

Mental Health Support in Schools Action Research Group

Final Report, May 2014

Recommendations:

1. Make mental health training mandatory for all staff in Children and Families. Thus, improving the training and support offered to teachers about how mental health affects young people.
2. Increased level of information about mental health for teachers and young people in schools.
3. Improve the signposting of services for young people, so they know where to get help when they need it.
4. Meet and report back actions in 6 months (Dec 2014)

Background:

In September 2013 Edinburgh Youth Issues Forum held a youth “Gathering” where young people identified issues that were most important for young people in Edinburgh and which they would like to research further. After voting, the three top issues were:



- mental health support in schools
- poverty and inequality
- the state of our schools.

Subsequently, City of Edinburgh Council’s Young People’s Participation Team has supported three groups of young people to undertake an action research process exploring one of these topics. This brief report gives an overview of the process and outcomes of the young people’s action research group looking at mental health support in schools.

The group

The group was made up of 9 young people (6 young women and 3 young men) ranging in age from 13-17 and 3 members of staff including 2 young modern apprentices. All of the young people were recruited through emails sent out to young people on the Edinburgh Youth Issues Forum database and to schools and youth organisations.

The process

This action research process has 4 stages:

- ***Think*** about “mental health support in schools” and about why this issue is important for young people in Edinburgh
- ***Investigate*** the current situation and what people think about this issue
- ***Create a resource*** to share what we have learned

- **Make recommendations** to the people who make decisions about mental health support in schools.

After spending several meetings discussing the issue the group decided upon two research questions upon which they wanted to focus:

- What can be done to improve awareness, information and education for young people and teachers about mental health?
- Why is mental health stigmatised and what can be done to de-stigmatise it?

We decided that it was important to ask both students and teachers about this issue and we developed the research questions into a set of questions for each of these groups. At first we wanted to have a questionnaire for teachers and a discussion for students, but after having a run-through of a group discussion we decided that it would take too long and decided to split the questions for students into an individual questionnaire and a group discussion. Each member of the group took both questionnaires to hand out at their school and tried to enlist the help of one of their teachers to run a group discussion.

The group read all of the survey responses and used them to create the radio play discussed towards the end of this report. What follows is a discussion of the results from these questionnaires and group discussions. Whilst informed by discussions with the group, due to time constraints this discussion is written by the member of staff supporting the group. This is an exploratory piece of action research conducted with limited resources and the results are presented here purely to stimulate discussion about the topic of mental health support in schools. We do not claim that these results are representative or statistically valid.

Findings from the action research:



Young people's group discussions

In total five group discussions were conducted in 4 different schools for the action research. Although group members reported that there was good discussion at these sessions, the recording from them was not consistent and much of the discussion was lost. A learning point for future research would be to either find extra resources for the group themselves to facilitate these discussions or to consider providing teachers with a pro-forma for recording the sessions.

Some brief overall points that could be gathered from the research are:

- When asked what mental health is, young people provided a long list of conditions and illnesses related to mental ill-health. The action research group was impressed by the range of answers given to this question but noted that almost all of the answers related to mental ill-health and only one group mentioned positive mental health.
- Each of the groups gave a list of ways that you might tell if someone has a mental health problem. The most common of these were
 - Becoming quiet and/or withdrawn
 - Changes in behaviour

- Seeming sad
- All of the groups said that mental health is represented negatively in the media but three of the five groups said that they thought that the representation of mental health was getting better.



Young people's questionnaire

We received 124 responses to the survey from young people aged from 12-18 years old. Sixty-nine of the respondents were female, fifty-one were male, two were gender-fluid¹ and one did not state a gender.

Q1 Do you feel comfortable talking about mental health?

Headlines:

Do you feel comfortable talking about mental health?	Overall %(number of respondents)	% of young women (number of respondents)	% of young men (number of respondents)	% of gender-fluid (number of respondents)
Yes	70.2% (87)	63.8% (44)	80.4% (41)	50% (1)
No	14.5% (18)	15.9% (11)	13.7% (7)	
It depends	8.1% (10)	8.7% (6)	5.9% (3)	50% (1)
Don't know	3.2% (4)	4.3% (3)	2.0% (1)	

Discussion:

"I wouldn't say it's my fave subject to talk about, but it is a serious issue that we must talk about" (f17)

The large majority of young people said that they felt comfortable talking about mental health. In their explanations there was a strong normative sense that it is important to talk about mental health. Young people believe that it is important to talk about mental health is in order to normalise it, to help people get help and not to think of people who have mental health problems as "different".

"yes (I feel comfortable talking about mental health) because it's a part of life" (f14)

"I do (feel comfortable talking about mental health). I think there should be more emphasis on mental health being something that it is ok to talk about, I don't feel like there are any safe places to tell about it without being judged." (m15)

¹ One of these two respondents defined gender-fluid as "a non-binary individual whose gender changes from male to female to outside the gender binary".

However, there was some sense that whilst mental health *should* be easy to talk about it isn't always. A distinction was made by many of the respondents about talking about their own mental health and talking about either the mental health of others or mental health in a more abstract sense. Many of the young people who said that they felt comfortable talking about mental health said that this was the case because they don't have a problem with their mental health. Conversely several of the minority of young people who said that they don't feel comfortable talking about mental health said that they have experienced mental health problems or their family have experienced mental health problems.

"No (I don't feel comfortable talking about mental health) probably because mental health affects me, talking about it makes me kind of depressed" (f14)

Others who said that they didn't feel comfortable talking about mental health, mentioned either that they didn't want to unintentionally offend anyone or that they didn't feel that they had enough information to talk about it.

"I feel slightly uncomfortable as I don't want to offend anyone" (f14)

However others saw talking as a way to get important information and to learn about mental health.

"It's important to learn about mental health and talk about it because the more you know about it the less likely you're going to treat someone who has mental health problems differently and stereotype them as 'crazy'" (f14)

Several young people said that whether or not they felt comfortable depended upon who it was that they were talking to and how close they were to that person.

"It depends who I'm talking to. I could talk to my family and closest friends because I feel like they'd understand." (f14)

Q2: Who or where would you go if you had a mental health problem? Why?



Headlines:

(Note: some young people gave multiple responses to this question and therefore the percentages do not add up to 100.)

Who or where would you go.	Overall % (number of respondents)	% of young women (number of respondents)	% of young men (number of respondents)	% of gender-fluid (number of respondents)
Family	46.0% (57)	53.6% (37)	37.3% (19)	50% (1)
Medical help	37.1% (46)	33.3% (23)	45.1% (23)	
Teacher	31.5% (39)	36.2% (25)	25.5% (13)	50% (1)
Friends	15.3% (19)	21.7% (15)	7.8% (4)	
No-one	4% (5)	4.3% (3)	3.9% (2)	
Don't know	3.2% (4)	1.4% (1)	5.9% (3)	

Discussion:

Family (and more specifically parents) were the most commonly mentioned people that young people mentioned that they would ask for help if they had a mental health problem. Some young people said that they would not want to talk to anyone outside of their immediate family.

“My mum, I don’t feel comfortable knowing someone else knows a mental fault of mine if they are not a close friend or family” (m15)

Other young people said that telling family members might be a first step towards getting help from outside the family.

“I would first go to my family so I could get help and encouragement, then I would go to the doctors” (f15)

However, several young people stated that they would not speak to their family because they would not want to worry them and one young person who has a mental health issue said that he doesn’t want his parents to know.

“I have a mental health issue and I would like to feel comfortable to go somewhere to talk about it but I wouldn’t like my parents to find out. There needs to be more emphasis on it being ok.” (m15)

The most commonly mentioned teacher that young people would talk to was their guidance teacher, although others mentioned a specific teacher with whom they had a good relationship. The most commonly mentioned medical professional that young people mentioned was their GP closely followed by the school nurse, but small numbers of young people also mentioned counsellors, specialist mental health services and hospitals. Other places mentioned by individual young people included specific places that they went to calm down, organisations including “See Me” “The Junction” and youth groups.

The most common factors that young people mentioned about why they would choose a particular person to ask for help were:

- That they thought that person would know about their problem and be able to help
- That they had a strong existing relationship with that person and feel comfortable with them
- That they trusted that person and thought that they would keep the information confidential

“I would talk to my parents and they would help me because they know me well and would be able to know where my best interests lay. I trust them to help me get better by being there for me” (f15)

Q3: If you found out that someone has a mental health problem, do you think that your opinion of them would change? If so, how would it change?

Headlines:

Would your opinion change?	Overall % (number of respondents)	% of young women (number of respondents)	% of young men (number of respondents)	% of gender-fluid (number of respondents)
No	66.9% (83)	68.1% (47)	66.7% (34)	50% (1)
Yes	19.4% (24)	20.3% (14)	19.6% (10)	
It depends	5.6% (7)	1.4% (1)	9.8% (5)	50% (1)
Don't know	5.6% (7)	4.3% (3)	7.8% (4)	

Discussion:

The responses to this question are somewhat ambiguous because, with hindsight, the question could be clearer and could, in particular, take into account the distinction between opinion and behaviour.

Some young people clearly make this distinction in their answers and suggest that while their opinion of the person would not change their behaviour to them may change. In almost all of these incidents young people said that their behaviour would change to become more supportive, although two young people said that they would be cautious or wary towards the person.

“My opinion of them wouldn’t change but I’d try to watch what I say and do to make sure that I don’t hurt their feelings and cause them any problems.” (f14)

A majority of the young people who said that their opinion would change actually described behaviour changes with a supportive intention.

“Being truthful I think it would change. I would become more aware that they are at a difficult time in their lives. I would be more conscious about how I act towards them.” (f17)

Others suggested that they would be impressed that the person was being honest about their mental health and would develop a new level of respect for them.

“Yes, I would have more respect for them because I think it would be hard for them to open up and share the information.” (f15)

However, a small number of young people admitted that they might feel less comfortable around the person and that their opinion would change in a negative way.

“Yes it would – because somehow I am influenced by the stereotypes.” (f17)

Of the majority of young people who said that their opinion would not change, many said that the person was still the same person and that their illness should not change how we think about them.

“My opinion wouldn’t change. Who they are is not defined by their illness.” (f16)

“No, because if they are already my friend what does it matter?” (m14)

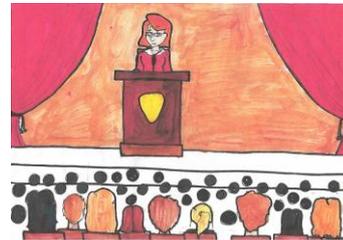
The young people who said that ‘it depends’ whether their opinion would change cited the seriousness of the problem and the closeness of their relationship to the person as the factors that would affect their opinion.

Several young people cited situations in their lives where this situation has already arisen. One young man said:

“I would be worried and I am worried for some of my friends. I worry that they will do something they regret, but my opinion of their character wouldn’t change.” (m15)

Teacher’s Questionnaire

Forty-seven teachers (9 of them guidance teachers) from 5 different schools completed the questionnaire. A brief overview of the responses is given below.



What do you think mental health is?

Where students were more likely to list different mental health issues, all of the teachers provided a conceptual answer to the question. The most common theme in these answers was that mental health is about how people “think and feel” or that it is about how people manage in their day-to-day lives.. More than half of the teachers specifically mentioned that mental health can be positive or negative.

“Emotional wellbeing and state of mind. A sliding scale with lots of variables - positive and negative.”

If a student came to you when they were upset or if you saw a student who was not their usual self, what would you do?

40/57 teachers said that the first thing that they would do would be to talk to the student and try to find out what was wrong. Of these 40, 22 specifically mentioned that listening to the student was the most important thing that they could do.

“Allow them to talk, listen to them, discuss the issues and support them in seeking appropriate help.”

35/57 teachers said that they would probably refer the student on to someone else – either immediately or after they had spoken to them. The most common person that they would refer on to was guidance staff, followed by the Head of Year. One teacher said that she would speak to the student’s friends and ask them if there was anything wrong. Several teachers said that they would support the student to get specialist help for their mental health issue.

Do you feel comfortable talking about mental health? Why?

All 57 of the teachers said that they feel comfortable talking about mental health, although a few qualified this by saying that they would not feel comfortable talking about their own mental health except with people who they are close to.

“Yes - I spend a lot of time talking openly and frankly about depression, low mood, self-harm etc. I have lots of experience, training and great colleagues to support me.”

In answering why they feel comfortable talking about mental health the most common answers were:

- The importance of talking about mental health with students
- Reference to personal circumstances including having family or friends who have either experienced mental health difficulties or worked in the field of mental health support
- A sense that there is increasing openness about mental health and that the stigma around mental ill-health is decreasing

“Yes, totally. MH is such an important issue for young people and I think we should all be more receptive when people are finding things difficult. My best friend from school took his own life despite appearing to be a successful surgeon. If talking helps we should do more.”

How do you get information, and do you have enough, about mental health?

Where do you get information?	Percentage (number of respondents)
Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and other professional training	(21)
Specialist organisations and staff	(19)
Internet	(17)
Media	(8)
Personal contacts	(5)

Few of the teachers directly answered the question of whether they had enough information about mental health, with the majority simply stating how they get their information. A few teachers said that it is never possible to have enough information. Nine teachers stated that they would like to have more training about mental health issues.

Is there a need to have more mental health support in schools? If so do you have any ideas about how your school could improve its mental health support?

Thirty-two of the forty-seven teachers that responded said that there was a need for more mental health support in schools. Another seven teachers said that it was difficult to know how much support the school needed or that there could never be too much support in schools. Only five of the forty-seven teachers said that they thought that their school had sufficient support for its students regarding mental health issues. Another four teachers did not feel qualified to answer this question.

There was a perception that as it becomes easier for people to talk about mental health then more students will be identified as having a mental health problem and therefore more support will be needed. Several teachers cautioned about the danger of placing pressure upon teachers to provide additional support.

“Yes we need more support but it needs to come from outside, teachers don’t have time to provide support without it affecting our own mental health.”

The most common suggestions for the types of support that schools needed were:

- Specialists coming in to school and running workshops for students
- More training for staff (4 teachers suggested that CPD on mental health issues should be compulsory for all staff)
- More specialist staff (particularly counsellors)
- A more open culture where staff and students can have open discussions about mental health

How might you notice someone has a mental health problem?

Teachers gave a wide range of answers to this question but there were some common themes. The most common answers related to:

- Low mood
- Changes in behaviour/social interaction/academic performance
- Becoming withdrawn
- Mood-swings

Eight out of the forty-seven teachers noted that it is very difficult to tell if a student has a mental health problem and two teachers said that the only way that you can really tell is by talking to the student.

“By being more aware. People with mental health issues look normal, or most do.”

How do you think mental health is portrayed in media/society?

The general sense from this question was that the way that mental health is portrayed in the media is improving but that it is still generally negative and that there is a long way to go. Several teachers talked about how the portrayal is inconsistent with, for example, interesting documentaries about mental health but then comedy programmes that portray people with mental health problems as people to be laughed at.

Several teachers perceived that there has been an increase in public campaigns to educate people about mental health issues and the “See Me” campaign was mentioned by 6 teachers as a particularly positive example of mental health issues in the media.

“I think See Me is an excellent campaign. It reminds people to think about the person rather than the mental health problem. It’s a shame that the rest of the media isn’t so enlightened.”

Radio Play

The group decided that they wanted to create a radio play to share the key messages from their learning on this project. After writing the script, they recorded the play and one of the group members drew pictures to animate the play.

The key message that the group wanted to get across was about the importance of communication. The radio play encourages people to think about how they could best support a person who may be experiencing difficulties with their mental health. It also encourages young people to think about what they could do if they were experiencing a mental health problem. It emphasises the importance of listening and of not making assumptions about people.

A script of the play is available on request. The play can be accessed online at:

<http://vimeo.com/95219980#at=1>

Evaluation

At the last group meeting the group did a brief evaluation of the project. The outcomes can be seen below:

Things I liked about the group:

- We all contributed ideas
- Get to act immature
- Lots of laughter
- Everyone listened to each other
- Great achievement
- Co-operated with each other
- Met new people
- Very productive
- Got to know people quickly
- Good sized group
- Have fun
- Have a laugh
- Had fun
- Got some interesting info which could benefit people in the future
- Met nice people

Things that could have been improved:

- Need to have more time
- My voice in the radio play
- Meetings more weekly
- Jason Derulo
- Meetings more often

Staff running the group were consistently impressed by the commitment shown by group members and the level of discussion about mental health support in schools. The group members' positive attitude meant that we successfully completed the project in a tight timescale and developed a thought-provoking product, whilst also having a lot of fun.

Christina McMellon

on behalf of the

Mental Health support in Schools Action Research Group

Art work by Alicja Stachura