



# Young people's mental health:

## Impact of Covid-19

This programme of work has been funded by STV Children's Appeal, and as part of our delivery Youth Scotland and Place2Be have been speaking with young people and youth workers to find out how Covid-19 and the public health restrictions that have been put in place to deal with the pandemic, have affected their lives.

### Summary of key findings

#### It's a mixed picture with both positives and negatives

Unsurprisingly, our findings echo many which have been widely reported elsewhere and indicate that overall Covid-19 has had a negative impact on young people's lives.

However, a binary positive or negative assessment fails to account for the complex views which young people expressed to us regarding their experiences of the pandemic.

The impact of social restrictions was generally identified as being more of an issue for young people than concerns about the virus itself. Approximately 10% of young people told us they were either 'very anxious' or 'not anxious' i.e. at both ends of the scale. The overall majority were clustered around a neutral response.

There seemed to be a difference in young people's views when asking them to reflect on their experiences during the pandemic versus asking them to think about the impact it will have on their future. While the majority were not particularly anxious about Covid-19 itself, this was not the case when asked to think about their future. Approximately 70% reported being concerned about the impact of Covid-19 on their future, particularly relating to employment and financial security for them and their families.

There was also a strong indication that young people's experience changed over time. For some the novelty factor wore off (e.g. being off school) and for others they began to enjoy opportunities arising from the situation (e.g. spending quality time with their family). This clearly had health and wellbeing implications for each individual.

#### Returning to 'normal' will bring its own issues

Many young people indicated they want to life to return to normal as soon as possible. However, approximately 30% said they were anxious about the prospect of returning to school or work, largely due to fears around *"all the change and uncertainty"*.

Nevertheless, young people expressed concerns about returning to situations that pre-

Covid were not positive. This included those experiencing issues with bullying and pre-existing mental health conditions (which had worsened during the crisis).

## Mental health impacts are complicated

We learned the mental health impact of this crisis is likely to affect young people in different ways. There are those who have clearly struggled throughout the crisis:

*"I hated lockdown for it has made life much more difficult now"*

*"I got into bad routines, became lazy and less motivated for anything!"*

Returning to normal will pose its own challenges for young people in this position through having to re-establish routines and relationships that were lost or changed during lockdown. There are also young people who benefited from changes in their lives such as being able to spend more time with their family which has now been taken away from them due to returning to school/education. There is another group of young people for whom Covid-19 has deprived them of important milestones and transitions in their lives which can never be replaced:

*"I like school and not being able to go made me miss lots of things that happen in school at the end of the term which I won't get the chance to do again"*

The effects on young people's mental health are likely to be different depending on their experience. For some of the young people we spoke to they did not necessarily think of the impacts of Covid-19 in terms of their mental health as such but spoke of their "upset" and "anger" at how their lives had been affected. Several shared their family had noticed changes in their mood compared to pre-lockdown. From a youth work perspective, it is essential that these young people, who themselves don't recognise the effect of this crisis on their mental health, are able to access informal community-based support. This will be vital to prevent issues that could be addressed if caught early becoming more significant in their lives in future, especially given the demand already placed on targeted mental health services.

## What we need to remember...

Within young people's feedback it was possible to identify that even amidst the various examples of the toll the pandemic has taken, there are those who have found positives and benefits arising from the crisis. This is an important reminder for all those who are working with young people to avoid adopting the tempting view that everything about the pandemic was all bad for all young people. It is essential that – as with all good youth work practice – we start from where young people are and seek to understand the individual stories of young people's lives during the Covid-19 pandemic. From that starting point, and with trained and well-supported youth workers, we can ensure that young people's mental health is nurtured and supported to overcome the issues caused by this crisis.

# What we learned from young people

## Context

As part of our work together, funded by the STV Children's Appeal, Youth Scotland and Place2Be have been exploring the impact of Covid-19 on young people's mental health and wellbeing. We have been speaking with youth workers and young people to find out how Covid-19 and the public health restrictions put in place to deal with the pandemic, have affected their lives. As part of this work, we have also provided and evaluated training for youth workers in mental health awareness through Place2Be's Mental Health Champions – Foundation online training course.

We have captured young people's views and thoughts and collated these into a number of themes which help to describe the impact of Covid-19 on their lives. These are explored in the coming pages.

## Family and home-life

Lockdown required young people to spend more time at home with their families than they would have under 'normal' circumstances. From the feedback we received, this had different effects on young people and this changed as lockdown continued. 64% of young people reported that they could relate to the statement *'I enjoyed spending much more time with my family'* while 16% could not relate to this characterisation of lockdown. Some young people had a positive experience being able to spend more time with their families:

*"Family life actually improved. Some stress had gone and at first it was OK to spend more time together."*

*"We went on holiday at the end of lockdown and that was alright"*

*"We got to know each other more (as a family), I found out more about my brothers and sister and my mum"*

When asked in our survey about their positive moments from lockdown, the most popular response (approximately 25% of responses) referenced spending time/doing activities with family:

*"Being able to sit down and watch a movie with my family every night and spend time together"*

*"games/movie nights with my family"*

While this feedback was really encouraging and demonstrates a benefit for these young people arising from the situation, there were other young people whose experience was very different:

*"my parents were so grumpy all the time"*

*"I fell out with my family and been kicked out of home"*

*"staying at home was almost a welcome idea at first but I soon came to hate it"*

*"Covid has not been good for me with all the family stuck in the house together. There have been lots of arguments. I felt horrible as I had to bottle stuff up because I couldn't go out with my friends. I talk to my friends a lot to get things off my chest and couldn't do that. It was a horrible time."*

*"not seeing grandparents is horrible"*

While the majority of young people told us they enjoyed spending more time with their family this was somewhat contradicted by the spread of responses to the perception of finding 'being at home a lot less stressful'. 45% felt that this reflected their experience but 36% indicated that being at home during lockdown was more stressful. Although we were unable to explore the reasons for this, it could indicate that differences in the types of relationships between young people and family versus young people and friends can affect their mood or wellbeing. Supporting young people in managing their relationships is a fundamental aspect of good quality youth work. These findings would suggest that this is an area where young people may need more support, particularly regarding family relationships and how this impacts on their mental wellbeing.

## Friends and relationships

For those young people who were not having a positive family experience the loss of normal social contact with their friends and peers compounded effects of lockdown in their lives. Not having close friends that young people could see in person appears to have been a significant challenge. While 70% of young people told us that they used video-calling options to keep in touch with friends, this did not provide the same quality experience and relationship which also brought its own issues and uncertainty:

*"online calls were good but some people did not call others and you weren't sure whether to call them"*

*"1<sup>st</sup> month was OK not seeing friends. We kept in touch by phone and Xbox but eventually really needed to get out and see people."*

*"lockdown has made my life very boring and not able to meet my friends upset me"*

*"boring and boring during the lockdown. I hated it and couldn't meet my friends"*

*"I felt lonely"*

As well as being important sources of emotional support with regards to mental health and wellbeing, it was clear that for some of the young people we spoke to, their friends also help them in other aspects of their wellbeing:

*"I got into bad routines, became lazy and less motivated for anything! My parents made me get up and do things but they were working. It was my friends that got me to meet up and stuff."*

*"I was happy to be at home. I needed to do things but just couldn't get motivated. I got lazy and sometimes I wouldn't get up till the afternoon and then couldn't be bothered. It was better when we started to meet friends again because I needed to be somewhere else."*

Perhaps not unsurprisingly, these findings reinforce our ideas on the vitally important role that friendship plays in enabling good mental wellbeing. While our findings with regards to family relationships shows more of a mixed picture which varies across different young people, it is clear that for a majority of young people Covid-19 has had a detrimental effect on the quality of their friendships. Although digital communication has mitigated the impact, the general perspective we have seen from those we spoke to indicates that it is not a suitable substitute for face-to-face relationships with friends, particularly for the length of time that social restrictions have been in place. This also reinforces the vital role which community-based youth groups play in young people's lives in providing safe spaces for young people to meet their friends.

## Motivation and activities

The support of friends was important for some young people in staying motivated or finding their motivation. The theme of motivation and how the pandemic has impacted on this came across strongly in young people's feedback, particularly how this changed over time:

*"I started off doing my schoolwork but that soon stopped and I got lazy"*

*"it has affected my sports. I love sports and every night I am doing something but all my clubs shut down and I couldn't do anything. My mental health has definitely been affected and my mum says I am really grumpy just now. I really hated it."*

*"It was fine at first, but then just got boring"*

For young people who are very active, either socially or through activities, the sudden and sustained loss of these was clearly a factor affecting their wellbeing:

*"I am never in so at lockdown I couldn't get out and that made me very angry and unhappy"*

*"I am an outdoor person. I had never been just at home all the time. I had to adjust to cope with not being able to be out all the time."*

*"I didn't like not being able to go out to play as normal"*

We did also find that some young people used the time they had during lockdown to try new things with 45% reporting that they 'did something creative'. 53% also reported that they used exercise and physical activity to cope with the circumstances. From what

young people have told us it is clear that – albeit not universal – lockdown and in particular the length of time it was in place for, has had a detrimental effect on their motivation. We know that this can also lead to negative mental health consequences as well.

## A digital life

While digital communication with friends was one way in which young people tried to cope with lockdown, we found that there was an overall (self-reported) increase in young people's screen time. From those we surveyed, as well as video-calling their friends (70%), 74% told us they coped by spending more time watching TV and 51% spent more time playing online games - *"I loved lockdown – loads of time to play Fortnite"*. Overall, young people said they spent an average of 8 hours per day on screen. While some people spent very little hours on screen (0-3 hours) and others spent most of their day (15-17 hours), the majority were clustered around this average. With no pre Covid-19 data to compare this with we cannot say for certain what impact this has. However, pre Covid-19 we know that more young people would be likely to balance their screen time with other activities which were not available during lockdown. Given the issues we identified around motivation, it will be important going forward that young people are supported to find the right balance of activities that support their mental wellbeing.

## School / Education / Work

It was obvious from the outset of lockdown that there would be a significant impact of Covid-19 on young people's education given the closure of schools from March until August. What came across strongly from the young people we spoke to is that this has affected people in many different ways. For the majority this has been a negative effect but we cannot lose sight of those young people for whom there were positive effects of schools being closed. This was reflected in our survey response where the majority of people (70%) were 'not anxious' or 'neutral' about returning to school/education/work. Where a positive view was expressed, 'friends' was an important aspect in young people's this positive view around return to school:

*"because I am with all of my friends and I feel safe around them."*

*"I'm looking forward to seeing my friends"*

Other key aspects were about getting back to a routine and doing activities that were normal pre-Covid:

*"I am so glad to be back at school and sport as it was starting to affect my mental health"*

However, even where young people reported a largely positive view, there was still evidence of a mix of emotions from the majority of young people we spoke with.



*"I am excited to get back into a routine but anxious that it might not be safe and I could pass something on to a vulnerable family member."*

Many still shared a number of concerns with the remaining 30% who reported being 'anxious' at the thought. This was largely due to concerns about mixing with other people, potentially greater exposure to the virus and also 'carrying' the virus back to their families:

*"(I) will be mixing more with others"*

*"I'm worried about catching (it) because I have asthma and our school is very busy"*

*"In case I go to college and someone passes it on to me and take it back home to my grandparents with underlying health conditions"*

Within this theme, there are several common aspects around 'change', 'loss', and 'fear' to draw out from what young people told us. This gives an insight into the complexity of emotions and feelings that young people have been dealing with.

## Change and uncertainty

All young people experienced disruption to their education from the sudden stop in March. However, the return to school for many young people has meant getting to grips with a very changed environment to what was their previous experience.

*"I hated lockdown for it has made life much more difficult now. I hate wearing a mask in school"*

*"It's just going to be so different"*

*"Not sure what to expect and what will happen, whether we will have to go into a second lockdown"*

*"School will have new procedures so it won't be the same. I know I will be okay once I go back though."*

*"Worried about having to distant from friends. I was excited about seeing my friends. Worried about family."*

Knowing that things will be different but not knowing how it would affect them and their experience as school has clearly been a big issue for some young people to cope with. This in itself can have negative consequences for people's mental wellbeing and given the situation regarding Covid-19 is still so uncertain, this is likely to be an on-going concern for young people who really need to have support to understand and process the emotions which are stirred by this situation.

While for some young people change has been in relation to what they had previously known, there were also examples from some young people affected by change to what they were expecting. For those who were leaving school to enter further / high

education or employment, what has transpired is very different to what their expectations had been:

*"I had a guaranteed place at Uni starting this month for primary teaching but Covid has affected my decision to go to Uni this year because I don't want my course to be different. I just didn't feel happy with all the stuff that was being changed and all the uncertainty. I don't know what's going to happen now."*

*"I am studying in England and as rules are different I will not see my family as much - I worry for them"*

*"My guidance teacher called me about next year – I am going on a police course but now it might be online – not sure now"*

## Loss

Closely linked to issues arising through change and uncertainty is the very real sense of loss which some young people reported:

*"I like school and not being able to go made me miss lots of things that happen in school at the end of the term which I won't get the chance to do again"*

*"I still do not know if I will have a job to return to. As a 23 year old who was looking at progress I am now looking at potential unemployment in a time where jobs are few and far between or are only advertised for an individual with a certain set of skills or experiences"*

While not described as such by the young people we spoke to, there are parallels between the sense of loss which was shared and the emotions relating to grief. It is well accepted that grief can have long-term effects on people's mental wellbeing. As such we need to be mindful about the effects that the 'loss' which many young people have experienced as regards to their education and work could have on their mental wellbeing both now and into the future.

## Fear – unrelated to Covid-19

Albeit a small number of the young people we spoke to, there was still those who spoke about their fear of returning to school/education for reasons not linked to Covid-19. This reflects the findings shared above indicating that for some young people not being at school has been beneficial:

*"because I find school work quite tricky and I'm scared of bullies"*

*"I have been dealing with depression for quite a while and it was getting bad before the lockdown and since then it has gotten even worse so I do not have any motivation to do work for uni at all."*

Where young people have been experiencing issues prior to Covid-19, the impact of lockdown and the prospect of returning to school/education could also have a



detrimental effect on their wellbeing. Therefore we cannot take it for granted that a return to 'normal' will be considered positively by all young people.

## Future

### Fears

Sadly the overwhelming majority of young people expressed a range of fears about the future which has been a common finding in many similar reports about young people and Covid-19. These covered a range of issues from fears around life in the coming months:

*"That things will continue to be altered, being around those you love or meeting new people will be made increasingly difficult"*

To those relating to their future education and employment:

*"I hope that it doesn't get worst and that I'll still be able to stay in school"*

*"my grades & studies at uni will be diminished as the class of 2020"*

*"That the economy will take a long time to recover and that it will further divide society"*

*"Not having a job, no means of making money, unable to support myself"*

*"Finding a job is going to become much more difficult and the uncertainty over next year's exams is quite stressful."*

*"The economy and how this will affect us for the rest of our life."*

And also the longer term effects of Covid-19 on family, friends and society:

*"That my friends or family get ill from Covid and don't recover"*

*"Life forever changing, and the effects of long-term virus-specific anxiety on people"*

When asked to rank the issues that made them feel most anxious 'Financial difficulties', 'Tension at home', and 'Fear of no jobs' were those that were rated highest by the majority of respondents. It could be suggested that fears of this nature are not restricted only to young people and many of these examples would be relatable for people of all ages. However, it is vital that we recognise the impact that these fears can have on young people lives and their mental wellbeing both now and in the years to come. Community-based youth workers are well placed, if equipped with the right training and knowledge, to support young people in working through these fears and

ensuring that they do not become so significant in their lives that they have a major negative effect on their wellbeing.

## Hopes

Pleasingly, when asked to tell us about their hopes for the future, while many responses focussed on Covid-19 a large number focused on what we would normally see listed as young people's hopes for their future.

*"To pass my college courses"*

*"I want to do well in school this year and achieve the grades I need for university."*

*"(I) get a decent job and just be overall happy"*

*"that I get a good job,"*

*"being able to past exams and get a good job"*

There is an important message to take away from this list for everyone who works for young people. While Covid-19 has turned all our lives upside down, when you take a step back from focusing on this, young people's hopes for their future remain broadly similar to what they were before this happened. Therefore it is vital that we work to support young people to achieve their hopes and ambitions for the future. This needs to include equipping young people with the skills and resilience to deal with the impact of the pandemic but also enabling them to find ways to achieve their dreams in whatever a post Covid-19 society might look like.

## Our approach

The following section of our report outlines our approach to this work and how we captured information from young people and youth workers.

### Young people

#### Focus groups

Based on feedback we had received from youth workers and evidence through applications to the Youth Scotland Action Fund, we identified a range of themes<sup>1</sup> to

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- <sup>1</sup> Family
    - Parental coping strategies (mental health arising from lockdown and its consequences and impact on young people – parental anxiety/depression)
    - Substance misuse (own and family members)

explore with young people. One of our experienced youth workers then worked with a small group of young people to turn these themes into questions and activities that could be delivered in a focus group-type setting (delivered online or outside in line with prevailing public health guidance). In keeping with our philosophy, these focus groups were designed to be interactive and enable reflective thinking by young people. This helped us gather 'deeper' information as to what the effect of Covid-19 has been on their lives in their own words and relative to what they perceive their normal lives looked like before the pandemic struck.

We then identified five youth groups across Scotland to work alongside to deliver these focus groups and help us to better understand how Covid-19 has impacted on young people's lives.

#### By the numbers:

We would not claim that the young people who participated in the focus groups are a statistically representative sample of young people of this age range. However, we managed to reach a broad range of ages, perspectives and experiences with views from a cross-section of social backgrounds.

- 5 focus groups, with 2 in Edinburgh and one in each of Stirling (rural), West Lothian and North Ayrshire, comprising:
  - 4 mixed gender groups and 1 female-only group
  - 1 BME group
- 37 participants (aged between 11 and 21 years)

## Online survey

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- Family breakdowns – increased family tensions/ separations / domestic abuse etc.
  - Friends / relationships
    - Restarting friendship at school/clubs etc. after many months off – loss of social skills and confidence / thoughts / feelings
    - Fitting in and new ways of interacting
  - Education
    - Anxiety around missed school work and pressure to catch up – fear of lagging behind/getting into trouble from teachers
    - What's been missed out e.g. schools transitions etc.
  - Employment and money
    - Poverty and Financial difficulties arising from lockdown and its consequences
  - Coping / Loss
    - Following routines- healthy sleep patterns after months of " upside down living – up till early hours of morning/ sleeping till late afternoon
    - Feelings during lockdown.
    - Fears / Anxieties / Hopes for the future (short and longer term)
  - All things digital
    - Digital addictions – from us/overuse of digital platforms/gaming etc.

Alongside these focus groups, we used these questions in an online survey to reach more young people and provide further breadth to the findings from the focus groups. The survey was available from 3 August to 5 October and asked a series of questions inviting young people to consider and share:

- their level of anxiety about the virus
- the 'upside' / positive aspects of lockdown
- their fears about exiting lockdown and returning to school/work
- what they have been doing to cope during lockdown
- their hopes and fears for the future

#### By the numbers:

As with the focus groups, survey respondents are not a statistically representative sample of young people. However, the purpose of the survey was to complement the focus group activity and provide an opportunity for comparison of the findings between the two sources of information.

- We received 53 responses (34 females / 15 males / 4 other) from young people. The average age was 16 (youngest = 8 / oldest = 24).
- 44 are currently in education, comprising:
  - 32 at school
  - 4 at college
  - 8 at university
- 6 are employed full time
- 3 are not in education or employment
- 48 identified as White (English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British)
- 3 identified as Mixed / Multiple ethnic background and 1 chose not to say

## For further information

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