students and/or teachers', 'homework' and 'lessons'. Exams and tests came out on top easily, with 47.8% of our respondents choosing that as their response. A further 26.6% chose socialising with others, and less than 1% combined choosing homework or lessons. It is worth noting that a lot of 'other' responses mentioned 'family problems' or 'parents' as their main source of stress. While we decided not to include it as it isn't related to school, this result is worth noting in the latter parts of this report when we tackle how to deal with parents' influence and response to a teenager's mental health.

School Therapists

While there are other regulations and guidances for schools regarding mental health, there is currently no legal requirement for schools in England to provide counsellors for students in schools.

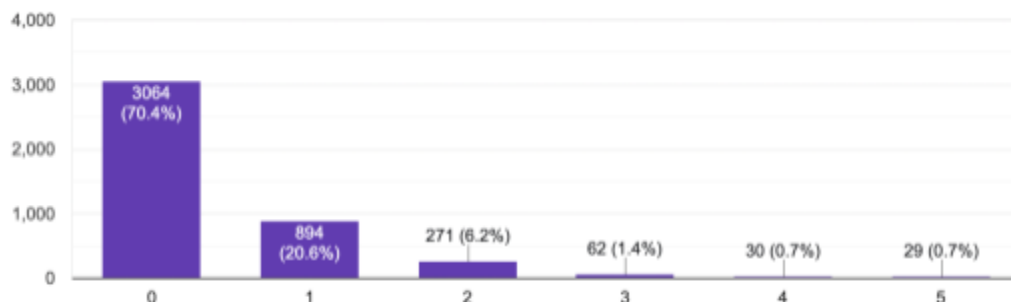


Figure 2 - Number of therapists our respondents have at school

During our school council meetings, one of the topics which came up the most is the lack of counsellors in many schools and the number of students who want counselling support but

couldn't afford it outside school. Even in the selective schools that provide counsellors for teenagers, the number of counsellors in each school is insufficient. Many students who go to schools with a counsellor have reported that they haven't been able to access them as the demand for them is too high and they have prioritised more urgent cases. This means that students with 'milder' mental health illnesses have not been able to access any help.

This is reflected in our report, where a shocking 70.4% of students claimed there isn't a single therapist at their school, as shown in figure 2. There are 20.6% who reported having one therapist, 6.2% with two therapists and less than 3% with three or more therapists. Furthermore, 90.4% of students believe that their schools don't have a high enough number of therapists (figure 3) while 97.4% believe that it should be mandatory for schools to have a counsellor (figure 4).

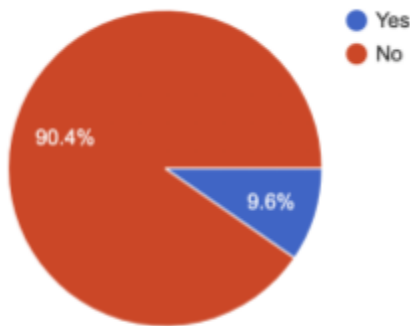


Figure 3 - Whether or not our respondents believe the number of therapists at their school is enough

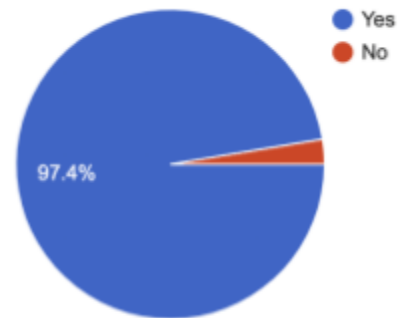


Figure 4 - Whether or not our respondents believe it should be mandatory for schools to have therapists

We believe the first step the government needs to take is to ensure that schools have to hire in-school counsellors to support students. While it is compulsory for schools in other parts of the UK and many other countries to have in-school counsellors, it makes no sense that it isn't the same case for England. While we are certain that schools care deeply about students' mental wellbeing, the thing that is of utmost importance to them is exam results. This means that if counsellors aren't compulsory, financially-strapped schools will simply choose to use that money to hire another MFL assistant or a lab technician. This is why we believe that the government should establish a legal requirement for schools in England to provide in-school counsellors for students. Perhaps the government could set apart a budget specifically for schools to hire counsellors, so schools won't feel like it is eating into their budget and wouldn't affect the academic performance of pupils.

Upon speaking with some of the students who responded, we believe the responses could have been slightly skewed as there are students who don't realise that their schools have therapists when they do. This shows that schools need to spend more time and effort educating students on the mental health provisions available to them.

Mental Health Education

In general, our research has found that students find their mental health education at school inadequate. 97.4% of our respondents have responded that they don't believe their school is doing enough to educate them and 99% believe that mental health lessons should be compulsory at schools.

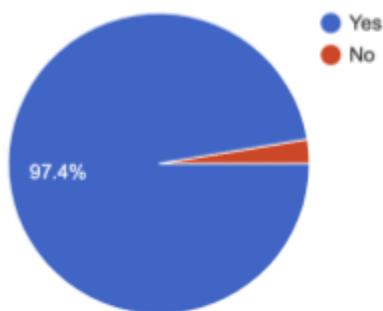


Figure 5 - Whether or not our respondents believe mental health lessons/education are needed in school

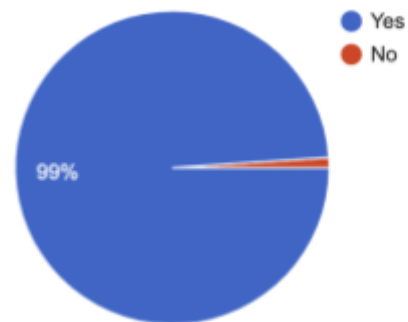


Figure 6 - Whether or not our respondents believe mental health education or lessons are needed at school

After these results came out, we consulted with our school council. Most of the members believed that the PSHE (personal, social, and health education) classes that are compulsory for students in the UK were not useful and a waste of time. They believe that it is tackling the wrong issues and need to focus more on issues that students are fighting.

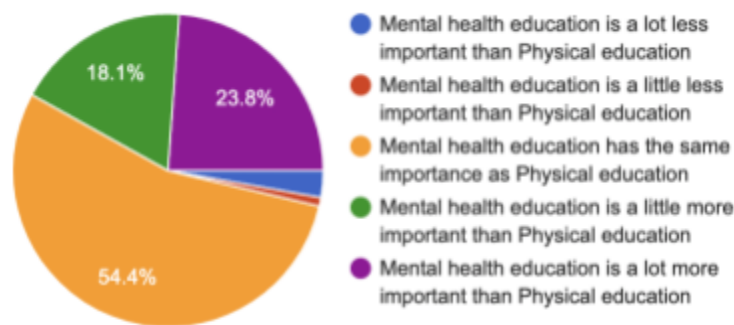


Figure 7 - How our respondents compare the relative importance of mental health education and physical education

Another question we placed on our questionnaire was how important students believe mental health education lessons are, as compared to physical education (PE) lessons. While most of our school council believed that mental health education is a little more important than physical education, our results showed that 54.4% of students believed that mental health education is of equal importance to physical education. Moreover, 18.1% believed mental health education was a little more important than PE, while 23.8% believed it was a lot more important than PE. On the other hand, only 3.7% believed that physical education was either a little or a lot more important than mental health education.

This is why we believe that mental health education lessons should be compulsory for schools. We are not talking about PSHE lectures which happen no more than once a month and don't do much. Students want to learn about topics more in touch with them, such as eating disorders, depression, self-harm and sexual education. Our feedback shows that they want to be able to go more in-depth with all these issues instead of simply hearing a 30-40 minute lecture on them. They also hope there could be a more open and collaborative approach to these teachings, as opposed to the current PSHE education, which doesn't encourage a lot of discussions. These students hope that mental health education lessons could happen as a parallel to physical education lessons. To quote one student, 'I would rather learn about how to cope with having an eating disorder than to learn how to play basketball, which is a sport I will never play again and don't care about.'

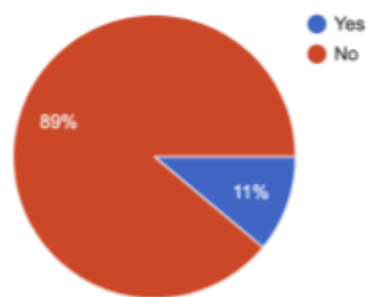


Figure 8 - Whether or not our respondents think that current mental health education is enough at school

Mental Health and Teachers

"One day, I was at a PE lesson at school. I don't know if the teacher knew, but one of my parents had recently left my family. Midway through the lesson, the teacher started berating me and made fun of me for being bad at a sport I have never played before and for being fat. That not only humiliated me in front of my peers but also triggered my eating disorder and depression. However, four years later, the teacher is still working at the school and from what I know, continuing his behaviour. I have reported this problem, but they seem to have labelled his actions as 'character building' and were fine with that behaviour."

That was a direct quote from a member of our school council. This experience is also reflected in our questionnaire. 67.1% of our respondents reported that a teacher has impacted their mental health negatively. This is why 97.7% of them believe that it should be mandatory for

teachers to have training on mental health, while 87.4% believe that teachers need to face a consequence for negatively impacting students' mental health.

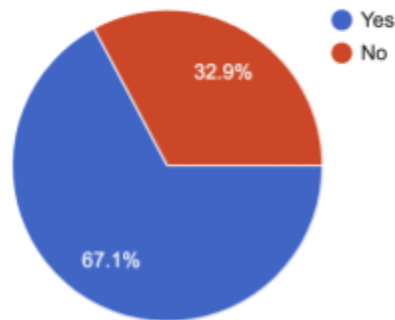


Figure 9 - Whether or not a teacher has impacted our respondent's mental health negatively?

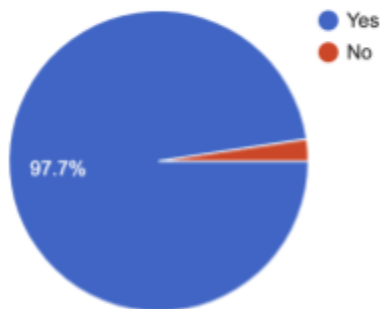


Figure 10 - Whether or not our respondents believe it should be mandatory for teachers to have training on mental health

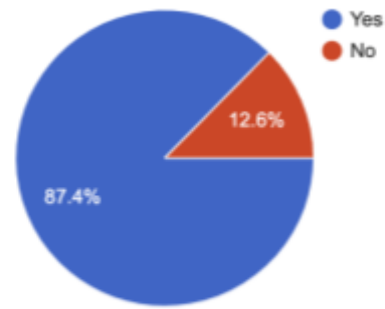


Figure 11 - Whether or not our respondents think teachers should face consequences for negatively impacting students' mental health

We believe that each school needs to properly educate teachers on how their actions or words can impact their students' mental health or be triggering to them. A lot of teachers are still old-fashioned and don't believe in the existence of mental health and won't consider their students' mental health. This is why the government needs to make it compulsory for teachers to receive a certain level of training because it is vital for students to be able to go to school feeling safe. Similarly, teachers also need to be trained on how to handle or assist students who are dealing with mental health issues, such as bullying.

Mental Health and Academic Performance

Academic stress is one of the main causes of mental health problems in teenagers. We don't think it is reasonable to expect schools to eliminate all academic pressure because the purpose of schools is to teach students knowledge and help them achieve top grades. However, the consensus is that the school could still do more without compromising the academic performance of students.

While a certain amount of tests and homework aids the academic development of students, there is a point where their marginal utility decreases so much that it is not worth the extra stress or time for students. It is also suggested that sometimes, tests make it harder for students to set aside time to revise the material as their schedules often have to be interrupted by the tests that they are given. With 35.6% of students believing that they do not have too much academic work (figure 12), this isn't too big of a concern. However, we still believe that most schools could reduce the academic workload of students without seeing a significant drop in results. A few students even suggested that they believe they will achieve better grades as they could revise more productively.

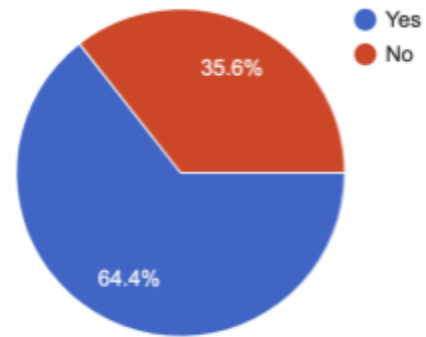


Figure 12 - Whether or not our respondents think they have too many tests or homework

A solution that can reduce the stress of students without decreasing the amount of academic work is via more coordination among teachers. Figure 13 shows that 36.5% of students claimed that they have sometimes been in a situation where tests and homework were clustered together and caused them additional stress. A further 29.4% of students claim it happens often, and 26.6% claim that it happens very often. On the other hand, only 1.9% say it never happened to them. In addition, 95.2% of respondents believe that the situation would improve if there was better coordination between teachers, and spacing out the tests more. 93.8% also believe that their academic performance would improve because of this.

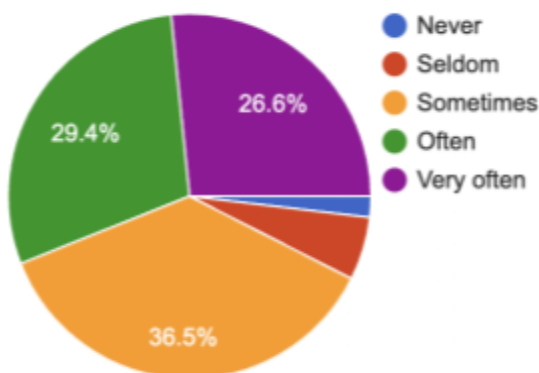


Figure 13 - Whether or not our respondents have been in a situation where tests and homework are clustered together, causing additional stress

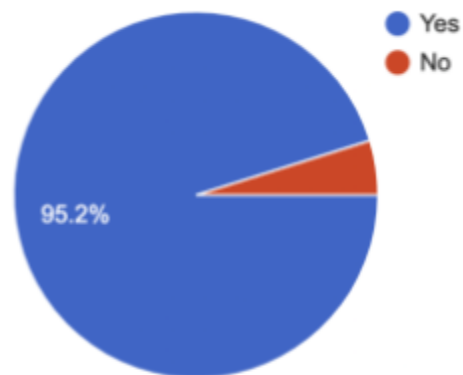


Figure 14 - Whether or not our respondents think their mental health would improve if there is better coordination between teachers

We completely understand how difficult it might be for teachers to coordinate tests or homework, especially in schools where there are different sets and streams. However, we believe this can be easily adopted in younger years where everyone does the same subjects or when lessons are taught in large classes where students have similar timetables. A few of the students complained that their teachers set them tests during the week of their AS exams and weren't reasonable about them when they didn't do well as they spent most of their time revising for their public exams. This is an example of where teachers can be a bit more considerate to make students' lives easier. Some schools also limit the lessons in which teachers can set homework or ask STEM, humanities and languages teachers to set homework on different days of the week. These are all methods that can reduce the stress of students without compromising academic performance.

Mental health and Parents

Unfortunately, 76.8% of our respondents believe that their parents do not have a good enough understanding of mental health and do not know how to support them. 82.8% also believe that mental health is still stigmatised by their parents, such as not being able to talk about it openly.

As much as teachers can do at school, students spend even more time at home. There was a student who told us that while her school therapist at school could help her tackle her mental health problems, it usually all unravels quickly when she goes home. It can be a casual comment that can affect the body image of a teenager, actions that increase their anxiety or more serious cases like verbal or physical abuse.

This is why we believe that parents need to be educated on mental health. If teachers and students have to receive mental health training, parents do too as they are as important in shaping the mental wellbeing of teenagers. Mental Health Notebook has been producing pamphlets for parents to educate them on mental health. However, this is not enough. Schools can host webinars for parents to participate in so that they can be more in touch with what their children are going through and be able to support them more adequately.

Summary

Awareness of the mental health of teenagers has increased as the topic becomes less stigmatised, but there is still a lot of work to be done if we want to ensure that the next generation of teenagers can grow up with minimal mental health issues. We believe that this needs to be approached in different directions, including improving the counselling provisions, mental health education, parent and teacher training, and much more. As teenagers ourselves, we completely understand how our respondents and the students we talked to feel. They are

all issues that are of utmost importance and need to be tackled as soon as possible. Hopefully, politicians will take action in the form of legislation and schoolteachers will improve the mental health provisions at their schools.