

Understanding young people's mental health in 2023: A report by M&S and YoungMinds

Foreword

Barely a day goes by without mental health being in the news. It is a huge issue, and nowhere more so than among young people. It consistently tops the list of issues M&S customers and colleagues across the nation say they care strongly about, and YoungMinds know that 42% of young people are struggling to cope.

In May this year, the NHS reported a record high in the number of urgent referrals to crisis teams¹. In just one month, 3,732 young people were urgently referred, three times more than in the same month in 2019. May was not an anomaly – numbers have been this high for some time.

M&S and YoungMinds have launched a new partnership to raise awareness of the help available to young people struggling with their mental health and provide funding and support for vital resources aimed at young people and the adults in their lives.

To support the new partnership M&S and YoungMinds commissioned new research to better understand young people's mental health. This report looks at what we found and explains what actions we can all take to help. One of the saddest findings is that despite struggling with their mental health, 65% of young people hadn't asked for any kind of formal support and 33% of those said they felt too embarrassed to ask. That's a tragedy but is something that we can help with.

Too many young people are reaching crisis point and we want to help stop that. While the research findings paint a bleak picture, we believe there is still cause for optimism. There's a role all of us can play by having more and better conversations with young people which make clear that help is available, and they are not alone.

That's why M&S and YoungMinds have teamed up to help get more support to more young people, more quickly. Working together the partnership aims to raise £5m over the next three years, and M&S has kickstarted this with a £1m corporate donation.

£5m will double the number of young people, and the adults in their lives supported by YoungMinds to 7 million people, primarily through digital resources and the Parents Helpline. M&S will also help its 30 million customers and 60,000 colleagues understand more about mental health and feel able to have better conversations with young people, and the adults in their lives, who may be struggling.

We want to build a coalition of the hopeful and say to young people: Together, we've got this.



Laura Bunt
Chief Executive, YoungMinds



Victoria McKenzie-Gould
Corporate Affairs Director, Marks & Spencer

Lily, age 24:

"I truly believe that had I got the help I needed when I needed it, rather than several years down the line, that I wouldn't have struggled nearly as much as I have.

"Having help would have given me the tools and the time to be able to heal and would have allowed me to live my life".

Introduction

This report looks to better understand young people's mental health across the UK in 2023. Through this research we want to shine a light on what causes young people to struggle with their mental health, how they seek support, and the broader impact this has on their lives.

We surveyed a nationally representative sample of more than two thousand young people aged 16-24 who are struggling with their mental health, to understand:

- What were the causes of their poor mental health.
- If and how they were seeking support.
- The impact of their mental health on education, employment, and their social lives and relationships.
- How long they were having to wait for support.
- What was happening to their mental health while waiting for support.

Understanding young people's mental health in 2023

Despite struggling with their mental health, 65% of young people hadn't asked for any kind of formal support.

Of those that didn't seek support, 33% said it was because they were too embarrassed. Despite the huge rise in awareness of mental health, especially among young people, it is a timely reminder that there is still work to be done to reduce stigma and remove barriers for those seeking help.

22% said they didn't try because they didn't think they would get support, 11% said waiting times were too long and 21% said they weren't sure what support might be available. 6% said their family didn't want them to seek support.

35% told us they had sought some kind of formal support for their mental health. 62% went to their GP or another part of the NHS for support, 33% approached their school, college or university and 16% sought support from a charity or in a community setting such as a youth centre or early support hub.

Loneliness is the biggest cause of mental health problems in young people with 44% saying loneliness had a negative impact on their mental health.

We asked young people what factors had a negative impact on their mental health. Loneliness was the most common cause, cited by 44% of people who struggled with their mental health in the past three months.

Close behind loneliness were financial pressures (39%), family issues (35%), school pressures (34%) and future life chances (31%).

Still significant were social media (28%), romantic relationships (24%) and, although lower than comparable surveys in recent years, young people are still feeling the after effects of the Covid-19 pandemic (20%).

Of those struggling with financial pressures, we asked whether they had seen these pressures worsen in the past six months. 96% agreed that they had, indicating that the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis continue to be felt.

The impacts on young people while they await mental health support are wide ranging and can have a significant effect on aspects of their lives.

61% of those waiting for mental health support had stopped attending school, college, university, or work.

It's clear from the data that this isn't a matter of a few days here and there. Of those who stopped going to school, university or work, significant proportions reported long-term absences:

- **School:** 58% missed more than two weeks of school, 42% missed more than a month and 20% missed more than six months.
- **University:** 74% missed more than two weeks of university, 53% missed more than a month and over one in five (21%) missed more than six months.
- **Work:** 59% missed more than two weeks of work, 39% missed more than a month and 13% missed more than six months.

Alongside the impacts on academic achievement, not going to school often leaves young people feeling isolated from friends. These issues often compound with people returning to school feeling more pressure to catch-up academically leaving them feeling more isolated.

More than three-quarters (76%) said that while waiting for support, they stopped exercising, doing leisure activities and hobbies, or seeing friends.

Over half (52%) said they experienced problems in their relationships, such as with family or romantic partners.

Seeing friends and family, doing things you enjoy, and exercising can be incredibly protective for your mental health. The impact of missing out on these experiences can be huge for a young person who is already struggling.

Missing out on school can also have far-reaching consequences that go beyond the impact on education. Of those young people who stopped going to school because of their mental health, around six in ten (59%) said it made them feel isolated from their friends and almost half (47%) said it made them worried about their future.

Nicole, age 19:

"I no longer saw friends, participated in hobbies, went to the shops, family traditions were all lost in the haze of mental illness. I felt as if my whole existence and identity revolved around A&E visits, multi-disciplinary meetings and fearing the illnesses that became all consuming."

Erin, age 17:

"Over my last two years of secondary school, I seemed to spend more time out of school than in. I would have panic attacks nearly every day. I missed out a lot with friendships and felt further isolated."

Lily, age 24:

"During my last year at school I missed quite a few days due to my mental health. I dropped hobbies and seeing friends so I could concentrate my energy on school."

A fifth of young people wait more than six months for help. While waiting, 41% said that their mental health got worse.

While 48% of those who sought help received some within a month, 21% waited longer than six months and 14% waited longer than a year.

The data also showed that 87% of those waiting for formal support sought help online while they were waiting, with mixed results.

While 38% found the online support they were looking for, almost half (47%) said the support they were looking for wasn't available. Worryingly, 30% found unhelpful content online and a significant minority (12%) experienced harmful content online.

Of the young people who sought support, four in ten (41%) said their mental health got worse while they were waiting.

When asked about specific symptoms:

- 62% said they isolated themselves from friends and/or family
- 36% became aggressive or violent towards others
- 51% experienced suicidal thoughts
- 27% harmed themselves

Nicole, age 19:

"Waiting for suitable mental health support meant that my whole life felt like it was paused and erased. I was left without suitable support, and my mental health left to deteriorate."

Conclusion

These results paint a bleak picture of the challenges young people face when they struggle with their mental health.

In a world where young people are in some ways more connected than ever before, it is striking that loneliness is the most common reason for young people to struggle with their mental health. Our research also shows that those who are struggling often don't get the support they need. For many this results from failing to seek support in the first place, while extended wait times for accessing support are also commonplace.

As a consequence, the impacts both to the individuals affected and society as a whole are significant and wide ranging. A large proportion of our respondents reported missing out on education and/or employment, in addition to their social and personal lives suffering. And for many, the wait for the right support caused a further deterioration in mental health.

But despite this, we believe that there is cause for optimism. Through our partnership, we aim to:

1. Kickstart a broader conversation so that young people do not feel alone with their mental health, and the adults in their lives have the tools they need to recognise and respond when a young person needs help.
2. Fund the expansion of YoungMinds services so that they can double the number of people they support through:
 - a. Supporting young people directly with online resources and on social media
 - b. Supporting adults with online resources and the Parents Helpline
 - c. Campaigning for better support for young people's mental health
3. Create a coalition of the hopeful - working with M&S customers and colleagues, and stakeholders across government, civil society, and business to improve the situation for young people and champion solutions.

This bold, ambitious partnership imagines a better future for young people's mental health. There is a lot to do, but there is so much opportunity to help. Together, we've got this.

ⁱ <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-services-monthly-statistics/performance-may-provisional-june-2023>

Appendix

Results

65% of young people who struggled with their mental health didn't ask for any kind of support.

- 65% struggled but didn't ask for any kind of formal support.
- Of that 65%, 33% were too embarrassed to ask for support.
- 35% had sought some kind of formal support for their mental health.
- 72% got little to no support.

Loneliness is the most common factor for young people struggling with their mental health.

- Loneliness was the top cause with 44% saying loneliness has had a negative impact on their mental health.
- Close behind loneliness were financial pressures (39%), family issues (35%), school pressures (34%) and future life chances (31%).

61% of those waiting for mental health support had stopped attending school, college, university, or work.

- Of those young people who stopped going to school because of their mental health, 59% said it made them feel isolated from their friends and 47% said it made them worried about their future.

76% of young people said that while waiting for support they stopped exercising, doing leisure activities and hobbies, or seeing friends.

- 52% said they experienced problems in their relationships, such as with family or romantic partners.

A fifth of young people wait more than six months for help. While waiting, 41% said that their mental health got worse.

- 21% waited longer than six months for support.
- 14% waited longer than a year.
- 41% of young people said their mental health got worse whilst they were waiting for support.